

Fifty years ago Newington's Bill Rodgers shocked everyone, racing to Boston Marathon title



Connecticut's Bill Rodgers breaks the tape in one of his four Boston Marathon victories. He took his first step to becoming a true legend of the sport on April 21, 1975 when he came out of nowhere to win his first in 2 hours, 9 minutes, 55 seconds. Fifty years later, his performance remains fresh in the memories of many. (Courant file photo)

By **LORI RILEY** | lriley@courant.com | Hartford Courant

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Fifty years ago, Jack McDonald had followed Bill Rodgers' progress at the [Boston Marathon](#) from Natick, Mass., to Boston College to Cleveland Circle. But when Rodgers got close to the finish line near the Prudential Center, McDonald couldn't see him anymore. So he climbed a tree.

There, McDonald, founder of the [Greater Boston Track Club](#) who would go on to become the [athletic director at Quinnipiac University](#), could see his track club teammate, the guy he had beers with at the Eliot Lounge, the runners' hangout in Boston; the guy he trained with on Tuesday nights – *that* guy – was, incredibly, winning the Boston Marathon.

Rodgers wore a hand-lettered GBTC shirt and a pair of prototype Nikes that the legendary [Steve Prefontaine](#) had sent him in the mail. He ran easily, alone, and his finishing time of 2 hours, 9 minutes, 55 seconds was an American record.

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"It was one of those moments in sports – we all have one – that you'll never forget," said McDonald, now retired and living in Marshfield, Mass.

The year was 1975. It was the first of Rodgers' four Boston Marathon wins. He also won four times at the New York City Marathon as well, becoming one of the most popular and recognizable figures in running, even to this day. Rodgers, who was born in Hartford and grew up in Newington, helped popularize the running boom of the '70s, going to all the fledgling road races that would become iconic, dueling with Frank Shorter, who won the gold medal in the marathon at the 1972 Olympics, becoming an ambassador of the sport, something he has continued to do.



Greater Boston Track Club Coach Bill Squires and Bill Rodgers in 1975

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His time, though it happened 50 years ago, still stands up as a top time today. There were no "fast" shoes, no hydration along the course unless a bystander had a hose or handed out cups of water, no high-tech clothing, no type of fuel to keep the runners energized during a race. Rodgers didn't even wear a watch.

"Why would I run with a watch?" Rodgers said last month. "To me, racing was just mano a mano."

[Amby Burfoot](#), the 1968 Boston Marathon champion, was Rodgers' teammate at Wesleyan who ignited the spark when the two were college roommates.

"Bill's marathon career was just astonishing," Burfoot said. "Bill was never going to be the fastest 5,000- or the 10,000-meter runner but at the marathon, he was absolutely the equal of what we're producing today."

And Rodgers – at 77 – is still running. He will be a grand marshal at Monday's Boston Marathon, along with wheelchair pioneer Bob Hall.



On April 17, 2025 the Greater Boston Track Club honored Bill Rodgers and Bob Hall (wheelchair) for their historic 1975 Boston Marathon victories. Front Bob Hall; Back Amby Burfoot, Jack Fultz, Scott Hall (escort for Bob) and Bill Rodgers.

Bill Rodgers, who won his first Boston Marathon 50 years ago, will be honored as one of the grand marshals for the Boston Marathon Monday Rodgers' last marathon was 16 years ago at Boston.

"It was fun, but I don't have the drive anymore," he said. "Even when I was 60, 61, I was struggling. I have so many miles on my body. I have 190,000 miles on my body in my lifetime."

Get a haircut

Rodgers was a member of Newington High's first cross country team and also ran track under Frank O'Rourke, a no-nonsense coach who gave Bill and his brother Charlie and their friend Jason Kehoe a hard time about their long hair.

In 1965, his senior year, Rodgers won the Class LL cross country championship, a 2 1/2-mile race at Stanley Golf Course in New Britain. He said it was the best race he ever ran in high school. Mike Brault of Norwich Free Academy beat him in the State Open.

Rodgers went to Wesleyan, where he met Burfoot, who had been coached by 1957 Boston Marathon winner John Kelley at Fitch High School. Rodgers remembered when Burfoot won the Boston Marathon, he didn't make a big deal about it.

"He didn't wear his medal," Rodgers said. "You'd never know he won the Boston Marathon."

But for Rodgers – who ran his best time in the two-mile his senior year at Wesleyan then stopped running – the association would pay off down the road.

Running stopped, smoking started

When Rodgers graduated in the spring of 1970, he was eligible for the draft. As a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, he got a job in a hospital in Boston. He stopped running and started smoking.

"Once you leave a team, you don't have anyone to run with," he said. "I always needed other people."

One day, he watched the Boston Marathon. He saw Jeff Galloway, a former teammate at Wesleyan. He saw John Vitale from UConn. That started him thinking about running the race. His motorcycle was stolen and Rodgers had to run to work. Then he got fired from the hospital for trying to help start a union.

It was at that low point when he decided to start training again. He ran on the indoor track at the local YMCA and in the spring, ran in a nearby park in Boston.

"I felt like I was making a comeback," he said. "Immediately you start feeling better, although I didn't stop smoking right away."



Bill Rodgers breaks the tape as he crosses the finish line in Boston, April 17, 1979, to win the 83rd running of the Boston Marathon in 2 hours, 9 minutes, 27 seconds. It was his third of four Boston Marathon wins after his first in 1975, 50 years ago. (AP Photo)

It was then that he started to understand what Burfoot and Galloway had been doing, were still doing, more than he did when he was in college. Back then he thought that cross country and track were hard enough; why would anyone want to run 26.2 miles? Running was still considered a bit of an oddball thing to do; the boom had been ignited by Shorter's 1972 Olympic win but was still gathering steam at that point.

What pushed Rodgers to the next level was the Greater Boston Track Club (GBTC). McDonald, a work-study student and miler at Boston College, started the club when an administrator asked him to organize a track meet for some visiting British runners. The local runners who showed up kept coming back and the club was born. Rodgers had run with the Boston Athletic Association one year but switched to the GBTC in 1974 because of what he called the “high-powered runners” there. Jack Fultz, who won Boston in 1976, ran, as did a young Alberto Salazar, who would go on to win Boston in 1982 and New York City three times. The legendary Bill Squires was their coach.

Rodgers attempted his first Boston Marathon in 1973; he didn’t know how to pace himself, went out too hard and dropped out at [Heartbreak Hill](#). That fall, he finished his first marathon in Framingham, Mass., paced for the first 16 miles by Tom Derderian, who had run Boston while he was in high school and would go on to run in two Olympic Trials.

The following spring at Boston, Rodgers’ hamstrings cramped up in the Newton hills and he stopped to stretch. Vitale, running by, hailed him and told him to keep going. The two ran together to the finish; Rodgers finished in 2:19:34.

Primed for victory

In 1975, he felt like he was primed to win. He had finished third in the prestigious world cross country championships in Morocco in March, beating a group of former and future Olympians. Shorter finished 20th.

Rodgers ran in borrowed shoes; he forgot his racing shoes. On the plane ride home, he asked his teammates Shorter and Galloway, who knew Prefontaine, if they could ask Prefontaine for running shoes. The shoes came in the mail not long after he returned to Boston.

“They were super light,” he said. “I had just taken the bronze (at cross country). I felt unbeatable.”

Rodgers had been running 200-mile weeks in training. He was ready. On April 21, 1975, he was at the starting line in Hopkinton, with his Nikes and hand-lettered shirt. It was a chilly morning, so he asked his brother Charlie to get him some gloves at the local hardware store.

Early in the race, he heard someone cheering for Canadian [Jerome Drayton](#).

“Someone said, ‘Go Canada,’ to him,” Rodgers said. “He had the maple leaf on (his shirt). I said, ‘The hell with that.’ Even though I like Canada – you know what I mean.”

Rodgers was fired up. He took off. Drayton went with him.

“We duked it out,” Rodgers said. “I finally got away after Wellesley College. He probably thought, ‘This guy’s going to fold his cards and I’ll catch him in the hills.’”

“But I was really fit. That was the easiest marathon I ever did.”

He stopped to tie his shoes. And kept going. Now everybody was cheering for him, including McDonald in the tree.

“I was so wired,” Rodgers said. “Nothing was going to stop me. You’d have to shoot me to stop me. I was going for the finish.”

When McDonald saw his time, he was stunned; he jumped down and ran to congratulate his friend. Rodgers had broken Shorter's American record of 2:10:30.

The photographers wanted to take pictures of his feet because usually the winners' feet were blistered and bloody, but Rodgers' feet made it through unscathed in the new shoes.

He got a medal and a certificate. There was no prize money then at Boston because runners were considered amateurs. Times have changed – last year's male and female winners took home \$150,000.

Burfoot, who finished 36th that day, was thrilled to see his former roommate's success. But he was more than a little surprised.

"It was unimaginable – the tawdry scrawl of GBTC on his shirt, the stopping to tie his shoelaces ... to run 2:09, it was completely mind-boggling," Burfoot said. "This is the guy I ran 500 training runs with at Wesleyan and he always just loped along beside me.

"I knew he was an incredibly relaxed runner; I was a methodical Germanic attention-paying runner, if you will – Bill was picking up credit cards off the road, scanning the skies for different kinds of birds, hawks and stuff – and I'm just going 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4."

Nobody saw Rodgers coming

Burfoot, who will run the Boston Marathon Monday, said that people asked him if he saw Rodgers' potential at Wesleyan.

"People would ask, 'Did you know he was going to become Bill Rodgers?'" Burfoot said. "And the answer is, 'Are you kidding me? There's no way you could have predicted what Bill became.'

"Part of it was this competitive demon that he was. When he got into races, and had to go hard against people, he personalized it and really attacked and threw himself into the competition."

Even now, 50 years after his first Boston Marathon victory, Rodgers, who lives in Boxborough, Mass., is the sport's most iconic ambassador, traveling to races around the country and the world, chatting with runners, signing autographs, signing his books.

"It's amazing, he ran hundreds and hundreds of road races across America for years in the late 70s and it's almost like every runner of that period met Bill at some point at one of those races at the expo, or he sat around and talked to people afterwards," Burfoot said. "They all have the same memory – 'This is just the nicest, most low key, most friendly, most humble guy you could possibly imagine.'

"I think that's important. It's instructive to all those hundreds of thousands of runners who met him, that that was the way they should behave too to other newcomers to the sport."

What is it like to be an icon? Rodgers was asked.

"It's too weird for me," Rodgers said. "I always felt like I was lucky.

"I was just one of the zillions of runners out there. I was just following Amby. Frank started it. And we followed. Everyone did."

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