

First Decade 1978 – 1987

With the running success of Frank Shorter and Bill Rodgers Frank Cashman of the Grand Rapids Track Club thought the area was ripe for a Road Racing event. Enter Marty Allen of then Old Kent Bank. They wanted --- the rest is history.

1978 - Bill Rodgers, recent winner of the Boston Marathon agreed to be our headliner. And that he was. A rainy day greeted the runners and Boston Billy turned in a 1:17:24. Diane Culp was the female winner. We were off!!!!

1979 - Local hero Greg Meyer won the first of his seven River Bank Run victories. 14 single age group records were set.

1980 - A finish line snafu marred the finish of the 3rd annual race. Meyer won his second RBR in 1:16:02; Karen Blackford took the female honors in 1:38:00. Author Hal Higdon won his 2nd Masters title in 1:23:52.

1981 - Joan Benoit and area native Herb Lindsey made their race debut and took away honors. Lindsey crushed the course record in 1:14:08 and Benoit beat her nearest competitor by over 8 minutes. Super Race Systems took over the timing and finish line chores.

1982 - Tragedy and triumph marked the '82 race as a Lansing man collapsed and died at the finish line. Meyer was back, and he won his 2nd OKRBR. Benoit repeated.

1983 - A photo-finish capped the '83 race as Meyer out leaned Greg Orman for the win. Jeanne Lasse Johnson battled the rain and won the ladies race by 2 seconds over Jane Buch. The race was changed to an out and back course due to flooding.

1984 - Veteran road racer Doug Kurtis outlasted a depleted field (due to the Olympic Trials) to win over a field of very good local and statewide array of stars. Soon to become a River Bank Run legend and favorite daughter, Dian Bussa won the lady's race. She would go on to win five River Bank Runs.

1985 - Hot!! Hot!! Hot!! That factor prevented Meyer and Benoit from considering a course record run. They did win in 1:16:57 and 1:27:25 respectively.

1986 - A reversed course and earlier start time didn't hamper Benoit-Samuelsen from establishing an American record of 1:24:43. Meyer won again, holding off Orman. Al McGuire (NBC and Marquette University) spoke at the pre-race expo.

1987 - 10th Anniversary! A TAC (now USATF) National Championship and prize money. Meyer wins his 7th and Diane Bussa (now Brewer) won in 1:28:17. The race was designated as an Olympic Trials qualifier for the Marathon. Ara Parseghian spoke at the clinic. Benoit-Samuelsen withdrew because of a thigh injury. She filled in as the official race starter. Jeannie Fichtel (Old Kent Bank employee) was the first solo female race director.

Second Decade 1988 - 1997

1988 - FEET FEST! Mark Smith of Cadillac won the race, as he was preparing for the Olympic Trials in the Steeplechase. Brewer took her 3rd crown.

1989 - Two South Africans battled to the closest race in the history of the RBR. Both Brian Sheriff and Mark Plaatjes were timed in 1:16:34. Fourth win for Brewer on a perfect cool day.

1990 - The Sheriff was back, Brian that is, and he took his 2nd title over a then record field of over 4,000. Brewer won her fifth. Alan Page of the Minnesota Viking was the guest speaker.

1991 - The advent of the 5K Run. Plaatjes and Sheriff reversed their finish of 2 years previous, Plaatjes winning by a scant 4 seconds. Marcia Narloch won the women's race.

1992 - 15th Anniversary! 39 runners have completed all the races up to now. Bill Reifsnyder, coming off an Olympic Trial hamstring injury, ran a course record 1:14:47. Olga Appell won her first of many in 1:26:47.

1993 - Kristen Sweers takes over the reigns of the race - a marriage of sorts that would last through 2015. Again, a very hot day greeted the 3,724 runners. The flamboyant Jerry Lawson took the men's race and Appell repeated. The race also had their first "Rosie Ruiz", the famous course cutter at Boston. A 42-year old male "finished" in 1:26:50. NOT!

1994 - "Come Run, Come All" A minor course Change at John Ball Park. An \$11,000 Wheelchair purse offered with Tom Sellers taking the title in record time of 54:20. Simon Karoui started the Kenyan invasion as the male winner and Appel repeated.

1995 - "Catch us if you Can" Keith Brantley won the newly formed USATF Championship Circuit race. An 8 AM start. A half mile and mile kids run (race day downtown through Ah-Nab-Awen Park) Also, the 1st USATF National Championship race for the 25k.

1996 - The inaugural Old Kent Junior. And the elementary school program "Feelin' Good" Mileage Club".

1997 - 20th anniversary! John Kagwe edged countryman Joseph Kariuki for the win. The Dave Clark Five's "Catch us if you Can" song was dropped as the race theme song because of ASCAP royalty problems.

Third Decade 1988 - 2007

1998 – “Run out of Excuses” Unofficial World Record by Kariuki; 1:13:55. Margaret Kagiri won the women's side with a 1:28:45.

1999 – “It's your Move” A rainy day didn't stop Kariuki and Theresa Waniji from copping the top spots. 72-year old Marty Slager had run all the races up to this point. Jean Driscoll garnered her 5th wheelchair win in 1:06:14 and the 10th year of Mary Free Bed sponsoring the wheelchair competitors.

2000 - “I'm gonna Kick Asphalt” The year of the infamous Old Kent Ballpark start and finish. Construction in the S-curve forced the move. Very windy and humid conditions didn't hamper Swiss wheeler, Frank Nietlispach, from setting a world record of 52:44. Driscoll won her 6th and Kariuki won his 3rd straight title. “Champion-chip” makes its debut as the timing system, through Classic Race Management.

2001 - “Attitude. Run with It!” Back home to downtown GR. The race name changed with the sale of the Old Kent Bank to Fifth Third. They remain the title sponsor. John Kagwe ends Kariukes' streak at 3 wins in a row. Svetlana Zakhanova repeats as the ladies champ.

2002 - 25th Anniversary! Bill Rodgers returns and runs a 1:35:1, a bit off his inaugural winning time in 1978. A new \$74,000 purse up for grabs. Anniversary runner, Bill Maat, keeps the streak going as he covers the course in 4:29 ... with a broken leg. 8,519 total participants.

2003 – “Tear along the Dotted Line” Dan Browne of the US Army became the 1st US overall winner since Keith Brantly in 1995. Very humid day.

2004 – “Face it. Pace it. Run it” Kenyan Simon Wangai prevented a repeat victory from Dan Browne. 1st Sgt Charles Big ran the race in full combat mode, including a 30# ruck sack and carrying the 301st guide-on flag. Fan favorite Joseph Kariuki could not get out of Kenya for various reasons, to compete.

2005 – “You’ll be moving on May 8” Rain and cold faced the 7,896 total participants. Simon Wangai and 41-year old South African Colleen DeReuck took the titles.

2006 - The River Bank Run was inducted into the Grand Rapids Sports Hall of Fame. Fernando Cabada beats a strong field, including five world class Kenyans, with an American record of 1:14:20. Russian Victoria Klimina took female honors in 1:27:46. 11,847 total competitors.

2007 - 30th Anniversary! Julius Kibet won after 2 consecutive runner-up races. Katie McGregor, former University of Michigan All-American, took the ladies crown. Bill Rodgers returned to “race” ran with the “masses” and completed the course in 1:54:08. 13,928 participants.

Fourth Decade 2008 – 2017

2008 - Brian Sell, Hansons/Brooks star ran 1:15:06 and Carolin Chepkorir a 1:29:31 to be crowned champions. Sell was preparing to run Olympic Trials Marathon in Beijing.

2009 – Rain and an out and back course plagued the 32nd race. Kenyans Isaack Kimaiyo and Genoveva Kigen took the rain-soaked honors. Charity Partner program is launched. 16,210 total participants.

2010 - 29 degree wind chill and very windy conditions greeted the 6,562 25Kers. American men finished 1-2-3 led by Andrew Carlson in 1:14:41. Firehiwot won the women's race. myTeam Triumph "Angels" and "Captains" finish 14 of their group with various disabilities. 18,337 total participants including over 1,400 in the Fifth Third Junior.

2011 - Fernando Cabada returned to win his 2nd River Bank Run 25K. Molly Pritz of Hansons/Brooks took the female title. The race was saddened by the 3rd death of a runner in the race history.

2012 – 35th Anniversary! An overcast and 53 degree weather greeted the 21,713 total participants. Robert Letting paced the men and Janet Bawcom set a new American record for the ladies in 1:24:36.

2013 - Chilly but dry weather was on tap for the 36th edition. Julius Kieter and Mo Farah worked together. Farah set an American record of 1:14:21 in pushing Kieter to the victory in 1:14:07. Three women staged a great race with Chemtai Rionoukei outlasting American Dot McMahan and Mattie Suver in 1:25:45, 1:25:52 and 1:25:54 respectively.

2014 - Samson Gezana, in 1:14:07, edged Christo Landry at 1:14:17. Kellyn Johnson topped last year's runner-up Dot McMahan by almost two minutes. 5,653 runners ran the 25K.

2015 - Jared Ward of Utah made his River Bank Run debut, edged Christo Landry by 4 seconds 1:14 :57 to 1:15:01. In a RBR first, \$1,000 bonus was a carrot for the women as they received a 13 -minute head start, to attempt to beat the men. Lindsey Scherf fell 200 meters short of the bonus, but still ran a credible 1:26:35 in horrible conditions. Sara Hall was 2nd.

2016 - In was new race director, Fifth Third Bank's John Zimmerman's. Christo Landry turned the tables on last year's winner Jared Ward, to win in 1:15:31. Ward was 2nd in 1:15:43. Aliphine Tuliamuk-Bolton, a new American citizen, celebrated with a 1:25:35 victory in the women's race and took the Women's Bonus. 4,637 competed in the 25K. On a sad note, race co-founder, Frank Cashman, passed away in July. Legendary Joan Benoit-Samuelson made a guest appearance in Grand Rapids.

2017 - 40th Anniversary! A picture, perfect Saturday morning in May. A plus was in store, as local hero and Olympian, Dathan Ritzenhein, made his River Bank Run debut. He responded to all the "GO RITZ" cheers along the course, with a 1:14:27 victory over favorite Christo Landry. Aliphine Tuliamuk-Bolton took her second straight victory in 1:24:35 and again the Women's Bonus payout. Eleven runners kept their streak going, and successfully completed their 40th River Bank Run, ages range from 59 to 70.

2018 - 40 degrees and no rain greeted new race director, Scott Stenstrom, Fifth Third Bank. The new RBR “Sweetheart” Aliphine Tuliamuk got her trifecta with a 1:25:34 victory. Sam Chelanga edged Scott Fauble by 3 seconds. A competitive pack of 5 ran together for 12 miles before Chelanga and Fauble pulled away. The Fifth Third River Bank Run has a proud place in the USATF Running Circuit.

2019 – Amway becomes title sponsor presented by Fifth Third Bank with Spectrum Health as the official health provider. Amway’s David Madiol stepped into the race director shoes. Cool with perfect conditions allowed Parker Stinson to break the American Record in 1:13:47. Emma Bates took 1st place with a 1:23:50 and the women’s bonus payout.

2020 – COVID-19. Tradition continues as Virtual Race (participants had option to defer to 2020). Race organizers planned a celebratory event for participants with a Drive Thru Packet Pickup, Photo Opportunities and Post-Event Refreshments with participants remaining in their vehicles on Saturday, October 24.

2021 – A pivot from Spring to Fall allowed for “closer to normal” event with a new race date of October 23. Packet Pickup was held outside, and social distanced start and finish was encouraged. Participation levels were about 50% of 2019 and those that participated had a great race day experience which also included the Finish Fest on Calder Plaza. Biya Simbassa took first place at 1:14:26 and Makena Morley set the women’s RBR Course record at 1:23:16.

By RBR History by Al Owens: