

Bob Cook

If you were a road runner in the “golden age” of Manitoba racing, where dozens of runners raced near or below 5 minute per mile pace (mid-70’s to mid-80’s), one name that repeatedly appeared at or near the top of the race results was Bob Cook. Bob liked to run from an early age, but it was not until Grade 7 at Golden Gate Junior High in Winnipeg that he realized he had an aptitude for distance running. He was required to participate in a 12 minute run in gym class (aerobics was all the rage at the time, and a 12 minute run was said to be the best test of your fitness). Bob lapped everyone else in the run so he figured he should enter the mile race (not yet metric) in the school track meet. He won that race but was beaten soundly in the St.James/Assiniboia divisional meet by a host of runners who actually trained. Bob finally learned his lesson and started training seriously in Grade 9, running cross-country and winning the 1500 at the divisional track meet. When he got to Silver Heights Collegiate there was no track program, so he began training with Don Breakey, coach of the Winnipeg Olympic Track Club. In his last year of high school, German measles kept him out of the provincial high school cross-country championships but he won both the 1500 and 3000 at the provincial high school track championships.

After high school, Bob joined the Yellow Snow Athletic Club and also competed for 5 years for the U of MB cross-country and track teams. The cross-country team made the nationals every year, never winning but finishing 2nd by 3 points or less on 3 agonizing occasions. During those years, Bob was coached off and on by friend, mentor, Yellow Snow teammate, and rival, Chris McCubbins, who had a great influence on his running career.

After university, Bob continued racing on the roads for the Yellow Snow Club. He had run the Gimli ten miler at age 21 in Oregon waffle shoes (definitely not meant for road racing) which caused the soles of his feet to peel off after the race. His fastest Gimli 10 miler was 49:52, winning that race 3 times and coming 2nd twice. He won the Athlete’s Wear 10 km 2 or 3 times. He ran the Grand Beach Sun Run twice, winning once and coming 2nd the other time, and won the Kenora 10 km twice. Bob also remembers winning an exciting Bird’s Hill 20 km, narrowly beating Chris McCubbins, who was 42 at the time (Bob was 29 in comparison). At the 10 km mark it had been anyone’s race with Bruce McKay and Bob Walker also at the front, both looking relaxed at that point.

Some other highlights included a third place finish in the 1984 Dallas White Rock marathon in 2:21:37 while fighting a cold. Friend and training partner Bruce McKay won the race comfortably in 2:20:20. Bob finished 24th in the America’s Marathon in Chicago in 2:19:10 in 1986 and won the 1984 national 20 km championship in PEI in 62:15. He entered the Manitoba Marathon one year when prize money was offered for running under 2:40 and did it as a training run in 2:35.

On reflection on a stellar career, Bob’s proudest achievement was running for Canada at the 1984 World Cross-Country championships in New Jersey, finishing exactly in the middle of the pack (125th), but only 2 minutes behind the winner in the 12 km race. His favourite race was the Grand Beach Sun Run, which was unusual for its last 3 km stretch in the sand.

When asked for a favourite road racing story, Bob offers the following:

“At the start line of the 1986 marathon in Chicago there was this tiny, bald guy with a slight paunch. I wasn’t sure if he was African or American but he was in line with the fast runners like he thought he belonged. I didn’t expect to see him again but at about 20 miles he suddenly came up on my shoulder and passed me. Then I heard shouts of Go Henry! I had read that multiple world record holder Henry

Rono was making a comeback that year (he had set his last world record in around 1981), and sure enough it was him. Then with 400 meters to go I was with a group of several runners and one was him. I sprinted (relatively speaking) to the finish, beating most of them including Rono who finished 2 seconds behind me. So I can say I beat Henry Rono. It sounds pretty good if you leave out the first couple of sentences.”

One of Bob’s worst experiences was a 10 km race in Atlanta that he was sent to as the winner of the Chiropractic 10 km. Even though it was October, the temperature was above 30 and the humidity was 99%. He was in the lead in the race with one km to go, just passing the runners from the concurrent 5km race, when one of them asked him, “Are you alright?” Although Bob said he was fine, he definitely wasn’t. He was confused and disoriented, showing obvious signs of heat exhaustion. The man, selflessly giving up his own race, convinced Bob to stop, possibly saving his life. The eventual winner of the 10 km staggered past to the finish line in not much better condition.

Another difficult finish was in the 1983 Western Canada Games 10,000 metres in Calgary where the temperature was in the high thirties. Bob collapsed right on top of the finish line but still won the race. The medics measured his pulse at 230 and refused to tell him his blood pressure; neither of those things was good, particularly since Bob knew his maximum heart rate should only be 192. It took two months to regain his heat regulation.

There was a good reason why Bob (and his wife, Bev McKay, who still has the fastest Manitoba Marathon by a Manitoba woman, a 2:45:30 in 1983) disappeared from the MRA scene in the 1990’s: they traveled overseas for work. They visited more than 50 countries in 21 years and Bob went for at least one 30 minute run in every one of those but 3. Those runs were mostly very enjoyable but there were a few harrowing experiences. Bob remembers an out and back trail run along the banks of the Zambezi River in Zimbabwe. “I turned around half way and immediately came across a *Beware of Crocodiles* sign. Why there was no sign at the other end of the trail was a mystery. There were two worrying things I knew about crocodiles: one, they can run for short distances at 15 to 20 km per hour, which was faster than I was running on the trail, and two, they can leap from the water to snatch prey such as wildebeest (and joggers) from the shore. Needless to say, the 5km run back was very quick.”

Bob’s best times on the track were 1:57.5 for 800m, 3:52.3 for 1500m, 8:09.95 for 3000m (good for 2nd at the 1984 national indoor championships), 14:15 for 5 km, and 29:49 for 10 km. On the roads, he ran 15:10 for 5km, 30:03 for 10 km, 49:52 for 10 miles, 65:53 for the half marathon and 2:19:10 in the marathon. He is proud of his consistency, having run 10 km in under 31 minutes, 25 times. If he wasn’t the best, he was definitely one of the best we have ever produced in 50 years.