

The Early Years (1927 - 1934)

1927

A total of 12 local runners were intrigued enough with the idea of a Thanksgiving morning race to toe the starting line at 11 a.m. despite an early snow that had turned to pouring rain. But by the time the participants reached the finish line some thirty minutes later, a bright sun had broken through.

Eric Crawshaw led the tight pack of runners through Mt. Nebo and back onto Charter Oak Street but faltered on the uphill sections of Highland Street, giving way to John McCluskey and Duke Haraburda. McCluskey, who wasn't expecting to win as Haraburda had beaten him throughout the cross-country season, ran into immediate problems. The motorcycle policemen assigned to the Race were too close and their belching smoke made him gasp for breath until he begged them to move farther away and they complied.

Haraburda turned first on to Porter St. and looked like he was ready to clinch first-place. But a sudden change in stride length by McCluskey reversed their order, and by the time the two reached the end of Porter it was McCluskey who had the commanding lead.

McCluskey was shadowed throughout the five mile run by his brother Joe, who rode along on his bicycle offering advice, encouragement, and a piece of fruit. He also received inspiration from some of the lovely young ladies lining the course as spectators.

"There was one in particular who I had taken a fancy to," he admitted. "It helped a lot to see her waving."

Top Finishers

1. John McCluskey.....29:46
2. Francis Haraburda.....29:55
3. John Thompson.....30:27
4. Eric Crawshaw.....30:52
5. Bruno Rothe.....31:20

1928

Jim Gwin, a 21-year-old sophomore at the Connecticut Agricultural College in Storrs, won the second Manchester Road Race in 27:44. Gwin, a "poultry major" from Tyrone, Pennsylvania, set a course record and bettered by more than two minutes John McCluskey's winning time of 29:46 in the inaugural run on Thanksgiving Day in 1927.

McCluskey, the defending champion, entered the Race but dropped out after the first mile on Highland Street due to a sprained ankle.

Gwin took the lead on the downhill section of Porter Street and held it the rest of the way. *The Manchester Herald* reported that he unleashed a closing sprint over the final yards to the finish line. George Scully, a student at Hartford Public High School finished second in 28:06, and Richard Monstream, a teammate of Gwin's on the Connecticut Aggies cross country team, placed third in 28:25. The first Manchester runner was James Crowe, who came in sixth in 30:24 and ran the Race in street shoes. The 1928 Race was held in a light snowfall and attracted a field of 11 runners.

Top Finishers

1. James Gwin.....27:44
2. George Scully.....28:06
3. Richard Monstream.....28:25
4. Vincent D'Atri.....28:56
5. Francis Breen.....29:14

From "The Manchester Road Race, A 75-Year Celebration" Used with permission. Books available for sale at Manchester Historical Society for \$29.95

1929

Walter Bennett, 23, from Dorchester, Mass. and Springfield College, edged out Charlie White of the Connecticut Agricultural College at Storrs by two seconds, 26:31 to 26:33. Former MHS star and Fordham freshman runner Joe McCluskey finished just eight seconds farther back, as the first seven runners all bettered Jim Gwin's previous course record, 27:44. A total of 32 runners finished.

White was the early leader, with Jim Craig, an engineer at Cheney Brothers, moving past him as the pack emerged from behind the Rogers Paper Mill off Charter Oak St. McCluskey, opting for a conservative first Five Mile attempt, lay back in sixth position.

By the time the runners reached Porter St., Craig had dropped behind to third, while White pushed the pace a stride ahead of Bennett, who looked the most comfortable of the three. McCluskey moved up gradually and eventually passed Craig at the intersection of East Center and Foster St., where his family lived.

Bennett struck with a mile to go and then nursed his lead to the finish, where, due to thick crowds spilling off the sidewalks into the road, he could find only a single-lane passage between the trolley tracks. Both McCluskey and Craig likewise had trouble negotiating Main St., which was also clogged with auto traffic. They could neither see each other nor the two runners ahead of them. Race organizers later agreed to close Main St. entirely the next year.

Top Finishers

1. Walter Bennett.... 26:31
2. Charlie White.....26:33
3. Joe McCluskey....26:42
4. Jim Craig.....27:02
5. W. S. Babcock.....27:09

Top Finishers
1. Walter Bennett... 26:31
Sale at Manchester Historical Society

1930

While its date falls a month before the official beginning of Winter, Thanksgiving Day is a time when snow is always a possibility. And snow is almost certain to ruin the best laid plans of race organizers and runners. The white stuff fell on the Manchester Road Race for the first time in 1930. Fortunately it fell early enough in the morning to melt away, yielding a dry road, before the 11 a.m. starting time.

Given the way Joe McCluskey ran, it would have taken much more than a small blanket of snow to change the race outcome. The seasoning McCluskey received the previous year produced remarkable results in 1930, as he sped the course entirely alone to win in 24:54, a full 1:37 under Walter Bennett's course record. Those privileged to witness McCluskey's performance agreed that his new record might stand for many, many years.

Charlie White of the Connecticut Aggies, who had pushed Walter Bennett the previous year, was himself 39 seconds under the old mark and yet dropped to third place, eked out by Ted Lawson. Jim Craig abandoned his early-pace-setter strategy of 1929 to start slowly and move up at a strategic pace. At the finish tape, he held sixth place, eight spots ahead of John McCluskey, the 1927 winner. The day's snowy outlook held the finishing number down to 16.

With the help of Recreation Director Lewis Lloyd and two Boy Scout troops, Police Chief Samuel G. Gordon kept traffic off Main St. and all spectators on the sidewalks. As a result, McCluskey and those pursuing him had a clear, unobstructed run down Main St. to the finish line.

Top Finishers

1. Joe McCluskey24:54
2. Ted Lawson.....25:46
3. Charlie White25:54
4. C. M. Dettrich.....26:19
5. L. D. Hubbard.....26:42

1931

Even though he had won the previous Thanksgiving, setting an amazing new course record, Joe McCluskey couldn't lay claim to race number 1 in the 1931 Manchester Five Mile. That honor was accorded the internationally famous Clarence DeMar, seven-time winner of the Boston Marathon.

While McCluskey and DeMar were just two of the 32 starters, equaling the 1929 high, there could be no mistaking their headline prominence, which drew nearly 7000 curious spectators to the Main St. start/finish line. Town authorities estimated it was the largest sporting turnout for a Manchester athletic event in many, many years.

Once the gun was fired, the final outcome was never in doubt. Shufflin' Joe McCluskey, gearing up for the 1932 Olympics and accompanied by his Fordham trainer and coach Jake Webber, went to the front immediately and left the entire field far behind. McCluskey broke his own course record by 12 seconds and bested second place finisher Leonard Hubbard by over a minute. DeMar finished eighth in 26:31.

Since it was McCluskey's third year in a row as the first Manchester resident to finish, he was awarded a special loving cup trophy in addition to the usual first place prize. His brother John placed 23rd in 30:55 among the 28 finishers.

Top Finishers

1. Joe McCluskey.....24:42
2. Leonard Hubbard.....25:45
3. J. McLeod.....26:01
4. Ted Lawson.....26:02
5. P. Leslie.....26:18

1932

The competition kept growing better. But Joe McCluskey responded by simply running faster. The result was another McCluskey win, and another course record.

Lining up for the start on Main St., McCluskey had to face the likes of Les Pawson, in five months to win the first of his three Boston Marathon titles, and even better over the shorter road distances; John Turley, star Yale miler; Leonard Hubbard, second the previous year and proud possessor of four new cross country course records from the recent harrier season; Bricklayer Bill Kennedy, a marathoner since 1898 and winner at Boston in 1917; and Mel Porter, the junior national six-mile champ.

After biding his time with the pack for the first half-mile, McCluskey surged to the front to run his own race, gliding to the finish line in an almost-unbelievable 24:17.8. Even the swift Pawson was left a good 200 yards behind McCluskey.

Top Finishers

1. Joe McCluskey24:17
2. Les Pawson.....24:54
3. John Turley.....25:20
4. John Noch.....25:27
5. Leonard Hubbard...25:28

From 'The Manchester Road Race' Year Celebration Mission. able for Manchester Society

The Revival (1945 - 1950)

1945

With World War II ended and normalcy returning the Manchester Road Race reappeared. Thanks to support from the local Army and Navy Club, a deal was struck to revive the event.

The honor of being the first of 20 entrants in the revived Five Mile went to Herb Stevenson, but only eight runners eventually lined up at the lower Main St. starting line.

Bent on living up to his role as the pre-Race favorite, the slim, bespectacled Charlie Robbins sprinted off the line. Stevenson and Fran Leary stuck close to Robbins' shoulders as the three turned onto Charter Oak St. but they weren't to last long. Leary, who had won both the State and New England cross country titles while at Manchester High, had never lost to Robbins before.

This time, however, he was at an extreme disadvantage, due to his discharge just two weeks earlier from the Navy, where he had served on a carrier in the South Pacific. Leary couldn't match the fitness of Robbins, 25, and the most feared road racer in New England.

As the small pack began winding its way up Charter Oak, Robbins started to assert himself. Once clear of the field he piled on his advantage. Everywhere along the course he was cheered by an estimated 5,000 onlookers, many of whom had raised their American flags to show the route as he rolled up a quarter mile victory over Stevenson and Leary.

The first four finishers were all former Manchester High runners, and thus all were products of Pete Wigren, who served as race director. High schooler Charley Waite, who finished sixth, was rather embarrassed by his prize, a smoking stand, which he swore he'd never make use of.

Top Finishers

1. *Charlie Robbins*.....26:10
2. *Herb Stevenson*.....27:25
3. *Fran Leary*.....28:24
4. *Bob Bray*..... 28:43
5. *Joe Broderson*..... 29:44

1946

The 1946 Road Race featured a threesome of runners as talented as Manchester would ever see, and they staged a back-and-forth battle that wasn't decided until the final mile.

There was Charlie "Doc" Robbins, the previous year's winner and a Manchester native; Tommy Crane, a WW II veteran and sophomore at Springfield College; and "Shufflin' Joe" McCluskey. McCluskey, winner of the 1930-31-32 Races, the hometown hero, the local YMCA director, and one of the most successful stars in the annals of American distance running.

Perfect weather welcomed a field of 40 at the starting line including 12-year-old Paul Jordan from East Hartford, and 55-year-old Amos Kujala of Harvard, MA. The runners were sent on their way by the crack of Colonel John Reitmeyer's pistol, leaving behind a crowd of several thousand starting line fans.

McCluskey, competing for the first time in five years, bolted immediately to the lead and was 35 yards ahead as he swung left onto Charter Oak.

Tough and fast as McCluskey was, he was now 35 and facing competition that wouldn't flinch. On the Highland St. hill, first Crane and then Robbins drew up alongside the veteran hooper. Over the next two miles, the three greats waged a neck-and-neck struggle for the lead.

Encouraged by the constant stream of "C'mon Joe!" shouts from the sidelines, McCluskey made his last charge for the victory just before the four-mile mark. He wasn't able to sustain his sprint, however, and Robbins slowly took a 25-yard advantage that couldn't be overcome.

The competition had been so fierce that Robbins completed the course 61 seconds better than his 1945 time.

Top Finishers

1. *Charlie Robbins*.....25:09
2. *Tommy Crane*.....25:17
3. *Joe McCluskey*.....25:28
4. *Bob Knowles*.....26:18
5. *Dana Robinson*.....26:28

1947

Refusing to cave in to his years and his long stint in the Navy, 36-year-old Joe McCluskey entered the 1947 Five Mile and won perhaps the most exciting and emotional victory in the Race's history.

Here's how Earl Yost started his report on the event: "Finishing with the kick of a mule, the champion of champions captured the eleventh annual Army and Navy Club Road Race yesterday in record-breaking time. The winner was the fast-balding, long-legged stringbean answering to the name of J. P. McCluskey, better known in track and field circles around the nation as just plain Joe McCluskey of Manchester, CT, USA."

The pre-Race favorite was Charlie Robbins, hoping for a third straight win to tie McCluskey's 1930-31-32 record. But as soon as the gun was fired setting off the 52 assembled starters, Springfield's Robert Knowles raced straight to the front and led the turn onto Charter Oak, followed by McCluskey, Jesse Van Zant and Robbins. By the 1 1/2 mile mark, Knowles and McCluskey had opened up daylight on everyone else, with Knowles holding a slim lead.

Every time McCluskey challenged, Knowles would spurt ahead. At the four mile mark Knowles led by a stride, which he maintained as they turned onto Main St. There, no doubt encouraged by the huge crowd of spectators yelling out his name, McCluskey roared decisively to the front for the first time. Once in the lead, he could not be overtaken.

McCluskey crossed the finish line in 25:02, he had left Knowles 17 seconds behind and taken seven seconds off Robbins' course record of the year before. "I've never had any greater thrill in my career than winning today," he noted.

Top Finishers

1. *Joe McCluskey*.....25:02
2. *Robert Knowles*.....25:19
3. *Jesse E. Van Zant* ...25:45
4. *Charlie Robbins*.....25:53
5. *Edward Lemieux*.....26:15