

Allan Besson

Allan Besson Interviewed by Terry Cooke November 25, 2021

My introduction into the world of road running.

My first exposure into the world of road running came in 1979, as a sports journalist with the Winnipeg Free Press. I had been given the assignment to cover the first Manitoba Marathon.

I had covered countless track and field events, so I thought this would be a cake walk. Was I ever in for a surprise!

Aside from an impromptu detour when the media (semi-trailer) flatbed truck that traveled in front of the leaders, discovered it could not cross the footbridge onto Portage Ave., everything seemed to go smooth. Oh, I forgot to mention that when the race reached the entrance to the park, the gate was chained up and locked. Someone eventually found some bolt cutters, but a whole lot of runners had already run off the course, and around the gate, before we could continue.

I was on the flatbed with Ken (Frier) Nicholson of CJOB and several other journalists. The heat was killer and there was no shade. We caught up to the leaders somehow, and we eventually reached Nick's Diner at Headingly, and turned east on Portage Avenue towards the Finish Line. The corner was tight, and the truck's back wheel hit the ditch and Nickelson and I toppled off the truck, into the ditch. Once we were able to get back on the flatbed, the leaders were long gone. So, off we went the lumbering vehicle in hot pursuit until we caught the leaders and at that point disaster almost struck. We signaled the driver to get in front of them again. As the truck driver turned in to pass the leaders, he did not realize that the flatbed trailer was attached and swinging close behind. The leader, and eventual winner who we barely managed not to kill, was Wataru Sakimoto of Japan in a time of 2:17.31. Second place went to his countryman Takeshima Katsumi in 2:18.09.

I am sure that Sakimoto, still fondly recalls Winnipeg, and the crazy marathon with its many "first time" glitches. In fact, he returned the next year to defend his title, but wound up coming in second, to one of his countrymen.

After an event with so much unexpected twists and turns along the way, I realize there was no way I was not going to get involved in a personal way with this wacky sport of road running. My only regret is that Nickelson and I didn't have enough time at Headingly to pick up some hamburgers and Cokes at Nick's Diner.

I am sure the race was memorable for Sakamoto for a number of reasons. It sure was for me, so how could I not take up running after all that?

How I got into running.

I never took running seriously. By that, I mean that I knew that I was not fast, and I never would be. I had covered hundreds of track and field meets, but never was involved in actually running myself. However, in the early 1970s I had a membership at the YMHA on Hargrave, Avenue, and I worked out, and played racquetball there.

Occasionally I would jog on the short track in the basement as part as my workouts. That's where I met Fred Shane. One day he asked if he could run with me. I had seen him run and told him he'd have to slow down quite a bit.

We chatted as we ran, and finished 3 ½ km. which amazed me how the time and the distance passed quickly. Later, Shane asked why I didn't try road racing, and invited me out to a 5-K at the U of M that Sunday. With a little coaxing, I agreed and showed up for the race in my basketball sneakers. When the gun went off, so did I and my first km was fantastic, then then I began to feel like I was going to explode. I wasn't sure how I was going to finish after such a grand effort at the beginning. But I did. I was hooked and from that day on I began running daily.

I thought I should join a club, so I called Chris McCubbins up and asked him if I could join. The Yellow Snow athletes were a group very elite runners, and I soon discovered, that this was not the club for me. McCubbins, originally from Enid, Oklahoma won a gold medal for the United States in the 3,000 metres steeple chase at the first Pan Am Games here in 1967. Later, as a Canadian he ran in the 10,000 metre event. So, you can see how outmatched I was.

Later I hooked up with the After Five Running Club and found that group to be the one I would stay with.

Off-road involvement.

In 1970-80, I served as Vice President of the Manitoba Runners Association, as well as the editor of the MRA magazine "On The Run", and in the late 1980s I was a member of the Manitoba Marathon School Promotions Committee.

My worst running experience:

As I continued to enjoy running and how wonderful it felt to be fit, and able to achieve goals I had never even dreamed of, I also learned that there was a downside. Take injuries for example.

I think I had just about every injury that is known to running, but on an extremely hot Sunday, after a late night working the sports desk at the Free Press, I, accompanied by my late wife, and cheer leader Sylvia, showed up at the Tuxedo 10 km., race.

After about a kilometre, I hooked up with the long-time Race Director of the Manitoba Marathon Allan Finkel. I was feeling good, and we were discussing many things along Wellington Crescent. At the 5-km mark, with made the U-turn and started back. Suddenly, I was having trouble breathing. My heart was racing but I managed to complete the race.

I sat in the shade at the awards ceremony for a while, and then Sylvia drove me home where I went straight to bed. The next morning, I woke up and my heart was still racing, so we headed off to the hospital. I spent the night in ICU and was released the next day with an appointment to see a cardiologist, which I didn't need, as I was in training for my first half marathon. I was put on heart medications and asked to come back in a week's time.

The next week, the cardiologist wasn't happy when he listened to my heart, and he sent me straight to St. Boniface Emergency where emergency interventions (paddles) were used, and that shocked my heart back into rhythm.

At a later appointment I asked if it was OK if I continued to train for the half marathon. I was given the go-ahead but advised to get checked out the medical tent after the race.

All the pain, two hip and one knee replacements later, and at the ripe old age of 75, I have no regrets. I would do it all again if I could.

My most satisfying running achievement

That's easy. The whole process of training for a year, and then completing my first Twin Cities Marathon in 1990 in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota.

It all began at an After Five Running Club party. Two of our members, showed up wearing medals from their 1989 Twin Cities Marathon the week before. They had enjoyed their time and the running experience so much. I felt that if they can do it, well so can I. Many of us in the After Five Club decided to train for the 1990 Marathon. I bought my first pair of colourful Lycra running tights and had my right ear pierced the day before the race, and I was set.

I've taken part in a lot of different sports throughout my life, but nothing compares with my experience of road running. Downhill skiing, however, is a close second. In the short 20 years that I enjoyed running there countless 5-ks, 10-ks, 15-ks, half marathons, but the crowning glory for me is my three marathons. I ran Twin Cities twice in 1990 and 1993 and the Manitoba Marathon in 1990. The only time of any of my races that I remember is that first marathon in 1990. I finished in four hours, 20 minutes and change. Not fast, but definitely the highlight of all my sporting endeavors.

My favourite race

Twin Cities was one. But I have to say The Freeze Yer Gizzard Blizzard Run in International Falls, Minnesota was a favourite. I ran it several times in the bitter cold, but this one year was especially different.

The uniqueness of this 10-km race was, and still is, the huge amounts of runners who bus in to run the event, and the colder and brutal the weather is, the more they enjoy it.

This particular year, "Runner's World Magazine" sent Olympic champion Don Kardong there to cover the race and capture the atmosphere of the whole ordeal; including the craziness that ensues among the town and those who fearlessly brave the elements. The only problem was that on this particular occasion there was a major thaw, and everything around was melting. Regardless, Kardong did his interviews, took a bunch of pictures, they ran his story. I remember the day the magazine hit the newsstands. I bought one and was pleasantly surprised when I came to the centerfold of the magazine. There was a two-page photo of the start of the race, and there I was, just left of the fold, in my Yellow Snow Athletic Club hoodie.

My favourite road running story.

One year my 7 or 8-year-old son David wanted to try running, so I convinced him to enter the Manitoba Marathon two-kilometre Super Run. That year, I also entered the Super Run so we could do it together. It was a most wonderful experience for David and me, and after we crossed the finish line, we met up with his mom, and she handed me a medal which I had purchased a few days earlier. The look on his face as I hung it around his neck was priceless.