



MARATHON & Beyond



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at Tour de France**

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**Laid Back and Happy
at Yakima River**

**Retracing the
Pennsylvania
Walking Purchase**

It's Not About the Shirt 100
(Or is it?)

FRED STEWART



Ode to Joy Johnson

It's Not About the Shirt

(Or is it?)

BY FRED STEWART

The Shawangunk runners train in the Shawangunk Mountains, which are about two hours north of New York City. We usually run one or two marathons a year but as of yet had not planned a fall marathon. One day while perusing the MarathonGuide.com website, I stumbled upon “The Self-Transcendence Sri Chinmoy Marathon.” It was to be held on Friday, August 24, and I was surprised to find that not only was this to be the 11th running of the event but also that it was a Boston qualifier. And it was only 70 miles from my home. “Self-Transcendence”? “Sri Chinmoy”? My curiosity was piqued.

Although my friends Denise, Mark, and I had already qualified for Boston, Anne and Steve had not. They had been previously injured and had no intention of racing, but as is so often the case, it's not only about the marathon itself but the training and camaraderie leading up to the event.

Chinmoy Kumar Ghose, known as Sri Chinmoy, was born in East Bengal on August 27, 1931, and was brought up in the Hindu tradition. He immigrated to New York in 1964 and opened a meditation center in Queens. An integral part of Sri Chinmoy's teaching is to respect all religions. He wrote: “True religion has a universal quality. It does not find fault with other religions Forgiveness, compassion, tolerance, brotherhood, and the feeling of oneness are the signs of a true religion.”

He was also a strong believer in physical fitness, particularly endurance sports. Over time, Chinmoy built up a worldwide following of disciples, and in 1977 the Sri Chinmoy Marathon Team was founded by members of the Sri Chinmoy Centre. It holds many events worldwide, ranging from fun runs to swimming, cycling, and ultramarathons. One of the cornerstones of Sri Chinmoy's philosophy is the expression of self-transcendence, which is going beyond personal limits and reaching new levels of inner and outer perfection.

“I do not compete with the rest of the world. I compete only with myself, for my progress is my true victory.” (Sri Chinmoy)

The Self-Transcendence Marathon is run on a beautiful, flat course around Rockland Lake in Congers, New York, less than 30 miles north of New York City.

► Cristy and Fred with their Sri Chinmoy smiles.

And it is run as repeating loops! That's right, the course is a series of 2.9497-mile scenic laps around the lake. It turns out that most Sri Chinmoy events are done as a series of loops, but I had never heard of a BQ event that employed this technique.

The preregistration entry was a mere \$50, cheap by today's standards. And the website promised not only great support but that "every runner's needs would be met!" This I had to see. The Sri Chinmoy Self-Transcendence Marathon was shaping up as a very interesting event.

Although there are several inexpensive hotels within a few miles of the marathon, our group (Denise, Anne, Cristy, Steve, Norm, Mark, and I) decided to go down that day as it was less than a 90-minute drive.

We drove to Rockland Lake State Park and were pleased to find that both park admission and parking were free. Our next stop was at one of the many restrooms. Another positive. The entire park facilities were open and available for use. What a friendly atmosphere. Everyone was smiling and chatting. It had the feel of a social Sunday run. And you couldn't help but notice the various languages that were being spoken. This was truly an international event. In fact, I would estimate that of the 500 runners, only about 30 percent were from the United States. Most participants seemed to be wearing a shirt, jacket, or sweatshirt with various Sri Chinmoy sayings displayed. And after eying a gorgeous long-sleeve hooded "Sri Chinmoy" sweatshirt I was particularly eager to pick up my packet with potentially a "collector's item" shirt.

"My life is only half full when I receive. My heart is completely full only when I give." (Sri Chinmoy)

Oh, well, there were no packets, only a bib number, pins, and a thin, white cotton T-shirt with a Sri Chinmoy quotation on the back. My shirt read "Remain cheerful, for nothing destructive can pierce through the solid wall of cheerfulness."

At 7:00 we lined up for the start, but I didn't sense the usual marathon-day tension in the air. We paused for a moment of silence. Everyone seemed relaxed.



Courtesy of Fred Stewart

There were lots of smiles, and at the gun everyone started jogging (albeit some much quicker than others).

“You do not have to be the fastest starter. Just be a starter! You will, without fail, reach your destination.” (Sri Chinmoy)

The path was a flat, wide bike path around the lake, usually well shaded except for a small stretch that was exposed to the sun. As we entered this unshaded area, a man standing on a small bridge we crossed was offering encouragement, followed shortly by another gentleman reading inspirational passages aloud from a book. About a mile and a half into the loop, we entered the first water stop, and I was surprised by the number of volunteers for such a small event. They provided both water and Gatorade, and they seemed more knowledgeable than many volunteers, calling out what they were offering, acknowledging you when they sensed your interest, and even moving with you as they handed you the cup.

We passed a band playing inspirational songs and shortly thereafter a sitar player. We then came upon a small group of women chanting, followed by another woman praying. But keep in mind: this was a *race*!

“Every second a seeker can start over, for his life’s mistakes are initial drafts and not the final version.” (Sri Chinmoy)

Having finished loop one, I saw what was meant by satisfying every runner’s needs. This was indeed the *crème de la crème* of water stops. Not only were there more volunteers than normal, but there were many offerings: water, Cytomax, watermelon (salted and unsalted), sea salt, Coke, and seaweed! That’s right, seaweed.



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It turns out that dulce seaweed is rich in vitamin B and fiber, is a good source of protein and iron, and contains the salt balance that is easily digested by the human body. For the record, I did not risk eating seaweed for the first time during a marathon.

◀ We came upon these women chanting, praying, and singing along the course.



At one of the water stops, I inadvertently cut in front of someone. “My fault,” he said. That certainly wasn’t true, and I found myself chatting with this gentleman from Germany who had flown in for the weekend. As a Sri Chinmoy follower, he was like many other runners who had traveled from all over the world to participate in this low-key event. Many appeared to know each other, and everyone was friendly and cheerful. I noticed a woman running barefoot and chatting with an Australian running in Vibram FiveFingers. Although he had traveled over 10,000 miles to race, he changed his time goals because he was fascinated with talking to a barefoot runner. I too found the conversation interesting but soon found myself getting dropped.

On my last loop, the man who had been encouraging everyone while standing on the small bridge shouted out “Enjoy your last lap.” I had to smile. Really, who enjoys the last three miles of a marathon? Evidently, followers of Sri Chinmoy do.

“No matter what happens, do not lose hope. For once hope is gone, everything is gone.” (Sri Chinmoy)

Running loops was quite interesting. Rather than counting down the miles, the six in our group all said they were thinking in terms of loops: loop one, two, three, five to go, two to go, last loop.

Earlier in the race, I had noticed several men sitting on chairs with clipboards on their laps. It was not until I finished that final loop that it dawned on me that these men had been jotting down bib numbers as we passed. After all, this was a Boston qualifier, and without chips and mats it would otherwise be quite easy to simply skip a loop.

“To be true to oneself is the hardest test of life.” (Sri Chinmoy)

At the end of the finishing chute, I was offered four electrolyte tablets in a small cup, and it seemed as if everyone was treated as though they were the first finishers. A volunteer pointed out the massage tents and the ice baths. I hopped in a tub of ice, and another volunteer brought over three more buckets of ice, ensuring that the water would be kept cold.

After that our group found our way to one of the many picnic tables, where we thoroughly enjoyed a vegetarian feast. It felt like more of a picnic atmosphere than a race scene. We feasted on soy hot dogs, pasta with an incredible vegetarian sauce, salad, fresh-made bread, and a mintflavored orange juice. I hadn't noticed when I got in line, but it was pointed out to Norm and me that we were in the “ladies” line. Sure enough, there were two lines, one for the men and another for the women. We stayed where we were, as Norm noted that Sri Chinmoy approved of diversity. Later we were advised by one of his followers that this was typical of Sri Chinmoy events. Come to think of it, there had been separate medic tents also.

Before the brief awards ceremony, a group of followers sang a handful of marathon-related songs written by Sri Chinmoy. They were inspirational and fun. Many in the park joined in, as they all seemed to know the words.



Courtesy of Fred Stewart

◀ The author relaxes in the postrace ice bath.



Courtesy of Fred Stewart

▲ Anne (far left) receives her age group award.

As I look back, one of the things I found most interesting was the quotations on the backs of the shirts. As I approached a runner, or, as was more frequent later in the race, a runner passed me, I found myself reading the quotation. There were so many, and all were different. Mostly they were inspirational, and I found myself thinking about their relevance. How does marathon training or racing take you beyond personal limits? Is the marathon a metaphor for life? What inspires the followers of Sri Chinmoy to travel around the world to participate in these events?

“Of all the medicines in the inner life, a smile is by far the best medicine.”
(Sri Chinmoy)

I’ve been running for decades but have yet to run a more enjoyable and distinctive event. The followers of Sri Chinmoy offered the finest in spirit and attitude. Anne achieved her BQ, and our group will surely return next year. I encourage anyone looking for an interesting and enjoyable Boston qualifier to consider running the Self-Transcendence Marathon.

Sri Chinmoy passed away on October 11, 2007. He received tributes from leaders around the world including Nelson Mandela, former President Bill Clinton, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Mikhail Gorbachev wrote that Mr. Chinmoy’s passing was “a loss for the whole world” and that “in our hearts, he will forever remain a man who dedicated his whole life to peace.”

“World-peace can be achieved when the power of love replaces the love of power.” (Sri Chinmoy) 

This year's

Self-Transcendence Marathon

Monday, August 25th, 2014

Download the application from
us.srichinmoyraces.org