

My First Falmouth Road Race

By Olivia dePunte

As a true born-and-raised, don't-cross-the-Mashpee-rotary-after-Memorial-Day local, Falmouth Road Race Sunday had meant little more to me than a time to hunker down at home. I am embarrassed to admit that before I was part of the staff, I was part of the minority of Falmouth residents determined to avoid the fuss and hubbub.

This year, I was smack dab in the middle of that fuss and hubbub, and I loved it. I rose before the sun, donned my official Road Race Organizing Committee swag and my Staff credential, and was ready to board a press truck by 5:30 a.m.

Press trucks, in case you haven't seen them, closely resemble three rows of bleachers on wheels in the back of a flatbed truck. I climbed aboard to take my place in the middle back, delighted just to have a seat among the journalists, photographers, and referees vying for a view of the race.

And just like that we were off and zooming to the start area in Woods Hole, watching the road pass by in reverse at a speed that almost made my FRR baseball hat fly off. We dismounted at the drawbridge, with just enough time to watch the start of the wheelchair division and then the female elite athletes before we were back on the truck ahead of the male elite field.

A split second of complete silence fell before the air horn sounded, like the whole area of spectators and athletes alike were waiting with baited breath. A dozen or so men toed the line, with calves stretched, breath held, and then bang! From the start, Wesley Kiptoo, a 24-year-old Kenyan runner, shot ahead.

We squinted our eyes from 15 feet down the road, making a collective effort to puzzle out bib numbers. The race referee, sitting to my left, raised his binoculars and was the first to shout out #5 was in the lead! Others were skeptical; from their many experiences watching and commenting on races, they maintained the moniker: "He who starts in the lead rarely finishes in it."

I, for one, had no experience to fall back on and nothing to do but watch with rapt attention and let time reveal the truth of the statement. Kiptoo, with his calm, unfaltering determination, sought out to prove them wrong, as if he'd heard their doubts rumbling from the truck ahead of him.

Running at an incredibly fast clip, he passed Nobska Lighthouse with his first mile down in 4:17. As he rounded the bend, no runners could even be seen in his wake until the pack caught up to the corner a full 35 meters behind. Still running strong at Mile 2, he maintained the lead.

The referee next to me was astonished; starting the race at a four-minute-mile pace was almost unheard of. While the commentators scoffed that he might be expending his energy too soon, the referee started to change his mind. Kiptoo still hadn't faltered once.

The long, flat stretch of shore from Nobska on is a respite from the hills for most, but Kiptoo seemed unfazed either way. The spectators along the course ringing cowbells and shouting his name didn't seem to register with him either. He appeared to have a singular goal in mind: get to the finish, and get there fast.

As far as I could tell, the only hint that he was starting to feel the miles was his skin glistening with sweat and his quick glances at his watch to check his pace. Passing by Trunk River Beach, with now a 50-meter lead, the spectators started to get more packed in. I can only imagine the adrenaline and the band blaring rock and roll must have pushed him ahead to his 70-meter lead at Mile 3.

A moment later, a hushed calm and quiet fell from Trunk River to Surf Drive, aside from a lone guitarist playing bluegrass on speakers outside a stilted house, resembling the one featured on this year's official poster. More smiles and clapping dotted the sidelines as we approached Surf Drive. Kiptoo ran on, past the water stops, without hesitation.

Mile 4 came and went with a round of applause from the fans, Surf Drive electric with a spin class and blaring music. Kiptoo kept steady, and the press started to speculate that he might be on pace for a course record. Even the most skeptical journalists' minds were turned as he passed Mile 5 and cruised past Flying Bridge Restaurant and the town band shell on Scranton Ave., the rest of the runners seeming more an idea in the distance than a threat.

At this point, there was little debate; the race was his as long as he held his pace for the last two miles. Fans were lined up on either side of the street by Falmouth Harbor, and the cheering was constant. Here, Kiptoo broke his first smile of the entire race.

Again, as if he could hear the speculation from the press truck ahead of him, he smiled like he knew it: this race was his for the taking. At Mile 6, the truck raced ahead for us to prepare to see the finish from behind the line. Heads turned to see the press truck filled with men (and me!) all holding big cameras and going 50 miles per hour in reverse, the runners momentarily forgotten. To my great amusement, fans were starting to wave at us like a float in a parade.

Soon, we made it to the finish line and dismounted onto the street, our parade-float-status quickly diminished. We were corralled into a press area and by the time we had collected our thoughts and our notes, Kiptoo came cruising through the tape. He put his hands to his ears to hear the cheers and broke his second smile of the entire race, his goal now complete. About 50 meters behind, his good friend John Korir took second with the rest of the pack on his tail.

The press area was a frenzy of collecting and corroborating information. The referee was shocked, having clocked a time of 31:07.99, and the press was buzzing about record breaking. Soon confirmed, Kiptoo was declared to have tied the seemingly untouchable 19-year-old course record, and I realized I had held a third-row seat to history in the making.

The rest of the results were posted within minutes; Daniel Romanchuk and Susannah Scaroni had both obliterated their own course records in the wheelchair division, to my little surprise but much delight. Hellen Obiri had challenged Emily Sisson to the finish for the victory, sailing to a 19-second victory in 35:13, tied for the second-fastest time in race history and the fastest finish since 2002.

To make a long story short, the race was fast, fast, fast. Kiptoo was all smiles now, his cool demeanor dropped. Medals were handed to the champions and Kiptoo said, "I felt like I was at home," in a finish line interview.

Spirits remained high as the rest of the runners started rolling in, some frenzied, relieved, exhausted, exhilarant. I witnessed a range of emotions cross the finish line as opposed to the calm, unflappable attitude of Kiptoo and the elites.

I felt the endorphins in the air like a second-hand runner's high. To be candid, I'm a fair-weather runner at best. For years, I have picked up and put down the inspiration to run like a piece of clothing bought with the best of intentions yet never seemed to fit quite right. Watching 10,000 runners of all shapes and sizes cross the finish line made me feel like I had been sitting on that clothing item all these years. Their dedication to finish strong no matter how the rest of the race went was more inspiring than seeing any of the elites for me.

Basking in the second-hand relief and joy of 10,000 people crossing the finish line made me realize what all the fuss and hubbub was about at last. I am so honored to have spent my first official Falmouth Road Race three rows back from history in the making, and just as thrilled to have watched the rest of the finishers go by from the sidelines.

I have read and researched and written about this race to no end, but after being witness to it, I felt the indescribable mix of passion and perseverance that people pour into this race. I was

struck by the new understanding behind this 51-year-long tradition and how it is so special to so many, because after seeing it for myself, it will always be special to me.