

[From the Courier-Journal, Apr. 25, 1999]

THERE'S ALWAYS BEEN GIL CLARK

(By Jim Adams)

Gil Clark stood on a slope beside Iroquois Park at 7:59:50 a.m. yesterday (runners never round off their minutes) and beheld what he had built: A wide river of 6,500 runners was standing in place, looking up at him.

"Ten," he said into the microphone.

"Nine," he said, firm of voice.

"Eight," he said. He waived a starting pistol above the pith helmet he was wearing, the trademark headpiece some might think is stitched to his scalp.

This moment could last no more than 10 seconds, of course, but it was a sight that caused the hearts of some of Louisville's serious road runners to soar yesterday at the start of the 26th Kentucky Derby Festival miniMarathon.

That's because the 78-year-old Clark—director of the 13.1-mile race since its inauguration on a Monday morning in 1974—was diagnosed with liver cancer last fall. Just a month ago, he lay unconscious in a hospital for five days; at death's door.

A stream of runners appeared at his bedside last month to say their personal farewells to the man who almost everyone acknowledges has done more than anyone else for road racing in Louisville.

He didn't invent the pre-Derby race—a politician did that—but Clark took it, built it, shaped it and nurtured it, and so a lot of people call him the father of the miniMarathon. The way the runners talk about him, he actually seems more like its favorite uncle.

"He's the one that made running in Louisville," said Jack La Plante, who has run in more than 20 miniMarathons and who stopped to grin for a picture with Clark yesterday morning. "He put the city on the map, as far as runners go," La Plante said right before running the race gain.

"He's it," said Stan Clark, long one of the leading runners in the miniMarathon, who is not related to Gil Clark. At last month's City Run, Gil Clark's absence was a huge hole, Stan Clark said. "He's always present; he's always there. There's always been Gil Clark.

Mary Anne Lyons, the leading female runner in the miniMarathon in recent years, tells this story: An acquaintance told her that years ago, she had set the miniMarathon as a personal goal and had trained long for it, but then ran into an unyielding schedule conflict on race day—a sister's wedding, Lyons thought it was.

Grasping at straws, the woman—unsure why—called Clark to explain her dilemma. Ever sympathetic, Clark listened, then told the woman to go out and run the route on her own and record her time, Lyons said—and that woman told her that her name appeared on a listing of race finishers that year.

The story captures the essence of what runners clearly feel about Clark. "He's for the middle and the back of the pack," said Kathy Priddy, Clark's assistant for 18 years when he was Metro Parks' manager for recreation services. He's been an advocate of what's fair and decent.

His view is at the very core of the miniMarathon itself, a race open to everyone, where neighbors run against neighbors, co-workers against co-workers.

The miniMarathon has always known it could be flashier and draw a different type of runner if it wanted to, but Clark has never thought much of those impulses. "I don't want to be director of a race that gives away money," he said in a telephone interview Friday. "If we can't do it for the fun of it, for the fitness of it, and for the camaraderie, then I would want it to die.

Clark was an unlikely road-race god on Feb. 4, 1974, when he was hired for the park job at age 53 after a career in sales. No one in his family has ever raced. Clark himself has always been a baseball man; he played in high school in Alton, Ill., and spent decades running the youth baseball league in Louisville's Beechmont neighborhood.

But within two days, he was transformed from baseball man to running man. "On the sixth day of February, the mayor (Harvey Sloane) came to see me and told me we were going to have a mini. I think he called it a half-marathon," Clark said. "I'll give them an audience," Clark said Sloane declared—and indeed the finish, then at the Riverfront Plaza and Belvedere, was generously attended by City Hall workers liberated for the occasion.

It was, Clark said, the first road race of its kind in Kentucky.

Businesses soon griped about work-day traffic tie-ups when the first miniMarathons were run on Mondays; the religious community wasn't happy when Sunday was considered as an alternative. So Saturday got the miniMarathon by default.

Today, Clark said, he believes Louisville has the only park department in the nation that oversees 20 or more races in a year—"for the good of the public," he added. "We have developed a lot of fine races in Louisville, Kentucky, and I'm proud of that," he said.

Priddy, Clark's assistant, said he actually retired and moved to Florida in 1997 with his wife Lorene, whom he always called "Mom." But she died in March of that same year, just days after the move, and Clark canceled his retirement and came back to the city where he'd lived since 1948. "Louisville was his life," Priddy said. "He would have had nothing in Florida."

Back in Louisville, he also continued to be involved with the mini, although the Derby Festival had by then taken over official management of the race.

And he also had the unending appreciation of the running community—a community that seems to doubt it would even exist were it not for him. Runner Lyons, for example, who is 30, believes that if Metro Park's running program had not been built, she might not be running today. Running in that case would have required travel, she said, and she very well might not have done it.

Clark worked with the program he loved until late last year. He said he did well after surgery for his liver cancer, but early this year, "for some reason I can't explain, it all went berserk."

One of his two sons, Marvin Clark, said yesterday that in late March, it truly appeared that his father would die. Doctors held out little hope, then no hope, and prayers were said for a peaceful exit.

Then, Gil Clark began moving—first a leg, then he opened an eye, and soon he spoke. Marvin and his father both said a doctor wrote on his chart these two words: "Divine intervention."

"God's got something else for me to do, I guess," Clark said Friday. "I might see another Vencor (the road race that precedes the miniMarathon), but if He lets me live to tomorrow night, I will be most grateful."

Aside from whatever God has in mind for Clark, the Derby Festival had some ideas, too. Yesterday, it wanted him to fire the starting pistol for the mini-Marathon.

Friends Tandy Patrick and Jim Woosley, a Louisville police officer, picked Clark up at his son's home in eastern Jefferson County in Patrick's Camaro convertible—with the top down and the heater on.

Clark wore a white-and-purple jogging suite and his multicolored pith helmet—he doesn't remember who gave the helmet to

him, and by now it's been through so many races it appears entirely held together by duct tape and paint. He was bundled in a blanket and scarf in the front seat of the Camaro. But this was the way he wanted it, so he could wave at the runners.

To travel the 25 feet from the Camaro to the starter's stage, Clark used a wheelchair, but stood strong when Mayor Dave Armstrong gave him a glass plaque, the Derby Festival's Lifetime Achievement Award.

And then the countdown to another race began.

ORDERS FOR TUESDAY, APRIL 27, 1999

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that when the Senate completes its business today, it stand in adjournment until 10 a.m. on Tuesday, April 27.

I further ask that on Tuesday, immediately following the prayer, the Journal of the proceedings be approved to date, the morning hour be deemed to have expired, the time for the two leaders be reserved, and the Senate then be in a period for morning business until 11:30 a.m., with Senators allowed to speak for up to 10 minutes each with the following exceptions: Senator MURKOWSKI, for 20 minutes; Senator COVERDELL, for 30 minutes; Senator DURBIN, for 30 minutes.

Finally, I ask unanimous consent that following morning business at 11:30 a.m., the Senate immediately begin consideration of S. 96, the Y2K legislation.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

PROGRAM

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, for the information of all Senators, the Senate will convene at 10 a.m. on Tuesday and be in a period of morning business until 11:30.

After morning business, the Senate will begin consideration of the Y2K liability bill. Amendments to the bill are expected to be offered and debated throughout Tuesday's session. So roll-call votes can be expected during the day Tuesday, and perhaps in the late afternoon, but not into the night.

Also, any other legislation or executive calendar items that are cleared for action will be moved.

ADJOURNMENT UNTIL 10 A.M. TOMORROW

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, if there is no further business to come before the Senate, I now ask that the Senate stand in adjournment under the previous order.

There being no objection, the Senate, at 6:05 p.m., adjourned until Tuesday, April 27, 1999, at 10 a.m.