

Remembering the Life of Chris McCubbins

by Dennis A. Lang, November 2022

Chris McCubbins was an exceptional elite runner but he was an even more exceptional person. His performances as a runner are in a class of their own in Manitoba's running history and you could not overstate his contribution to our running community. A fierce competitor on the track and roads, he was a modest, soft spoken and generous person who was a natural leader by example.

Raymond Christopher McCubbins (November 22, 1945 – August 21, 2009) was a native of Enid, Oklahoma and a graduate of Oklahoma State University, where he earned All-American honours as a runner in both track and cross country. His specialty running event was the track 3000m steeplechase. In 1967 he won the gold medal in that event at the Winnipeg hosted 5th Pan American Games, where he also met his future wife, a Winnipeg native. After a two year period of military service, during which he competed internationally for the U.S. Army's elite Modern Pentathlon Team, he and now wife Marie returned to Winnipeg in the fall of 1970 for Chris to attend graduate school at the University of Manitoba. Fortunately for Winnipeg Chris would spend the rest of his life there and have a profound effect on its running scene and his life's work in early childhood education and less-privileged youth advocacy.

As a child Chris was small for his age and not at all athletically inclined. He tentatively began running on his own at age 15 after other sports had not worked out for him. His two year older brother Tip, a runner and natural athlete, had encouraged him to join the high school cross country team. His innate running ability was instantly apparent to others and he had finally found a sport he was good at and enjoyed. He improved consistently through his final year of high school but was not yet fast enough to be offered a full athletic scholarship to Oklahoma State University, where he enrolled in Arts and ran cross country and track as a freshman in 1963-64. By the end of his first season his dedication to twice daily training paid off and Chris' performances ranked him the team's number one cross country runner and for his 2nd year at OSU he earned a full scholarship. An outstanding college athletics career followed culminating with his winning the 3000m steeplechase at the 1967 NCAA Track and Field Championships, setting a new national collegiate record for the event.

After his best year of running In 1967, Chris set his sights on making the 1968 US Olympic team, for the Mexico City Games. Chris was leading the Olympic trials 3000m steeple race when he crashed into a hurdle causing a fracture in a leg bone and an eighth place finish, ending his quest for an Olympic team berth. Induction into the US Army in December 1968 and marriage in May 1969 ensued. Fortunately, he was able to avoid military service in the Vietnam War by qualifying for the US Army's Modern Pentathlon Team competing in the five sport event of cross country running, swimming, equestrian, fencing and pistol shooting. Honourably discharged from the army in September 1970, Chris and Marie returned to Winnipeg and Chris began a masters degree program in Psychology.

Thankfully Chris was by no means finished with competitive running and Winnipeg was the beneficiary. His passion for running was as strong as ever and he was welcomed by coach Jim Daly onto the U of M Bison's cross country team. Chris was soon leading workouts and acting as a role model and mentor for younger team members. Still intent on making a US Olympic team he trained hard for the 1972 trials 3000m steeplechase but a serious Achilles tendon injury, that would require surgery, dashed his hopes once again. However, there was a silver lining to his Olympic disappointment when he serendipitously discovered his destiny to be a school teacher during a recreation director's position at a summer program

for children. He found he really enjoyed the interaction with young people and saw a new career path for himself from the experience. In the spring 1974 he graduated from the U of M's Faculty of Education with an Early Childhood Teaching Certificate and that fall began his life's calling as a teacher at Kent Road School.

His Olympic Games dream remained alive however and he now set himself a new running goal – to compete for Canada at the 1976 Montreal Games. 1974 and 1975 were dedicated training years toward this goal. On July 25, 1975 Chris ran 28:16.51 in a 10000m track race, at an international meet in Montreal, achieving the required Olympic standard for the event and setting a Manitoba native record that still stands today, over 45 years later. In January 1976 Chris and a group of running friends, mostly University of Manitoba Bison alumni, formed the offbeat named "Yellow Snow Athletic Club" and registered it with the Canadian Track and Field Association so Chris could get funding for his Olympic training. The Yellow Snow Club was inducted into the Manitoba Road Runners' Association - Road Running Hall of Fame in 2015. One more detail was left to accomplish - Chris received his Canadian citizenship in March of the year. A leave of absence from his teaching job let Chris head south in the winter for better training conditions and by running up to twenty miles a day he got himself into the best shape of his life. His superior fitness was demonstrated by his running a personal best of 13:44 at the 5000m distance in May. He was more than ready and on May 29, at the Canadian Olympic Trials in Montreal, he finished first in the 10000m event, qualifying himself for Canada's Olympic Team and proudly achieving his life goal of going to an Olympic Games.

But once again, the fickle finger of fate was not finished with Chris. The very day after his 10000m trials victory an awkward misstep walking off a curb led to a painful, debilitating groin injury. With his dream of competing at the July Olympic Games now in jeopardy Chris decided not to stop his final intensive preparation to let the injury heal. The condition stubbornly persisted and he was forced to reduce his training to light jogging, do hours of daily physiotherapy at the Olympic training camp and try multiple cortisone shots in the groin area, but sadly it all failed to quell the intense pain he felt while running. Knowing he was not fit to give his best effort, Chris lined up on the start line July 23 for the 1st of 3 heats in the men's 10000m qualifying round, where the top four finishers from each heat would move on to the final on July 26. He courageously ran with the leaders for 2400 meters before the pain was too great to continue but he persevered to the finish in 12th place displaying his class and sportsmanship by running the rest of the race in an outer lane so as not to impede the faster runners lapping him who were still competing for a place in the final.

Devastated by not meeting his goal of doing well in the Olympic Games he took most of 1977 to recover psychologically from a deep sense of personnel failure. But life goes on and a champion like Chris does not stay down for long. In November 1977 he won the senior men's race at the Canadian Cross Country Championships and got selected for the Canadian team that would compete at the World Cross Country Championships in Scotland in March. In 1978 he reduced his teaching job to half days to pursue a Bachelor of Education degree while taking on the role of coach for the University of Manitoba's cross country team.

1979 was the year the North American running boom came to Winnipeg with three big new races - The Winnipeg Tribune 10-km Run for Fun, the Manitoba Marathon for the Mentally Retarded and the Bonne Bell 10-km for Women. Each event hosted large fields of citizen runners in the thousands as well as the local elite runners as road racing became a mass participation sport. This worldwide cultural phenomenon lasted into the 1990's at its peak and represented the "golden age" of Manitoba running and Chris was in

the thick of it with a renewed passion for competitive racing. In 1981 he would run 29:46 in the Athletes Wear 10-km Run for Fun and 48:55 in the Gimli Icelandic Festival 10 mile, times that are not even approached in today's Manitoba road races. Chris continued to stay race fit and ran fast times into his late 30's with his sites now set on his 40th birthday and a "second coming" as an elite masters runner.

Chris turned 40 in November 1985 and for the next two years he was one of the best masters runners in the world. In the spring of 1986, he won the Athletes Wear 10-km in 30:39 after running a track 10000m earlier in the week in 30:27. In June he entered the Cascade Run-Off 15-km in Portland, Oregon finishing 25th overall in 46:07 and first master in a world class field. In August he ran the Asbury Park 10-km Classic in New Jersey in 30:49 winning \$1,000 as first master. Chris' performances in 1986 earned him the top masters ranking in Canada and a 4th place ranking in the world by Runner's World magazine. At the 1987 Cascade Run-Off he was again top master setting a new North American masters 15-km road record of 45:35. He would be first master at both the Asbury Park 10-km and the Falmouth 7.1 mile Road Race on Cape Cod. 1987 finished with Chris being selected Manitoba Male Runner of the Year and a 6th place ranking for world masters by Runner's World magazine. During this two year period, he set numerous Canadian Masters national records on the track and road that still stand in 2022, 35 years later.

There was another significant side to Chris' running career – Chris the coach. With his unpretentious manner and indomitable spirit, he drew like-minded runners to him and was more than happy to share his running knowledge and experience with them. Chris was first and foremost a student of running and made a point of staying current with new training methods, constantly researching and expanding his knowledge base. Many of Manitoba's top elite runners of the 1980's came from of his Yellow Snow Club. Chris' workout philosophy was simple "let's go out and have some fun". Chris instilled confidence in his runners by believing in themselves and to treat setbacks as lessons and not obstacles. There was always another opportunity coming and Chris lived what he taught. You succeed in running with hard work, perseverance and positive thinking just as you do in life. Chris continued coaching local elite runners up to his diagnosis of Leukemia in 2009, well after he himself retired as a competitive runner. He lived and loved running to the very end.

There is one more extraordinary accomplishment in Chris' life that goes to the very core of his being – Chris the school teacher. Whatever Chris did he did well and that included his life's work as an early childhood educator in Winnipeg schools. He took seriously and dedicated himself to being an exemplary male role model for his young, impressionable pupils who may not have had one in their lives outside of school. Chris had great empathy for others and demonstrated it through the care and nurturing he gave his students, particularly those who came from impoverished backgrounds. Assisting others who were disadvantaged became a passion in his life. Teaching at an inner city school he saw the difficulties and inequalities his students faced compared to those in more affluent parts of the city. By now Chris had become an accomplished cross country skier even entering and doing well in competitions. He saw this as an opportunity to get his students involved in an outdoor activity that they normally would not get to experience due to the cost of equipment their families could not bare. He took it upon himself to assemble the necessary ski equipment from garage sales, friends and corporate donations. Then he arranged to transport his students to the Windsor Park Nordic Centre and taught them how to ski. His program eventually expanded to include other schools. The Cross Country Ski Association of Manitoba got involved with support and fundraising and from all these efforts over a period of years "The Great Get Off Your Butt and Ski Program" was born for kids of all economic backgrounds to learn to ski – a testament to Chris' devotion to benefit those less-privileged.

For his unparalleled achievements as a Manitoba runner Chris was inducted into the Manitoba Sports Hall of Fame in 1999 and in 2008 he was similarly inducted into the Manitoba Runners' Association - Road Running Hall of Fame. Chris' attitude to winning medals and receiving awards was always "receiving these things is great but the journey getting there was better". In 2009 Chris was diagnosed with Leukemia. It would be his final contest of grit and determination. In typical Chris fashion he courageously fought the cancer for six months giving the battle everything he had and never letting up. On August 21, 2009 he tragically lost his courageous fight but cherished memories of him live on in the minds of the countless individuals he befriended, influenced or enabled with his modest, generous and caring personality.

In 2013 Joe Mackintosh published a book titled "Chris McCubbins – Running the Distance". Much of the material in this narrative is taken from his inspirational and heartwarming biography of Chris.