

Rop wins 35th Bridge of Flowers 10k Classic Westover Triumphs in fourth Conquering of Crittenden Hill

By Nate Rosenthal Special to the *Shelburne Falls & West County Independent*

SHELBURNE FALLS, Massachusetts- The second week in August has come and Shelburne Falls once again welcomed with open arms runners from around the world. More than 800 athletes converged upon this tiny community to participate in their annual road race – The Bridge of Flowers Classic, now in its 35th year.

The event is actually two races. The first is the 3k Steve Lewis Subaru Charity 3k Walk and Run, which features runners young and old. It has also been known as the Nathan Hale race. The runners set off at 8:15. The main event, the 10k Classic race, followed. This race has drawn people from all over the world and as recently as 2008, it was run as a part of the USA Track & Field New England Grand Prix series.

Once again, Mike McCusker, the founder and director of the race was front and center. He took his place at the microphone to start the races and then continued his usual banter with the crowd as the runners came in. Soon after, he was announcing the winners at the ceremony down the street. With volunteers from all over the area, the day went without a hitch. Also playing a major role was Steve Lewis Subaru of Hadley. They provided vehicles to lead the way in front of the runners.

McCusker got this event underway in 1979, as part of the Buckland Bicentennial. The 10k course starts in the center of the village on the now famous iron bridge, which is next to the actual Bridge of Flowers. At the beginning, it is relatively flat with some small hills, as the runners circle around come into the center. That is when everything changes. At about the 3k mark, the runners approach Crittenden Hill, which is an ascent of about 300 feet. Separation usually begins here. After a steady descent from a high point of 750 feet, the last 4K of the race is run on fairly level ground. The runners finish the race after crossing the iron bridge. There have been adjustments to the course over the years and in fact the race went across across the Bridge of Flowers for a short time. As a spectator event, this could not be better and people come out of their homes along the way to cheer the runners on and offer them water along their route. That is the beauty of the Bridge of Flowers Classic.

“Once again, we could not be happier,” McCusker said. “We had some great participation and the weather was extremely pleasant for the runners. This is an event of which we are very proud. I want to thank everyone who played a role.”

In the 10k, it was basically a two-man race between a couple of Kenyans, who run out of Springfield, Glarius Rop and Amos Sang. They took charge at the beginning, before the runners left the downtown area for the first time and remained well ahead of the pack. A late burst by Rop with about a half-mile to go put him in the lead and he won with a time of 32:08, 33 seconds in front of Sang. Third place went to Justin Freeman of New Hampton, NH, who got to the finish line in 33:45. The women's race was never in doubt as Heidi Westover of Walpole, NH jumped out to a lead right off the start and ran away with the race. She came in at 37:33, ahead of Kristina Gracey of Albany, NY, 39:11 and Lori Kingsley of Wysox, PA, 39:27. Westover's finish was 13th overall. Gracey was the 2011 winner for the women, while Freeman was the men's runner up that same year.

The 3k was won by Glen Meisenhelder of Feeding Hills in 11:14. He beat out Jacquelyn Pierce of Canton, MA, 11:30. Three of the top four finishers were women with third going to Julie Dragon of Marlborough, MA, 13:19 and fourth to Jackie Wells of Ashfield, MA, 13:22. The fifth place finisher was Gram Pezzati of Montague, MA, 13:33.

The runners in the 10k gathered on the iron bridge and quietly waited for the starting gun. The leader at the start was Shelburne Falls own Kaleb Fitzgerald. He came off the opening gun and jumped ahead of the pack. Freeman was right behind and just two steps behind him were Rop and Sang. Freeman quickly got the lead before the first turn onto Water Street. Moments after that, climbing the hill on Bridge Street, Sang and Rop took the lead in tandem. They would not give it up. By the time they were heading up Pleasant Street, they had put 30 yards between themselves and Freeman, all the time remaining side by side.

At the first mile marketing that lead over Freeman had more than doubled and it became apparent that first and second had been decided. Their lead was 75 yards and growing. They finished their loop back into town and the crowd was astonished to see how much they were leading at that short juncture of the race.

The next landmark was Crittenden Hill and as they both began their climb Freeman was out of view. Rop made a move and Sang did not go with him and within seconds he had a 20 yard lead on Sang.

Meanwhile, word had reached the press truck that Westover was pulling away in the women's race; having a 50 yard lead as she approached the base of the hill.

Rop had extended his advantage to about 100 yards at the top of the hill and by the third mile marker, it was about 125. That would be his biggest lead, because Sang was beginning to come back. The lead was down to 25 yards as two got onto Woodard Road and then to 10 at the four mile mark. Sang was closing fast

and it was clear that he would soon past Rop. The big question was whether Rop would fade after that.

The answer came at East Buckland Road. Sang did, in fact pass Rop, but within seconds they reverted back to the tandem running that they done before the hill. Through all of this Freeman was safely ensconced in third place. Rop and Sang were at the high school and opened up a 250 yard lead on Freeman.

They came off the final hill on North Street and began their final approach into the center. Rop pulled away over that final half mile and appeared in view by himself approaching the bridge. Rop's time was 32:08 and Sang came in at 32:40. Freeman was third at 33:44, well ahead of Michael Roda of Albany, NY and Drew Best of Amherst, MA who finished at 34:38 and 35:10 respectively.

Seven more male runners crossed the finish line and in came Westover at 37:32. She was 13th overall. Garvey and Kingsley were the next women, at 18th and 19th with Garvey crossing at 39:11 and then Kingsley at 39:27 just behind her.

Rop and Sang were both excited about their runs. Both runners practice together in Springfield and they had planned all along to stay together for as long as possible. Rop said, "We talked before the race and kept in contact throughout the early part."

When Rop pulled ahead at the hill, Sang recounted, "I did not want to go with him at that time, so I let him make the move, but we also knew that we would run together again. When he pulled away at the end, I just did not have enough left to go with him." With the way they were interacting after the race, it was clear that there was nothing more than a friendly competition between the two.

For each, it was their first time on the course and both were impressed by the challenged. I seems as though we will be seeing them again in Shelburne Falls.

This was a triumphant return for Westover, who has run the race four times. This was her first win. "Knowing the hill and what it can do to people, I made a move then. Actually, Westover led from the outset, but she really put some space between herself and the pack at that point.

Gracey, who won two years ago and knows the perils, was not about to challenge. "Heidi is a great runner and she proved it today. I realized early on, that was her race. I am happy with second."

The 3k was interesting. Meisenhelder and Pierce fought it out for top honors with Meisenhelder winning by 16 seconds. For much of the race third was up for grabs by as many as six runners. Dragon edged out Wells 13:20 to 13:25 and

Pezzati was right there at 13:33. Thirty seconds separated him from the ninth place finisher, Toby Hughes of Shelburne Falls who came in at 14:18. In between were: Anthony Lombardo of Portland, CT, 13:49; Naomi Tetherly of Chicopee, MA, 13:51; Tiffany Kurchner, Feeding Hills, MA, 14:04.

Notable in this race was the youth in the six and under group. Eight girls led by Allie Martin of Shelburne Falls took part. She won with a 21:46. There was a three year old, Lilyana Jette of Shelburne, who was third in 29:28, just behind five year old Linnea Macek of Shelburne. On the boys' side, six year old Benjamin O'Connor of Florence, MA won with a 16:18, seven seconds ahead of runner up Jack Berrien of Northampton, also six. Third was four year old Reece Berrien, who ran right with Jack. There were seven boys. Beverly Luduvico, 75, of Acton, MA was fifth in the 70-79, as the oldest women and Peter Nimkoff of Tallahassee, FL took that honor on the men's side, also placing fifth.

In the big race, Wade and Anny Stockman made the trek from Rensselaer, NY once again. Wade at 78 ran in the 75-79 group, finishing the course in 56:47. Anny at 81 ran it in 1:14.33. The top honor still goes to Ray Willis of Charlemont, who at 84 ran the 10k in 1:22.50.

As for the hill towns, Al Ladd of Colrain topped the field. His 40:53 got him to 29th and he beat John Herron of Shelburne who clocked a 41:22 to get 32nd. Kelsey Allen of Colrain led the hill town women with a 46:17.

In the team competition, the Willow Street Athletic Club beat WMDP by a composite score of 3:21.31 to 3:37.32. On that Willow Street team were Gracey and Kingsley, who were second and third amongst the women. The men's team race was won by Sugarloaf Mountain, 3:13.32 over Greater Springfield Harriers, 3:34.58. Fifth place Drew Best paced the Sugarloaf team.