

RUNNING THE CARPET CAPITAL

by Dan Gould



Every December I leave the balmy breezes and blue skies of Florida for a brief visit to the world of chill factors and gray skies in northern Illinois. I go home to Kankakee to celebrate the holidays and renew my acquaintance with my wife. Pat is not a runner or golfer and her affection for Florida is summed up in her view of palm trees - they remind her of toilet bowl brushes.

I've often left Bradenton well before dawn and arrived home eighteen or nineteen hours and twelve hundred miles later. There is no fool like an old fool! This year I sought to avoid such a label by finding a race halfway home, giving me a reason to break up the drive and a new racing experience. An Internet search of Georgia races produced just what I was looking for - the 17th Annual Carpet Capital 10 Miler on Saturday, December 11th. Dalton, the "Carpet Capital of the World," is located just off Interstate 75 and six hundred miles from Bradenton. Besides being halfway home and on my route, it offered a distance I wanted to run. The Carpet Capital Running Club's website answered most of my questions and had a complete entry form. I e-mailed the race director, Dave Leatherman, with a couple questions and noted that I was breaking up a long drive from Florida to the Chicago area. He promptly responded and noted that he was somewhat familiar with the Chicago area.

Small World Part I. Dave said he had graduated from Olivet College in the town of Bourbonnais in 1977. Kankakee, Bradley and Bourbonnais comprise the metro area in which I live. Olivet is now Olivet Nazarene University and the summer training home of the Chicago Bears. I arrived at the race staging area, the Vernell Elementary School, about an hour before the 9:00 o'clock A.M. starting time. I picked up my bib number and long sleeved T-shirt (very attractive) at the pre-registration table. One of the workers pointed out Dave Leatherman and I introduced myself.

Small World Part II. Dave was raised in Eureka, Illinois. His daughter graduated from Olivet last year and is working on a master's degree at Governor's State University, a little north of Kankakee. Back in the parking lot, I struck up a conversation with a runner parked next to me, Hoyt Brown, 56, from North Carolina. Dalton, located in northwest Georgia, is only a short distance from both the North Carolina and Tennessee borders. After a warm-up with Hoyt, we went to the starting line where we joined another one hundred and fifty ten milers and a much smaller group who were running the 5K. Hoyt pointed out Jim Duguay who he believed was in my age group and a talented runner.

The race started under broken clouds giving us occasional peeks of blue sky and sunshine. With the temperature at forty-two and a light breeze, it was "delicious," a shorts and singlet

day for me. The opening (and closing) mile in this very rural area is dead straight and very flat. The remaining miles are a series of gently rolling hills and turns. Volunteers patrolled intersections, some areas were coned, there were ample water stations, and the "Roadkill Runners" had done their job. Roadkill Runners? Dave told me volunteers ran the course in the early morning to pick up any roadkill. Hmmmm.....The post-race chili did have an unusual flavor.

After the first couple miles, the field was spread and I ran alone, occasionally passing another runner and occasionally being passed. The miles flowed by and my pacing was unusually good. Although Hoyt had cautioned me that the second half would be slower, I ran identical times for both halves. Amazing!

My GPS watch confirmed that this certified course was a true ten miles. As with other certified courses I've run, it was about five hundredths (.05) long. I was happy with my 1:16:36 finishing time and even happier when I learned that Jim Duguay was in the 65-69 age group. He had bested me by six minutes.

The centerpiece of the quite adequate post-race refreshments was chili and its warmth was welcome. I shared a table and small talk with other runners. An outsider would call them strangers, but runners who have raced share a bond that a non-runner would never understand. The awards ceremony moved along quickly, even with a pause to photograph the winners in each age group. A woman with a familiar face stood a few feet to my right. As I pondered how I might know her, she was announced as the winner of the 55-59 age group. Carolyn Mather is a writer for the Running Journal, a periodical that covers running in the southeast and to which I have been a subscriber for many years. Her picture appears at the top of her column. There were only four participants in my age group and only two of us had stayed for awards. I was first and Doug Hawley was second. Doug and I chatted after our photo was taken. He is a sportswriter and long time runner who once posted a 2:36 at Boston. I wanted to linger, but there were six hundred miles to drive.

Small World Part III. A day later I was socializing at the Jingle Bell Jog in Kankakee when Dan Webber saw my Carpet Capital 10 Miler shirt. He asked if a guy named Leatherman directed the race. I responded that he did and asked with obvious disbelief if he knew him. The response was that he knew him only by reputation, having talked with Melissa Leatherman at Riverside Health and Fitness Center where she has worked while going to Olivet. Since I've been working out at Riverside for the last five years, I presume I have seen Melissa myself.

The small world is a never-ending story, but the story of this adventure in racing must come to an end. The Carpet Capital 10 Miler is a five-star race. The course is scenic, safe, accurate and challenging. The amenities - food, shirts, and awards - are first class. I have a happy memory of the rolling hills of scenic northern Georgia, of new friends made and stories shared. If it ever fits your schedule, don't miss it