

Bruce Soulsby

As we look back 50 years at the MRA, a good place to start might be with the first marathon organized in the Province in that fateful year that the MRA started, 1971. The event was held at Bird's Hill Park on a hot day and the winner, in 3:02, was Bruce Soulsby, a track and cross-country runner from Winnipeg attending UND in Grand Forks. But to be more precise, Bruce was a hockey player who was not chosen for the UND hockey team and turned to track as an alternative during his 4 years degree course.

Bruce got off to a rocky start in life, starting school late and being a ward of the Children's Aid Society, as his mother was a resident of a First Nations community in Fairford, MB. He went to Knowles School for Boys and did his high school at Miles McDonnell Collegiate. He was able to attend UND because his guardian had been able to obtain a press-radio scholarship for \$500 for his first year, enough in those days to cover tuition. For the rest of his degree, UND paid for his tuition as an athletic scholarship. Although he did not consider himself a runner in high school and ran only a couple of times a year, he did run the mile at field day and the Suburban Conference meet and ran under 4:50 with no training. It was perhaps for that reason that his hockey friend at UND told the track coach that Bruce could run. At first, the cross-country workouts were daunting for someone who had never trained or run farther than a mile. When his first training run was 4 – 5 miles and he tried to outkick his teammates at the end, he was so stiff that he could not walk for the next week. Still, it was not long before he adjusted to the distance and started to excel. The star of the UND team was Arjan Gelling from Thunder Bay, a 13 time All-American who had come second to Gary Bjorklund at the NCAA cross-country championships. Training with him made everyone faster. Bruce remembers racing the U of M team and sprinting the first 100 yards, getting him to exhaustion early, and having Bob Walker run up beside him and say, "Let's go!" It would be a while before Bruce could keep up with Bob.

The UND team had some stars but the real powerhouse in North Dakota was NDSU with Mike Slack and Roger Schwegel. They won the NCAA Division 2 cross-country championships three years in a row. Racing against them made Bruce faster, and more humble. Bruce always considered cross-country to be his best event. After Gelling's graduation, Bruce was the only UND athlete to qualify for the Nationals. Out of 300 runners in Wheaton, Ill., he placed 33rd, running 25:20 for 5 miles on a cross-country course, a time that was better than Gelling's best.

Bruce ran track as well at UND and ran 2:01 for the half mile, 4:18 for the mile and did a 6 mile in Bemidji in 30:10. He went to the AAU national open cross-country championships in 1972 and raced against Frank Shorter (who won the Olympic marathon that year), Eamon Coughlan (known as the "chairman of the boards" for his domination in the mile in the indoor track circuit in the USA) and Jack Bachelor. Bruce came 86th out of over 400 runners in this elite competition. Years later, in 1979, Bruce came 6th at the Prairie cross-country championships in Saskatoon and qualified for the nationals in Halifax, where he placed 18th in the race, even though there were 7 Americans (including Bill Rogers) who came up from Boston to compete in the event, making Bruce 11th among Canadians.

Bruce raced the Islendingadagurinn 10 mile race in the late 1970's and early 1980's, finishing in the top 3 with times between 50:20 and 51 minutes. The peak of Bruce's road racing career was in the early 1980's. In 1981, he won a 25 km race in Assiniboine Park in 1:22 and the performance was written up in the Free Press by Scott Taylor. It was his favourite race that he ever did, as he felt so strong and lapped people towards the end. In 1982, Bruce finished 7th in the Manitoba Marathon in a time of 2:22:59, even though a stitch near the end deprived him of what could have been a 2:20 performance. This was the most satisfying performance of his road career. Earlier in 1982, Bruce came 2nd to Chris McCubbins in an elite field in the Puma 15 km in a time of 46:20, under 5 minutes per mile.

As a Master's runner, Bruce ran a 4:29 mile at age 40 at the Boeing Classic, a time most of us would be proud of at the peak of our careers. In 1989, Bruce was stride for stride with Roger Schwegel in the Manitoba Marathon, clicking off 5:20 miles, but cramped up at 25 km. After 1989, Bruce abandoned his running career as he started his family. Bruce also trained some other runners, including the late John Menlove, a terrific runner who died in his sleep at age 27, and Craig Livingston from Kenora, who was elated to achieve a 2:47 marathon under Bruce's tutelage.

Bruce went to the Ottawa Marathon in 1976. He had noticed that Frank Shorter had worn Tiger shoes with no socks and decided to try that with a new pair of Tigers of his own. This was an epic mistake, as anyone who has tried to run a marathon in new shoes can attest. Bruce suffered from terrible blisters for the last 10 miles of the race. This was the worst experience of his road racing career.

Bruce's best 5 km was 14:30; 10 km was 30:52; 15 km was 46:30; 25 km was 1:22; and marathon was 2:22:59. That is quite an impressive record for someone who only ran because he didn't make the hockey team!