

AT LARGE

The Bloomsday Experience

A LONGTIME PARTICIPANT TELLS WHY THE POPULAR EASTERN WASHINGTON RUN IS SO SPECIAL *By Darryl Genest*

On the morning of May 1, downtown Spokane will be filled with excitement and anticipation as more than 50,000 people gather to await the start of the 40th Lilac Bloomsday Run, one of the largest timed races in the world. Eager participants will arrive three hours prior to the 9 A.M. start time for the 12K (7.46-mile) race. It is an excitement I know well, having run this race 37 times.

Bloomsday has become one of the finest road races in America and one of Spokane's largest annual events. The run has also come to mean a lot more than just a road race. In Spokane, it is thought of as a celebration of spring, a time when neighbors become reacquainted with their community after a long winter and share in the Bloomsday celebration of health and fitness. For me, it is a special event that evokes many memories of growing up in Spokane and running the race over the years.

The Lilac Bloomsday Run was founded in 1977 by marathoner Don Kardong, who had competed for the U.S. Olympic team the previous year in Montreal. The inaugural event attracted about 1,100 participants, including Olympic runner Frank Shorter. The next year, famed Boston marathoner Bill Rodgers attended, helping to increase awareness of the event, which also was expanded to include walkers and drew more than 5,000 participants. Attendance continued to grow in the following years as the race offered prize money for elite runners and expanded participating categories to include wheelchair athletes.

It was an early March day in 1979 when I first thought about running Bloomsday. I was a tall seventh grader who weighed 95 pounds soaking wet. I had never taken part in track and field before joining the team that year. Our coach gave us all fliers for the race, which was in its third year, and told us we had nine weeks to train. Little did I know that race would become a part of my life.

Even after all these years, I still look forward to the activities on the day of the race, which is one of the best-organized events I have attended. I watch the streets near the starting line fill with participants

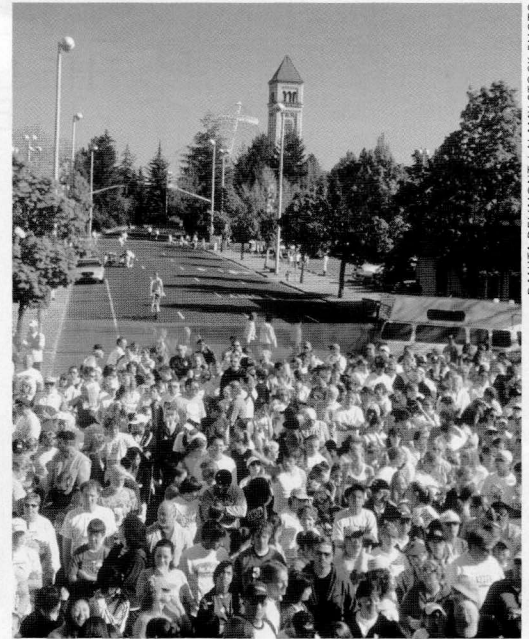
wearing sporting attire in every color imaginable. The race announcer keeps us entertained as he counts down the minutes to start. We listen as the Canadian and United States national anthems are sung. Helicopters from local television news stations fly overhead and add to the atmosphere as they film the event.

The anticipation builds as my group gets ready to run. A starter pistol is fired, and we are off, jockeying for position as thousands of people race down the crowded street—my heart pounding and adrenaline flowing.

The experience of participating in an event of this size is awe-inspiring whether you are running, jogging or walking. You are energized by the camaraderie of the participants, the high-energy volunteers and the thousands of spectators who line the race course. The scenic views along the route are wonderful, with the Spokane River dominating the geography, and at least a dozen bands playing music from stages placed at spots along the course. To mark the race's 40th anniversary, there will be 40 bands playing this year.

As usual, I can't wait for Bloomsday. After all, what better way to celebrate the arrival of spring than with 50,000 of your closest friends?

DARRYL GENEST earned All-American honors in cross country at Eastern Washington University, where he helped the Eagles win the 1982 NCAA Division II Cross Country Championship. Today, he is the head coach of the Federal Way Track Club. For information about signing up for the Lilac Bloomsday Run, call 509-838-1579, or visit bloomsdayrun.org.



DANITA DELMONT / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

More than 50,000 people gather in downtown Spokane each spring to participate in the Lilac Bloomsday Run, one of the world's largest timed races.