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“Canada 150” tulips in Major’s Hill Park.

Photo by FitzFoto/NERunner

Capital in Bloom For Canada’s 150th Anniversary

by Bob Fitzgerald

On the Friday entering Memorial Day weekend it pours rain for our entire 8-hour drive from NER World HQ on the South Shore of Boston to Canada’s capital city of Ottawa in the province of Ontario. When we depart on Monday the drumbeat of precipitation will once again be our traveling companion for another 8-hours. But in between these soggy bookends the weather is spectacular, good news for the 43,148 runners entered to run in the Tamarack Homes Ottawa Race Weekend slew of events that includes Saturday’s family friendly 2K (3,259); HTG Sports 5K (8,919); 10K (10,903); and Sunday’s Scotiabank Marathon (5,293) and Half Marathon (13,438) and conclusion of the Scotiabank Kids Marathon (1,336).

Arriving on Friday we expected the mood

to be as dour as the weather, what with the beloved Ottawa Senators (The Sens!) having fallen in double overtime just the night before to the Pittsburgh Penguins in the Stanley Cup semifinals. We are assured, however, that the Sens have overachieved all season, that the sun will come out tomorrow and that the largest weekend sporting event in the country is about to unfold.

The marathon originated in 1975 with 146 runners and was thought to be a one-time event, but the following year it served as the Canadian Olympic Trials course. The 10K was added in 1986 and it is these two events—the marathon and 10K—that have recently received IAAF Gold Label status, the 10K in 2015 and the marathon in 2016.

Gold Label criteria: Among a number of contingences including medical services,

course requirements, event coverage et al, there are stringent athlete requirements—the event must have at least five athletes (in mixed gender races this can be male and female) from five different countries who have met these time requirements:

Male Marathon	Female Marathon
2:10:30	2:28:00
Male 10K	Female 10K
28:00	32:00

There are numerous Gold Label races—Boston, NYC, Chicago, to name a few—but there are only two double gold events. The other is Lisbon with its half marathon and marathon on the same weekend.

When we last visited Ottawa in 2012 (all relatives on my mother’s side reside here, win-win) Jim Robinson had been the RD for the past 15 years and two-time Norwegian Olympian John Halvorsen (who’d attended the U. of Ottawa) was President of Run Ottawa while Robinson was the General Manager. Robinson had been at the helm when ING came on as title sponsor, and in the lean



Separated by the Rideau Canal, a section of Parliament to the left across from the Chateau Laurier Hotel.

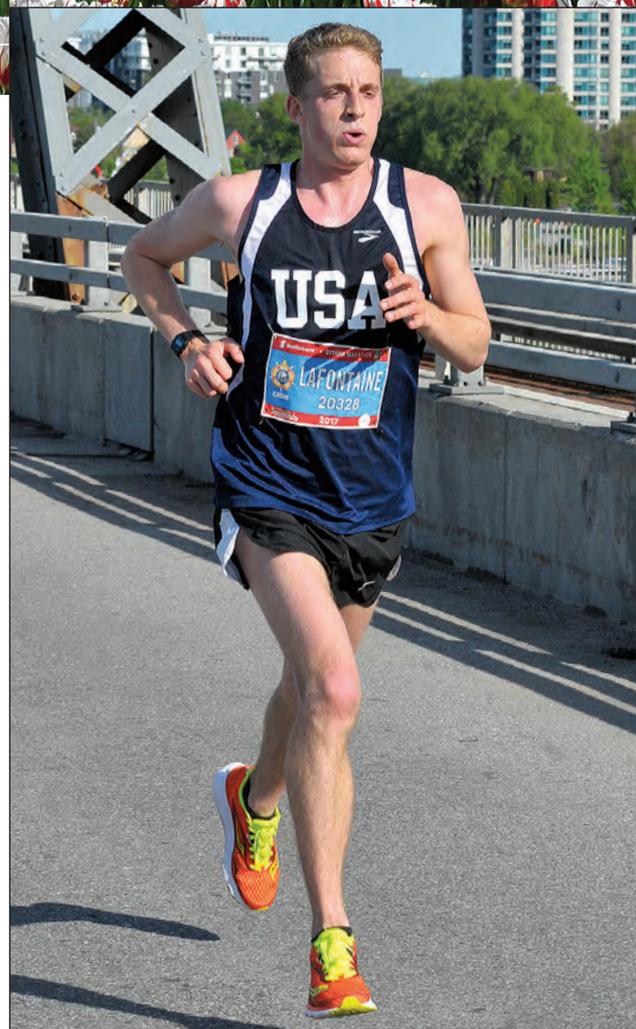
Photo by FitzFoto/NERunner

Gold Label Ottawa Marathon & 10K



A member of Syracuse's 2015 NCAA Championship XC team, NY native Martin Hehir placed 2nd in the Ottawa 10K.

Photo by Bruce Wodder/PhotoRun



Tolland, Connecticut marathoner Trevor LaFontaine crossing the Interprovincial Bridge into Ottawa.

Photo by FitzFoto/NERunner

years when the company withdrew from all its race sponsorships.

At the time Robinson stated, "Having a title sponsor is huge in providing funding to expand our programs and provide more for our marketing budget, and to look at TV coverage and to enhance our overall elite program." In the final year before retiring from his post, Tamarack Homes (a building company) came on as title sponsor and the event once again had wind in its sails.

At a Friday evening gathering at the Shaw Expo Center overlooking the Rideau Canal and Parliament, Robinson is now happy to be on the outside looking in, relaxing in the company of a retired City Hall official who quips, "I believe I retired early, but part of that was because of the way Jim would beat me up every year."

Robinson protests with a chuckle, "That's not how I remember it, it was the other way around," but is serious when talking about the race moving forward following his departure. "I told the Board that John had to be the guy. We worked hand in hand and he knew every

aspect of the event, plus he was certainly capable."

A boon to Halvorsen, as he had been to Robinson, is elite athlete coordinator Manny Rodrigues, now showing flecks of gray in his beard but still pulling in world-class athletes. While it wasn't intentional, Rodrigues notes that many Boston Marathon champions were drawn to Ottawa's fast 10K course starting by City Hall and streaking down bustling Elgin St. to head up one side of the Rideau Canal and down the other to finish facing Parliament.

"Uta Pippig would be the first, she was our first big name and won back in 2001, 2002," noted Rodrigues, who recruited Boston champion Deriba Merga in 2009. Merga responded with a dominant win in 27:24 to eclipse the 21 year-old Ottawa 10K record of 28:12 set by...John Halvorsen! Was Manny doing too good of a job? "That was many moons and 40 pounds ago," laughed Halvorsen. "It was actually the first race I ever ran on the roads."

The Ottawa 10K & A Walking Tour of Ottawa

Following Saturday's 2K and 5K, the 'main event' goes off at 6:30 pm. The only rise on the course comes via an overpass by Dow Lake that takes runners from one side of the Rideau Canal to the other. In the winter, the Rideau Canal is the world's largest skating rink with 7.8 kilometers maintained. Spectators line both sides of the canal (which runs through the center of the city) working noise-makers and yelling, "Go, go go!"

The event will be won by Ethiopians Leul Gebresilase in 28:43 and Natsanet Gudeta in 31:35. Both winners earn \$8K with prize money going 8-deep and second on the money list is none other than New York native **Martin Hehir**, 24, now running for Northern Arizona Elite. Hehir, a vital cog in Syracuse's 2015 NCAA XC Championship team, runs 29:05 to earn \$5K.



Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, these eight locks from the Ottawa River and the Alexandra Bridge that marathoners will cross from Quebec into Ontario. Photo by FitzFoto/NERunner

from the almost equally large Chateau Laurier Hotel of Victorian Gothic composition, are a series of eight entrance locks built for military defense in 1832 (and never needed) that now serve as a recreational passageway. For tourist entertainment and preserving tradition, the rising and lowering of the locks is worked by hand, a process that can take up to two hours. Boat tours run on both sides of the locks, which have been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Crossing behind the Chateau Laurier, we reach Major's Hill Park. On one side is the Ottawa River and on the other the US embassy, a monolithic cement compound. If you continue to the top of Sussex St. you'll annex Byward Market, a seven-block eclectic blend of outdoor markets, restaurants, shops and, since we were here last—three brewpubs in addition to the usual offerings.

"This is our biggest weekend of the year, even bigger than Canada Day," offers one excited barkeep. "Everyone will be here tonight for pasta and we don't do reservations so it's a real free for all." The free for all lends itself to an economic windfall of over \$26-million for both Ottawa and the French speaking Gatineau section of Quebec, accessed by bridge for about 10K of the marathon course.

If you'd like to join us for a dinner party at my cousin's abode, it's now a lengthy walk from Byward Market to the Rideau Canal where we'll cutoff to pass Ottawa University in the Sandy Hill suburb to my cousin's in

The race also serves as the Athletics Canada National Championship. In Boston this past April but withdrawing with Achilles concerns, Guelph's Eric Gillis is tops among men in 30:09 while Vancouver's Rachel Cliff, 29, is top woman in 33:35. London, Ontario's Lanni Marchant—the national marathon record holder (2:28:00) and a 31:40 10K runner—is sidelined after being ill but is doing her part with television color commentary. This is another aspect of being a Gold Label race as your event must have live TV or internet streamed coverage available to at least five countries.

Before the evening's dustup we take a walking tour of the city starting with the traffic-free Sparks St. Pedestrian Way yards from our host hotel on Kent St. The Lucky Penny brewpub is a new addition on one end of the 'Way' while tried and true Darcy McGee's Irish Pub sits four blocks away at the other end. McGee is the only member of Parliament to ever have been assassinated, supposedly yards from his namesake pub. McGee was one of the fathers of the Canadian Confederation and certainly worthy of a Guinness salute!

A turn to the left and there is Parliament, composed of four stunning buildings of neo-Gothic architecture and a huge tourist attraction. You can take a tour of Parliament or sign up for a river cruise, all within a block. The city is also adorned in beds of tulips, many a special "Canada 150" variety of white bloom and red flame. All told, there are 300,000 tulips ("150" and otherwise) throughout the city and along the canal.

Separating the outlying end of Parliament

Overbrook. Ottawa has a population of 900,000 but the vast extent of it resides in 'burbs like these. We've walked 7-miles on the day but will defer from complaining as cousin Pam walks 6-miles roundtrip every day to her office in Parliament. We do readily accept a post marathon BBQ offer by Michael (yet another cousin) in the general vicinity (and we take a cab!).

A Connecticut Yankee in Canada's Capital

The following morning a quick jaunt past Parliament and through Major's Hill Park brings us down to the National Gallery of Canada and a twin steepled church whose bells will chime as marathoners pass by. This is the 27K mark of the marathon and just up from the Alexandra Interprovincial Bridge that welcomes marathoners back to Ontario from Quebec.

It's sunny and 15C (59F) for the 7:00 am start and will rise to 20C (68F) three hours in, all under cloudless skies; in other words, fantastic for spectators and a tad warmish for the 26.2-mile crowd. A pack of six Africans pass us looking strong. Kenya's Elius Kiptanui, 27, will hold up best to win in 2:10:13. Ethiopia's Guteni Imana, 25, is the top woman in 2:30:18. Kiptanui has won his race by 17 seconds and Imana by 35 seconds, each earning \$40K.

The event is also hosting the 49th World Military Marathon Championships and passing singlets read Italia, Polska, Espana, France, Canada and USA. Poland will sweep in 2:13:43 and 2:34:47 while we also notice a blond haired USA runner doing quite well coming of the Alexandra Bridge—and lo and behold, who's the first athlete we run into when we make our way back to the finish area but Tolland, CT's **Trevor LaFontaine**, 24, a runner for Tolland HS (where he still holds the steeplechase record) and then West Point, now stationed in Seattle, WA. LaFontaine had run 2:25:18.

"My folks drove up to watch me. This is actually a lot closer for them than most of my races," says LaFontaine, who has a best of 2:24 from Marine Corps and, despite work commitments that curtailed some training, was still hoping for a PR. "I went out too fast, 71:15 for the half. Granted, it was a bit warm but I slowed a lot. I would have liked to have run a PR, and I set out with that in mind but my training leading up just wasn't there. I liked the course; it was pretty flat. If it was cooler and I was in better shape this would be the place to run a really good time."

Well, the weather could have been worse, and it soon would be, but before that incursion we managed just a few more steps for a last meal at the Lucky Penny that evening. We had no hesitation contributing to the local economy—we'd experienced a pair of world-class events in a world-class city and, on top of that, the US dollar was exchanging at 1.36 Canadian!



Canadian refreshment at the Lucky Penny.

Photo by FitzFoto/NERunner