

## Main Competition

By Brad Colwell

On July 25, 2009 about 450 participants lined up at the start of a local 5K race and walk on City Island. Situated in the middle of the picturesque Susquehanna River the island is owned by the city of Harrisburg Pennsylvania. It has no permanent residents but is home to the Harrisburg Senators AA baseball team. The baseball stadium, a soccer field and a large parking lot occupy most of the acreage of the island. The course would circle the outer perimeter of the baseball and soccer fields, cross a century old grated metal walking bridge (the Walnut Street Bridge) to the Harrisburg side of the Susquehanna River and turn north for an out and back along the river.

The main purpose of the race was to raise money for the Epilepsy Foundation. Most of the 450 participants were planning to walk the course. No race numbers had been issued and we were informed that finishing times would not be recorded and no awards would be presented. Most of the area's serious runners were either unaware of the race or decided to skip it due to the informal nature. That did not discourage the 30 to 40 participants who chose to race the course. The course was accurately measured and the start line and finishing clock were staffed by two veteran members of the Harrisburg Area Road Runners Club.

My 17 year old grandson Luke Schrader lined up beside me on the front line. At age 60 I usually cede the front line to faster runners. However as I looked around and saw that I was wearing the only running singlet among a sea of T-shirts the front line seemed appropriate. Luke is a typical teenager getting ready for his senior year in High School. He has a runner's physic with his 5' 7" height and 130 lb weight. However running to him is a fun activity you only do when a bunch of other people are trying to get from point A to point B faster than you. He tried the track team in Junior High School and ran a mile Personal Record (PR) of 5:50. At the end of the season he stated that he liked running but did not want to do it every day. He never again participated on an organized running team. Luke does belong to the Civil Air Patrol where the Air Force members join the kids they mentor for a monthly one mile fitness test. Luke always wins that race by a considerable distance.

As I have run over 400 races in my 25 years of competitive running I would like to see my grandchildren develop their running potential. All nine of my grandchildren, ages 8 to 18 have run races with me. Two of my granddaughters, Rachel Romberger and Cassie Colwell are on their High School Cross Country teams. At two races last year seven of my grandchildren ran the race or the associated kid's run. I joke that I can still set PR's at my age. Seven grandchildren in the same race as their grandfather is my PR. It is also a course record for those two races for most grandchildren in the same race. I rarely train with any of the grandchildren but I am thrilled whenever one or more join me in an open road race. I encourage them to run but recognize that in order to keep it fun they must decide for themselves how much they choose to run.

As we stood waiting for the Epilepsy 5K to begin I told Luke that he could be one of the leaders. Luke then stated that he planned to lead the race until he crossed the bridge (about the 1 mile mark). Someone told Luke that other runners might also have that same idea. As the race started Luke took off as he predicted in the lead. Two runners running together were in second and I was in 4th. Luke built a lead of about 100 yards and stayed in the lead as he crossed the bridge and ran along the river. At 1.75 miles he was passed by one of the two runners between us. I passed the third place runner but another runner passed both of us keeping me in 4th. The runner who passed me caught Luke at about 2 miles. Luke began to fade and I was gaining on him. At 2.7 miles I caught Luke and moved into third place. (I don't care if he is my grandson I am not going to let him beat me.) Luke was about 20 yards behind me as we crossed the Walnut Street Bridge heading for the finish.

I did not look back but about 50 yards from the finish I heard Luke's footsteps. Luke caught me with about 30 yards to go and we began an all out sprint to the finish. Well you probably know how this one turned out. The all out sprint of a 60 year-old is no match for the all out sprint of a 17 year-old. Luke got third place by less than a second as we both ended the race with a time of 22:50. Fourth place and an over 60 PR were quite an accomplishment for me. However the excitement of racing against my own grandson ranks near the top of my running experiences.

Luke complained after the race that I made him run faster than he wanted to at the end. I said that he did the same to me. This was the second race in less than a year where Luke and I sprinted to the finish and were within one second of each other. At several other races less than 30 seconds separated our finishing times. The same scenario plays out at almost every race. Luke, against my advice, starts out very fast. I run my steady veteran pace, gradually picking off people until I see Luke's back getting closer and closer. Sometimes I catch him and sometimes his lead is too large.

I understand that if Luke trained this competition would not exist. I explain to him often that he has great potential and what he could accomplish if he took this game seriously. However I have to admit that I thoroughly enjoy having him as my main competition. And I often recall the words he said to me when he was about 12 years old: 'Not many people get to run with their grandfather'.