

# Don't Meddle With Tradition

The best of the U.S. marathon finisher's medals—  
2009.

BY PAUL GENTRY

As a young teenager in 1972 during the Munich Olympics, I was huddled in front of our huge 19-inch screen in utter disbelief at what I was witnessing. In the late stages of the marathon, the crowning event for a Summer Olympics that had been marred with terrorist tragedy, Frank Shorter was triumphantly running well ahead of everyone. Two things immediately came to mind. One, “Why is he wearing a hat?” That didn’t make any sense to me; but more important was the overwhelming thought, *How can someone possibly run 26.2 miles and not die?*

As I watched history unfold in the gold medal ceremony, proud that an American had won after a 64-year drought, I thought that I could never do something that amazing. Running a marathon was surely a once-in-a-lifetime achievement for someone else, certainly not for me. Five decades later, I beg to differ with my teen counterpart.

According to John Elliott of *MarathonGuide.com*, there are over 400 marathons in the United States, approximately half the total number of marathons run throughout world. Three-quarters of those U.S. marathons have registrations of more than a hundred runners. Each and every one of these events is a priceless snapshot in time: a potential triumph for those finishers who have wearily awoken nearly every morning to run multiple training miles while most of their acquaintances and coworkers are comfortably reaching out to hit the snooze button on their alarms. The ultimate reward is in the finishing, and the finisher’s medal is a tangible reminder of that finish.

Today the finisher’s medal is a tradition that most marathon race directors (RDs) carry on, with special attention given to design, detail, creativity, historic reference, and a sense of community. Marathoners often keep their medals in plain view to remind themselves that they share a special bond with the one-tenth

of 1 percent of society that possesses the determination, discipline, and drive to complete this long journey. Those hard-earned medals embody the essence of the Olympic ceremony. It's about finishing what you start, about setting goals and achieving them. Crossing that line, whether in a time close to Shorter's win or closer to the race's end, means the same thing: you're a winner.

## History and value

When I completed the Hearst Castle Marathon in 2001, I remember how pleased I was with the finisher's medal I was awarded. Little did I know that this was the one and only running of the event. I've since categorized these as R.I.P. medals for marathons that have run their course (forgive the pun). To me this medal is invaluable, but next century, after we've all crossed the finish line, will this Hearst medal hold the same significance for my progeny? The medal symbolizes the tireless efforts of many on that cold January day and should never be cast aside in a drawer as its final resting place. It's rare now, but in 2101 it could end up in a museum next to an Indiana Jones relic.

Many runners put their first marathon medal in a case to preserve and display with pride this significant accomplishment. But what if you ran your first marathon in the 1980s? Finisher's medals were not common yet, and often the postcards mailed from the events were all the runner had to display in a frame. Many know that the Boston Marathon originated in 1897, but few may realize that Boston first gave out finisher's medals in the early 1980s, as did Chicago, whose finisher's medal mirrored military hardware, signifying stature. As marathon running has grown in popularity, budgets grew accordingly, and now almost every major marathon boasts a medal.

The New York City Marathon was awarding marathon medals in the 1970s after America woke up from its '60s haze to the realization that aerobic exercise is a must in maintaining good health. Runners found that with proper training in newly designed running shoes and constant hydration, finishing a marathon was an achievable goal. New York organizers were ahead of the game and wanted finishers to have something to show for finishing their prestigious event. Their 2009 medal displays a big "40" on it, signifying the 40th running for 43,660 finishers, the world's largest to date.

*Medals4mettle.org* takes the value of the medals much further than 26 miles. The organization has given out more than 13,000 donated finisher's medals to hospital patients across the U.S. To this wonderful organization, the medal signifies that with perseverance, you can triumph against seemingly overwhelming odds. They require the medal to be the one presented to the runner at the finish line. Children proudly display these medals, with many especially enjoying the Disney series for their whimsical and familiar cartoon characters.

## Creativity and cost

One-fourth of the marathons in the United States have fewer than a hundred finishers. Because of their size, these marathons are not able to distribute the costs of the medals as well as a larger race can. This smaller budget forces RDs to be creative. Some give out T-shirts only or nothing at all, which some call the “relish-the-experience option.” Some go for thrifty options like sticker medals, where a printer’s graphic is stuck on a medal under plastic, or wooden handmade medals created in the community, which can work out well if done correctly. Many times, however, this can be penny-wise and pound-foolish. Those who decline to give out medals may find themselves with a limited audience, especially if it’s a runner’s first marathon. Why not charge a few dollars more for a well-crafted medal to mark such a momentous occasion?

A marathon runner is already laying out a considerable amount of money. The event cost and the gear for those long, lonely training runs adds up quickly. There are at least two pairs of high-quality running shoes, gels, carb drinks, airline tickets, rental car costs, hotel reservations, and meals. Then there is the expo stocked full of mementos you can’t seem to resist. We never forget that a marathon is also an investment in our health and well-being, but shelling out big bucks hurts! Do you really want this high-priced special occasion represented by a stockpiled cheaper-by-the-dozen medal with a pair of winged sneakers on it? Be truthful, now.

It’s not always the smaller marathons that don’t live up to the ideal. Much time, effort, and networking are needed to produce a top-notch medal. Some RDs go too far outside the box or are just plain burned out. Other races may have had a change in directorship, with the new director going in a different direction because of not knowing the ropes. One northern-California marathon had 11 straight years of top-notch medals and then inexplicably had a significantly lesser quality medal in 2009, leaving many finishers scratching their heads in disappointment. Balancing consistency and creativity is quite a challenge. The medal is a small part of the whole marathon process to a director but can be a big deal for the runners.

That big deal is taken to heart in the Lone Star State. The saying goes that everything is big in Texas. Their marathon in Kingwood, the Texas Marathon, has a 2.2-pound (1 kilo) medal that certainly bears that out and is the heaviest in the United States. The Little Rock Marathon sports the largest medal at 7 3/4" × 6" and not exactly light at 1.67 pounds. This may not seem cost efficient, but these marathons think the achievement is significant and give back in kind, and all the runners we’ve spoken with loved them. That is, they loved them after recovery. Finishers may not immediately appreciate the anvil-like medals being placed around their necks when they are already close to collapsing!

Maxwell Medals (Flying Pig and Fox Cities, among other winning medals) and Ashworth Awards (of note, Boston) come to mind for supplying first-class finisher's medals. Race directors need to research medal companies and have to estimate the number of finishers they expect. Additionally, they need to have extras for runners who want shadowboxes designed to house their keepsakes or for those who simply lose them. Prices vary depending upon quantity, but for the average marathon, a good medal will cost between \$3.50 and \$6.00.

## Novelty

How would you like to receive a cowbell, glass, or mug as a finisher's prize—not in addition to, but instead of a medal? Some runners enjoy these out-of-the-norm prizes because of their originality, but RDs ought to balance creativity with tradition. One well-intentioned marathon did not give out medals as it had in the past; instead, it gave out more-expensive jackets. It was a miscalculation and, as shown by a barrage of e-mails and posts, many finishers preferred medals. Sometimes you simply don't want to tamper with tradition. My son received a glass for his first effort; you can probably guess what happened to it. Oh, well, it's only an irreplaceable memory. Granted, most marathons do have extras and can replace mementos, but it's not exactly the same.

Ceramic and glass certainly can be incorporated into the design. San Juan Island has a small ceramic medal shaped in the outline of the island, while Big Sur's clay medallion is a handcrafted piece of art. The Erie Marathon has a beautiful, blue glass medal. Utah's Park City Marathon combines the art and the glass and gives out a fire-polished, glass sun catcher. This will certainly catch your eye while you are seated on your front porch. Imagine the shock on someone's face when you say that sparkly thing is a marathon finisher's award! First-time marathoners looking for a medal may want to run this event at a later date, when their medal hangers are getting full.

Other artsy medals include handcrafted wooden medals that take a great deal of time and effort to make. One marathoner commented that he appreciated them all the more because the time and effort mirror those of each finisher. The First Light Marathon in Alabama is one race that does this; its wooden medals are fashioned by people with developmental disabilities. I'm sure that many finishers consider that particular prize one of their most precious.

Many runners love finisher's medals that have animated critters on them, and it seems to be a favorite theme of race organizers. There are fish, burros, pigs, hogs, and even roadrunners. In the case of the roadrunner, it's a not a real one. Akron plays on our memories of the old Warner Brothers cartoons with its high-speed-online theme that makes good use of Wile E.'s nemesis.

## Community

Dozens of marathons have bridges or rivers depicted on their finisher's medals, while some official state marathons have the medal shaped like their state. Landmarks are a recognizable way to etch the local images into your memory and make sure you take a piece of the local heritage back home. Those who are dedicated enough to become 50 States Marathon Club members get to experience a wide array of cultures, history, and sense of community.

Want a cheesy medal? Generally not, but most will want the Wisconsin Marathon medal, which is shaped like a piece of cheese. Having something in common with a Green Bay football fan, known as a cheesehead, can be a good thing! We are a diverse society, and marathon medals certainly reflect this. For instance, Wyoming's marathons are cowboy themed, the P.F. Chang's Rock 'n' Roll Arizona Marathon medal includes a cactus, and West Virginia's Hatfield & McCoy Marathon keeps that ancient feud alive on its medal.

When most people think of Nashville, they think of country music, so it's no surprise that musical instruments are in the Country Music Marathon's theme each year. Georgia proudly shows a peach, Idaho's Salmon Marathon sports the fish, and Baltimore has a happy crab. When a smiling volunteer places the medal around your neck, you become forever linked with that city or town in that unforgettable moment in time.

The Portland Marathon takes the community theme very seriously in its medal design. Portland organizers ensure that their landmarks, the state seal, the city's name, and the year are clearly visible. Each medal has historic significance, and from 2003 through 2005 the theme was the Lewis and Clark bicentennial, with a different design each year. The 2009 medal shows a highly detailed wagon train based on a commemorative half dollar minted in Denver and Philadelphia from 1935 to 1938. Marathon finishers take more with them than they may initially realize, thanks to organizations like Portland that go the extra mile.

## Medal fever

Do marathon runners choose races based on medals instead of just on location? Absolutely! Our web site, *262medals.com*, has been inundated with e-mails from runners who use the site in choosing their next run. Most runners aren't going to decide based solely upon the medal, but it's a big part of the decision. The hardware that marathon runners collect is of great value to them; this isn't collecting beer cans or lunchboxes. You collect medals because you're an above-the-norm athlete who has certainly earned them.

Some even go a step further, as earning special medals for running multiple marathons in a year has become very popular. The Competitor Group's Rock 'n'

Roll marathons have many different extra medals (or as some runners like to call them, “bling”) that can be earned by running different marathon combinations. The company has 14 different events and is ever expanding. It has become well known for its colorful, creative and literally heavy medals. Other special series include California Dreamin’ for running San Francisco, Long Beach, and Surf City; the Maryland Double of the Frederick and Baltimore marathons; and, of course, Goofy’s Race and a Half Challenge. Big Sur now rewards those who run its marathon and Boston back to back, dubbing it the Boston 2 Big Sur Challenge medal. Most of the series directors go all out on creating fantastic medals because they recognize it as an effective incentive to run more of their races.

Even running clubs have gotten into the extra-medal process. The Marathon Maniacs club gives a heavy, well-made medal to its members at its reunion race each year if you finish the marathon wearing the club gear. This extra souvenir is good incentive for nudging undecided runners to the club’s reunions from this group of 2,200 obsessed marathoners. It’s an idea that other large clubs are likely to emulate.

## Choosing the best medals of 2009

In order to recognize the considerable efforts that many RDs put into their medals, we gathered a panel of veteran marathoners from different regions of the United States to choose their favorites. Together they have more than 2,250 marathon finishes. Interestingly enough, panel members consistently chose the top three medals. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but true beauty transcends personal taste. There are some expected marathons, but there are also quite a few smaller marathons that understand artistry rather than just the bottom line, and marathons of all sizes are represented on our list.

Some races we initially thought had a pretty decent chance this year didn’t even make the first cut. One event wanted to keep the money local and didn’t use its usual manufacturer. The results unfortunately ended up one step above trophy-shop quality. Good intentions don’t always provide positive results.

When all opinions were tabulated, it seemed clear that it was important for many of us to have “marathon” and the year annotated on the medal and not on the ribbon. Additionally, the all-in-one medals that are also sometimes used for half-marathon finishers were not a panel pleaser. Some panelists thought it was important to have a beautiful design, while some simply liked novelty or creativity. The diversity of the panel ensured balance in judging.

We had many great medals to choose from; this list is the cream of the 2009 crop. We encourage every marathon to go that 27th mile for its finishers and to consider unusual designs while still holding dear the traditions of the marathon and keeping history and community represented each year. It’s not an easy thing

to accomplish, but we think you'll agree that these 25 marathon organizations managed quite nicely!

Runners, submit your medal pictures to [www.262medals.com](http://www.262medals.com), and we invite all race directors to send pictures or your 2010 medals to the address listed on our Web site. E-mail contact: [Paul@262medals.com](mailto:Paul@262medals.com).

## Our Panel

**Tom Adair** is the president of the 50 States Marathon Club. He has finished 245 marathons and 60 ultramarathons. Tom has three times finished a marathon in each state. Additionally, he finished a marathon on six continents and a half-marathon on the seventh continent (Antarctica). He lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

**Rich Benyo** is the editor of *Marathon & Beyond* and the author of 19 books. A former editor of *Stock Car Racing* and *Runner's World*, he has run 37 marathons. In 1989, along with running partner Tom Crawford, Rich became the first man to run from Badwater in Death Valley (the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere and hottest place on earth) to the peak of Mount Whitney (at 14,494 feet, the highest point in the contiguous U.S.) and back, a distance of 300 miles, in midsummer.

**Bob Dolphin** has been running for more than 30 years, and has run 460 marathons. He currently runs 20 marathons per year. With his wife, Lenore, he is codirector of the Yakima River Canyon Marathon. He is a member of the 100 Marathon Club North America and belongs to similar 100 Marathon Clubs in the United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan.

**Paul Gentry** lives in Belfair, Washington. He is a 20-year Navy retiree, a published author, and a musician who has written music that is heard on the radio in every state and many countries. He began running seriously at 39 and has 25 full marathon finishes and counting. He is a Marathon Maniac and half-fanatic club member and known by all as the "medal guy."

**Van "Pigtails" Phan** is a 39-year-old orthopedics physician's assistant who has run 246 marathons and ultras. She is one of only three members of the Marathon Maniacs Hall of Fame for completing 51 or more marathons/ultras for three years in a row from 2006 to 2008.

**Tony Phillipi** is a 48-year-old race consultant with Databar, a company that assists race directors with promotion, USATF certification, printing, wearables, awards, and timing recommendations. He has run 186 marathons and ultras. He is well known as one of the three main Marathon Maniacs who started the insanity!

**Robert Rayder, MD**, is a 41-year-old emergency room physician from Germantown, Tennessee. Due to the challenges of medical photography, he has an interest in unusual lighting techniques and the technical hurdles of the ultra-closeup. In 2008 Rob rekindled his long-latent love of distance running and completed 17 marathons in 16 states during 2009. It was only natural that Rob combined his two passions and developed a special affinity for photographing marathon finisher's medals. He is a regular contributor to *262medals.com*.

**Henry Rueden** is a 60-year-old Army retiree from Depere, Wisconsin, who has run 637 marathons and ultras. He has completed an ultra in every state and a marathon or ultra in every state eight times. He has also finished marathons in all provinces and territories of Canada. He has completed 100 inaugural marathons/ultras and has run in all seven continents. Henry is a member of the 50 States & DC Marathon Group, 50 States Marathon Club, 100 Marathon Club North America, and the Marathon Maniacs.

**Annie Thiessen** is the youngest member of our panel. This doctor of veterinary medicine has run 115 marathons and ultras. She is a sub-three-hour finisher and has won 36 races, including the Seattle Marathon.

**Steven Yee** is the president of the Marathon Maniacs running club, which has more than 2,200 members. Not just anyone can join his world-renowned club, as you have to run three marathons in three months at a minimum. He has run 240 marathons thus far, with his most recent run under 3:30.

**Andy Yelenak** is an avid student of running history and an artist who has created paintings for 18 marathon posters, including Boston and New York City. His work has appeared on numerous covers of *Marathon & Beyond*. After competing in the mile and hurdles in high school, Andy has been a dedicated runner for 30 years. He has run seven marathons with a best time of 3:13.

## And the 2009 winners are...

Here, in reverse order, Letterman-style, are the top 25 marathon finisher's medals for 2009.



- 25. ING Georgia Marathon.** This medal is a real peach. Come on, you almost wanted us to say it! The spinner medal has become a format used by many marathons in recent years.



- 24. Pacific Crest Marathon.** This Oregon series of races is held each year in June, and the organizers change designs every two years. The 2006/2007 medal was just as beautiful as the current one!



- 23. Fox Cities Marathon.** This series of medals changes each year to reflect one of the communities of Appleton, Combined Locks, Kaukauna, Kimberly, Little Chute, Menasha, and Neenah.



- 22. Michelob Ultra Tacoma City Marathon.** This three-year-old marathon is already known for its clever medals—this year, a bottle cap. The organizers also split a marathon medal in half for the 13.1 finishers, who then need to run two years in a row to piece together their prize!



- 21. Mercedes Marathon.** Can't afford the car? Run the race! If your mode of transportation is running, then this is the next best way of obtaining this extremely classy car symbol.



- 20. Grandma's Marathon.** This famous marathon, known for its down-home charm, distributed this remarkable medal to its lucky 2009 finishers!



- 19. Tupelo Marathon.** Many runners consider this medal the one they must have! We enjoy the rubylike gemstone eyes.



- 18. Walt Disney World Marathon.** Great pride is taken in this series of medals, which is unveiled on the day of the race. Many runners run their half-marathon the day before the marathon so they can receive the three-medal Goofy's Race and a Half Challenge set!



**17. North Carolina Marathon.** What does a marathon runner envision those last few miles before hitting the finish line? Sitting down, of course! This running chair was an instant hit with our selection panel.

**16. ING Hartford Marathon.** This marathon has used the castle for its medal throughout the years, but in 2009 it was honed to perfection!

**15. Glass City Marathon.** This smaller marathon medal caught our eye as being well crafted, and the organizers change the color each year.

**14. Big Sur International Marathon.** It might be smart to buy a shadowbox for this fragile medal made of clay, which is often mentioned as unique and is quite popular among marathoners.

**13. Surf City USA Marathon.** What better exemplifies the California way of life than a surfboard? This event evolved from the Pacific Shoreline Marathon but rode the wave much further to where it sells out each year and has become a must-run event.

**12. Baton Rouge Beach Marathon.** Why does a chicken cross the road? To run a marathon, silly! Runners love this chicken, so much so that they complained about the 2008 medal that didn't sport the chicken!

**11. E.T. Full Moon Midnight Marathon.** This out-of-this-world Area 51 run is as distinctive as its must-have medal. Note: No runners have been abducted to date (that we know of).

**10. Boston Marathon.** You don't mess with over a hundred years of tradition. This medal never changes, but its reputation makes it the most-sought-after prize of our sport.

**9. Rock 'n' Roll Marathon Series.** The organizers take great pride in all of their medals. This inaugural Vegas chip design garnered the most votes.



**8. Austin Marathon.** The most popular pick of the larger medals this year. This event is on the must-run marathon short list.

**7. Portland Marathon.** This marathon has a minted medal and always has more female finishers than their male counterparts.


**6. U.S. Air Force Marathon.** These classy medals change airplane designs each year and are made with the same high standards we have come to expect from our heroes in uniform.

**5. North Olympic Discovery Marathon.** This down-the-Washington-coast marathon has a beautiful medal that is updated each year by changing the color.

**4. New Mexico Marathon.** Much care is put into each of these ceramic medals, making each a highly sought-after work of art.

**3. Cincinnati Flying Pig Marathon.** Hands down the cleverest medal out there, with the pig's hindquarters on the back side of the medal!

**2. Route 66 Marathon.** A classic highway marathon with a hood-ornament prize. This event goes one step further and creates a special medal for first-time finishers (see cover of this issue).

**1. Marine Corps Marathon.** Truly the people's marathon: the few, the proud, the finishers! This medal symbolizes the pride and determination that only a Marine can understand, though marathoners come close. 

*All photos by Robert Rayder, except the Pacific Crest Marathon medal, which is by Richard Anderson.*