A Native Son Looks Homeward

By Mel Lavine

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As a native son, I always look homeward this time of the year when thousands of runners converge on Boston for the Marathon. The 26-mile, 385-yard race has never been postponed or canceled because of poor weather and this year's day of wind and rain was no exception.

It falls on a local holiday, Patriot's Day, which commemorates the Battles of Lexington and

Concord (April 19, 1775). Those first skirmishes between British troops and American colonials marked the start of the War of Independence.

There was no school on Patriot's Day. In the suburb of Brookline where I lived, someone always re-enacted the ride through town of William Dawes — not Paul Revere.

According to local legend, Dawes, a Brookline man, was the real guy who spread the alarm to the colonists to get ready for the redcoats. But Paul Revere gets all the credit. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow needed word to rhyme:

For example: "Listen, my children, and you shall hear/Of the midnight ride of William Dawes,/On the 18th of April, in Seventy-five;/Hardly a man is now alive/Who remembers that famous day and year..."

You see what I mean. A writer as classy as Longfellow would never let the facts get in the way of a good story.

In a prideful way, the Marathon touched my family. My Uncle Morris was one of the doctors hired to look after the runners. One day we spotted his picture on the front page of the Globe. He was grinning broadly, in company with Boston's roguish mayor, James Michael Curley. For the rest of my childhood, Uncle Morris, alone among my relatives, walked with giants.

In high school, I remember Mr. Bates, the track coach, told us boys it took courage to be a long-distance runner. And, in the next breath, as if he knew my fantasy, he said directly to me, "You don't have the courage."

Nonetheless, my dream of running all 26.2 miles remained a fantasy. I sprinted, and once ran the mile in something like six and a half minutes. In time, sprinting gave way to jogging and, in more recent years, to walking.

A younger friend never gave up hope. He swam in the ocean, and biked and ran on mountain roads. After training for several years, he flew to Boston with his two young children. They would see what kind of stuff their father was made of. In fact, he ran the Marathon in pretty good time; as I remember it, well under four hours. (Robert K. Cheruiyot, of Kenya, who won Monday's race, finished in 2 hours 14 minutes and 13 seconds, the slowest time in 30 years.) As my friend crossed the finish line, his kids ran to him. "Daddy, Daddy," they said. "You should have seen the old man who came in a half hour before you. People said he was 85!"

I wonder. Is it ever too late?

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