

# Allan Finkel

If you were involved in running in the 1980's, one of the most omnipresent figures in the community was Allan Finkel. He was involved in the administration of the Manitoba Marathon, the MRA and Run Canada. Allan says that he was not the "idea guy" who created a concept; he was the person who would see slivers of ideas, gave them life and helped them grow. The survival of these Manitoba running institutions is testament to Allan's success at doing just that.

Allan didn't run as a youth, but got started at age 24 with a neighbour in the Granite Curling Club area in the summer of 1978. She challenged him to join her on a run and he was surprised by a couple of things. One was how poor his conditioning was for a man in his early 20's. And the other was how good it felt when the workout was over. He was hooked for life.

Allan graduated from law school in 1977 but soon discovered that practicing law was probably not for him. He switched his articles during 1977-78 and joined Art Wortzman, who was an impressively active man many years his senior. They ran together indoors at the YMHA. When the Manitoba Marathon was announced for 1979, Allan was inspired to sign up. His first race ever was the Joe Keeper Memorial 10km in Kildonan Park in March 1979, then the Tribune 10 km that year and then ran the marathon with his neighbour. They struggled in the hot sunshine but were determined to finish, which they did in under 4 hours. Allan found the effort extreme, but greatly enjoyed and appreciated the encouragement of the spectators along Portage Avenue. His heat exhaustion was such that as he finished, people had to tell him that it was over and he could stop running now. For several weeks after, any staircase meant descending backwards due to the pain in his quads. Most of us know that feeling.

Allan joined the Phidippides Running Club with Doug Sammons and Ron Chopek soon after and learned a lot from their coaching. In fact, in the second Manitoba Marathon in 1980, Allan ran 3:10, a huge improvement. He got in much better shape the next year and was ready to run in the 2:40's, but developed plantar fasciitis and was unable to participate, although he was among the first of our local runners to try orthotics, which was new technology then featured in Runners World, with the nearest clinic in Minneapolis. He has now run 23 full marathons and 4 ultras in his career, and although he mostly runs half marathons now, he believes he still has one more marathon in him.

It was through Ron Chopek that Allan joined the board of the MRA in 1980. A friend named Paul Sullivan, then a reporter for the Winnipeg Free Press, told Allan that he saw in him a leader who could inspire people and bring them together, and in time Allan became MRA President for a number of years. Unable to run in 1981, Allan volunteered with the Marathon and was appointed lead navigator for the wheelchair marathon. This enabled him to meet Rick Hansen, who became another inspiration for Allan.

In 1982, the Race Director for the Manitoba Marathon left and volunteers Pat McCarthy and Nancy Desormeau had to step up to organize the race. Allan was recruited to become the start line coordinator for the Manitoba Marathon and had to learn the techniques associated with that, which he perfected over 2 seasons as part of the Marathon's Technical Committee. In late 1983, several people encouraged Allan to apply for the vacant job of Race Director. The timing was great. At that time, Allan was studying for his MBA with the idea of leaving his law practice and saw the Marathon opening as an opportunity to combine his working and his studying. He became Race Director in January 1984, after a secretary in the Marathon office had filled the role temporarily in 1983. When Allan took over, the marathon registration numbers had dipped from 4,500 to 3,000. In taking the job, Allan promised to stay for 2 years and ended up staying for 6 years, during which he grew the numbers and events and volunteers by

a large amount. He expanded the Corporate Relay by adding school relays, masters, and friends and families, started the Super Run in 1985, developed a huge Countdown 26 school running program, and generally reimagined the event as offering a “Start Line for Everyone.” In his last year as Race Director, there were 7,120 participants, with an event structure in place that would see continued growth afterwards. One of his theories was that a person could do a 5 km or a 10 km as a one-off and not continue in the sport, but if you could get them to commit to running a half marathon, you had a good chance of making that person buy into the lifestyle, and be active for life. He was also happy that many people found other sports because they first discovered the joys of a healthy lifestyle at the Manitoba Marathon.

During Allan’s time as MRA President and then with the Manitoba Marathon, he saw the conflict between the Manitoba Track and Field Association and the road running community, and he resolved to find a peaceful resolution. One promoted the development of elite athletes and the other was more about mass participation. One had control over the sport through its sanctioning power of races and saw the money, while the other had a different knowledge of road races and a different kind of volunteerism. One was built on a coaches-and-club system and certified officials and the other not. Allan sensed opposition from the leadership of the MTFA in those years, even though some of those leaders participated in road races themselves. They were unhappy about the marathon’s penetration into the school system, which was the MTFA’s primary source for identifying athletes for its program, where it preferred fast running with identified elite candidates to large programs training for longer distances, which might not even be healthy for young bodies. Hearing about three schools that had successful running programs, Allan was convinced that running 5 miles was not harmful for young participants, and started formal meetings between the MRA and MTFA. After many meetings, the conflict was resolved, part of which involved Allan becoming Vice-President of the MTFA and Tim Walker from MTFA becoming a board member at the MRA. The relationship worked for many years because both organizations could keep tabs on each other. When Athletics Canada broadened its scope to include road running, Manitoba was ready because of the resolution reached among MRA, the Marathon and the MTFA.

Another of Allan’s roles in our running community was as Manitoba’s representative for Run Canada (a new division of Athletics Canada), a position he held for 4 or 5 years. Among other things, RC set road race standards, a race director’s handbook and developed course certification. Allan also chaired Run Canada Week for all of Canada for 2 years. During that time, Allan brought the Manitoba Marathon together with the Kelvin High School Cross Country team to organize the World’s Biggest Relay – twice – which was recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records. Allan enlisted the support of local legend Lionel Orlikow in setting these records. The first record was 19,483 runners and was surpassed with 22,500 two years later. Over 100 schools were involved. The first event was the kickoff event for Run Canada Week, and Olympic medallist Lynn Williams (now Kanuka) was the official starter. The Guinness Certificates are still on display at the Manitoba Marathon office.

Allan was honoured by the MRA in 1986 as its first Honorary Builder for the work he had done in the sport, and was delighted to have Marilyn Fraser present the award. Around 10 years ago, Allan’s name was added to the Manitoba Jewish Sports Hall of Fame in its new Builder category for his contributions to Manitoba’s running community.

In looking back, Allan’s most satisfying image is watching the start of the Super Run in the Manitoba Marathon, seeing all those kids and families participating enthusiastically on Father’s Day, and feeling a quiet pride in how the Manitoba Marathon had helped them find their first steps into a healthy running

lifestyle. He is also proud of how he nurtured volunteerism through the Manitoba Marathon and how much he learned from the amazing people who give so much to help others.

His favourite races are a three-way tie: his first marathon in 1979; his fastest marathon in 1980; and helping a close friend to run his first marathon at age 40 at the Chicago Marathon.

Allan's best 5 km was just over 18 minutes; 10 km was 37:50; best 10 mile was in the low 60's; best half marathon was 1:38:08; and fastest marathon was 3:10:53 in 1980.

Allan's worst experience in a road race was at the Tucson Marathon, where the first 13 miles were straight downhill, torture on the quad muscles. It took two people a very long time to help get Allan on the bus after.

One of his favourite road racing experiences was a last-minute entry into an evening 10 km in 1986 in a small town in central Germany near the barb wire border with Eastern Germany. Allan was recruited by the mayor of the town who was driving by as he was finishing a hard run. They had to communicate with hand signals. Beer figured prominently both before and after the race. Allan won his first trophy ever, for having traveled the farthest to get to the race.

After a career of working for non-profits and then with the Appeal Commission for Workers Compensation, Allan now serves as a rabbi, for Temple Shalom in Winnipeg, his sixth career. His volunteer work with the MRA also started a long career of volunteering in many organizations, most notably the Winnipeg Folk Festival and coming back a few years ago onto the Manitoba Marathon Board where he was involved in strategic planning. Allan can also be found every year at the Manitoba Marathon Finish Line offering hugs and Finisher medals to the full marathoners. Allan continues to run, 43 years after his first runs in 1978. His three kids, in their early 30s, live in Kelowna, BC, grew up with parents who were runners. All are fit with active lifestyles that include hiking, running, biking and gym time.