

Grandma's Marathon runner will face 26.2 miles and the absence of his No. 1 fan

Running legend sure to encounter an emotional day

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(Bill at mile 24 finishing his 100th marathon last Saturday in Duluth, MN)

Just the mention of his mom in conjunction with Grandma's Marathon got Bill Wenmark choked up.

There will be many achievements for Wenmark to think about as he steps to the starting line this morning for Grandma's Marathon, a 26.2-mile footrace from Two Harbors to Duluth, Minn.:

- It will be the 100th finish of a marathon-running career that began in the old City of Lakes in 1976.
- He can ponder the magnitude of going from an initial time of 5 hours, 59 minutes, 57 seconds at the City of Lakes to his best time, qualifying for the Boston Marathon in 2:49:39 at Grandma's in 1984.
- He can additionally reflect on the 3,745 first-time marathoners who signed up over 30 years for Wenmark's training program to learn how to successfully churn through 26 miles, 385 yards. That group includes only three runners who never made it through the full distance.
- Wenmark started the Edmund Fitzgerald 100-kilometer run along the North Shore, the On It and In It New Year's Day dive into Lake Minnetonka and the Legend's 10K run in Deephaven, among other events.
- He also can recall the more than 20 years of riding his bike with friends from Forest Lake or Hinckley to Duluth on the day before Grandma's, then running the

race and typically dipping his tired legs in the icy chill of Lake Superior at the finish.

All significant.

But nothing ranks any higher for Wenmark than the great joy he derived from training his mother, Edie, to run her first marathon at Grandma's at age 74 and the excitement he felt when she finished her 10th in Duluth 10 years ago at age 84.

"She was the true grandma and matriarch of Grandma's Marathon," Wenmark said.

It was easy for Wenmark, who lives in Deephaven, to recall high points of his magnificent running career, but when it came time to talk about his mom, who died on Easter at age 94, the words stopped in their tracks.

Wenmark, 62, was asked about his mom not being there.

"It, ah ..." he began, then fell silent for several moments.

When he resumed, his voice was thick with emotion.

"She'll be with me all down the course," he said.

Because of that, his 100th marathon will be both easy and difficult. Wenmark will smile and thank the people who dispense the buttered caramel rolls on tables by the side of the road because it's a tradition for him to crave food the day after cycling to Duluth. But he will most likely have to battle a stray tear or two when someone who knows both him and his mother inquires about her, unaware that she has died.

"She was legendary," he said of his mom's reputation along the North Shore course. "They always waited for Edie. They knew she was coming and called her by her first name."

Wenmark, too, is legendary — for the enthusiasm, passion and spirit he brings to his marathon training classes.

Begun under the auspices of the American Lung Association after the Minnesota Distance Running Association scoffed at Wenmark's idea to launch a class for novice runners, Wenmark's organization has evolved into the Active Life and Running Club (ALARC) and now occasionally includes runners who are the sons or daughters of former trainees.

A former hockey player who believed he was tough enough to run 26.2 miles, Wenmark remembered finishing so far behind everyone else during his first marathon in 1976 that he was handed a ribbon for finishing fourth in a 5-kilometer race going on at Lake Harriet after the marathoners were long gone. He handed it back, proudly told the

woman he was completing the marathon and then walked on board-stiff legs, haltingly and painfully, to his Volkswagen Scirocco about 50 yards away.

After recovering, he recalled, "I said, wait a minute, there's got to be a better way to do this."

Since then, Wenmark has introduced thousands of newcomers to running 26.2 miles, has run 100-mile and 50-mile trail races, has completed the Leadville Trail 100-mile mountain bike race 13 times and has founded the NOW Care medical centers (which he sold to North Memorial two years ago).

He rarely lost the smile on his face.

Honored by the organizers of Grandma's and other events as the Pied Piper of Minnesota marathon running, Wenmark noticed that his 100th was drawing near and knocked off his 98th and 99th earlier this year to make it happen in Duluth.

"It's just really a special place," he said.