

Fifty years after becoming the first person in a wheelchair to officially compete in the Boston Marathon, Bob Hall was honored at this year's race as a grand marshal.

by Jennifer Best

Fifty years ago, a young guy in a wheelchair simply wanted to join in on the Boston Marathon. He wasn't trying to make a statement. He didn't have his sights set on a life path that would open doors for others. He just wanted to go the distance like any other athlete attacking the course.

But as morning dawned April 21, 1975, Bob Hall wasn't only on the verge of navigating one of the most storied marathon routes in the world, but he was also on the cusp of changing the lives of others for generations to come.

Bob Hall, left, and Bill Rodgers, right, served as co-grand marshals of April's 129th Boston Marathon.



HONOR

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“Bob Hall did an incredible thing racing in under three hours in a day chair that was close to a hospital chair. If it weren’t for his saying he wanted to race Boston, who knows how long it would have been before someone did, or where we’d all be right now,” says five-time Boston Marathon women’s wheelchair division winner and seven-time Paralympian Tatyana McFadden.

Leading The Way

As this year’s 129th Boston Marathon rolled around, the 74-year-old Hall alongside 1975 Boston Marathon winner and training teammate Bill Rodgers were honored April 21 as its grand marshals.

“He’s had an incredible influence on the sport and helping it grow in so many different ways. He’s made just a tremendous impact,” two-time Boston Marathon men’s wheelchair division winner and three-time Paralympian Daniel Romanchuk says of Hall.

Five years after Marine Corps veteran Eugene Roberts, who lost both of his legs in the Vietnam War, unofficially completed the route in his wheelchair in 7 hours after being denied entry into the event, Hall wrote to Boston Athletic Association President Will Cloney with his own entry request.

Hall, who lost the use of his legs after a childhood bout with polio, wasn’t coming into the request blindly. He had been training alongside Rodgers and had won the National Wheelchair Marathon in Ohio the prior year.

Rather than deny Hall entirely, Cloney responded that Hall could compete in the race, but he wouldn’t be provided a bib number. However, Cloney stipulated, if Hall could complete the route in under 3 hours, he would be granted a finisher’s certificate.

That was all the encouragement the then-23-year-old needed to join the starting pack of 2,090 for the 79th running of the course that stretches from the gently rolling hills out of Hopkinton, Mass., through



Bob Hall, left, became the first person in a wheelchair to officially race in the Boston Marathon in 1975, while Bill Rodgers won the marathon that year, finishing in an American record, 2 hours, 9 minutes and 55 seconds.

the Wellesley College screaming tunnel, around the turn by the firehouse, up Heartbreak Hill and on to the finish at Boston's Boylston Street.

He finished in 2 hours and 58 minutes pushing in his 27-pound, relatively lightly modified day chair.

This year at a panel discussion, which included the 26-year-old Romanchuk and the 36-year-old McFadden, and in media interviews leading up to the marathon, Hall recalled the thrill of that first run, the support of fans along the route, the challenges of climbs and turns, and the scents of cigars and sausages along the route.

"I'm not a hero. I'm not courageous. I just set out to do what I thought I could do in the best possible way knowing how I had to do it," Hall told CBS.

That decision, which he also says was based on "selfishness," led to the opening of official wheelchair divisions in marathons the world over. It also opened doors for broader inclusion experienced at today's Boston event, which draws not only wheelchair users, but other para athletes, duo teams and runners with support guides.

"Bob Hall broke through to allow people in, and he did it in one of those heavy, bulky, four-wheel, hospital wheelchairs. It takes someone to break down barriers. His effort allowed people after him to be part of it," says former U.S. Commissioner of Disabilities Deborah McFadden, Tatyana's adoptive mother.

Other marathons have followed suit, but Tatyana McFadden and Romanchuk say Boston has led the charge, continuing to expand inclusivity by welcoming athletes with disabilities with the same benefits afforded any other professional athlete facing the course, from lodging to cash payouts for the top three finishers.

This year, the United States' Susannah Scaroni won the women's wheelchair title, while Switzerland's Marcel Hug captured the men's title (read more in *In The Game* on page 8).

"Boston is wonderful. They really helped elevate the sport. I'm really thankful to Bob Hall and those that planted the seed in Boston's head and made it happen," Tatyana McFadden says.

Developing A Better Chair

Hall also helped develop a better racing wheelchair. Clearly not one to settle with what was available, Hall modified the chair for his first Boston Marathon by cutting the back down low and giving the wheels some camber for added stability.

In 1978, he built his first two purpose-built chairs designed specifically with the marathon in mind. He kept one, sold the other, and the Hall's Wheels company was born.

As he continued to compete in the years to follow, he also kept tinkering and, indeed, com-



pletely redesigning racing wheelchairs. He incorporated aircraft-grade tubing, speedometers and tachometers and adapted wheels from racing bicycles set at angles that optimized the athletes' arm action. Those ef-

forts drove innovation in wheelchair modification and design throughout the following decades.

By the 1990s, Boston had recruited Hall to serve as its wheelchair division director, but he never stopped innovating.

By 2000, the company offered seven lines of chairs addressing the unique needs of athletes in a broadening variety of sports, including basketball, tennis and snow skiing.

Though he has long since retired from the wheelchair business, Hall's durable chairs remain in circulation. Indeed, both Romanchuk and Tatyana McFadden began their training in Bob Hall wheelchairs that were the core of the stable at Baltimore-based Bennett Blazers, Kennedy Krieger Institute's adaptive sports program.

"Those chairs were probably 15 or 20 years old when I was just starting, and they're still going. They were made small enough that I could use them at a young age and get into the sport," Romanchuk says.

"They're just incredible chairs that have allowed so many athletes to get their start in the sport."

A two-time Paralympic gold-medal winner,

Bob Hall, with microphone, speaks in an interview panel, along with U.S. wheelchair racers Daniel Romanchuk, right center, and Tatyana McFadden, far right, at the CLIF 129th Boston Marathon anniversary event in Massachusetts.

A young Daniel Romanchuk raced in one of Bob Hall's racing wheelchairs when he was a kid, more than 20 years ago.

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As kids, U.S. wheelchair racers and Paralympians Tatyana McFadden, left, and Daniel Romanchuk, right, raced in Bob Hall racing wheelchairs.



COURTESY OF DEBORAH MCFADDEN

Romanchuk raced for a decade in the chairs that weighed just over half the 27-pound freight of Hall's original Boston Marathon ride.

"I'm thankful to the previous generations, like Bob Hall and others, who pushed the sport in many different ways, including inclusion, technology, production of the equipment and increasing visibility of the sport," Romanchuk says.

Romanchuk followed in the tracks of Tatyana McFadden, who had also begun her racing career in Hall's cutting-edge chairs. In 2013, she became the first athlete, able-bodied or with an impairment, to win the New York, London, Boston and Chicago

marathons in a single season. An eight-time Paralympic gold-medal winner, she's also the most-decorated U.S. para track and field athlete of all time with 22 medals.

"He gave a lot back to the sport in innovating more aerodynamic, lighter wheelchairs, steering and the compensator," Tatyana McFadden says. "I am so happy he got recognized this year at Boston."

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