

Bret & Dave's Personal Course Tour!

A great narrative of the *Road Runner* Akron Marathon race course from avid runners and course committee co-chairs, Dave Hunter and Bret Treier:

With the growth of our Marathon, we wanted to share some of our personal observations with those of you who have not run the course before. Each year, a couple weeks before the event, we run the whole course, with our Race Director, Jim Barnett, providing safety and support services, and with many of our local running buddies joining us for parts of the run or, in some enthusiastic cases, the whole thing! As you would expect, we know the course pretty well by now, and hopefully some of our personal observations will help a first-time visitor know what to expect on race day.

The Start, North Hill and Downtown

The course begins with runners toeing the starting line on Broadway, just north of the newly-opened National Inventors Hall of Fame School. This straightaway provides a fast start, with a gentle downhill for nearly a mile, but the savvy marathoner will measure their effort to avoid going out too hard too early. Within a block, we pass the University of Akron's Quaker Square Inn, the site of the former Quaker Oats manufacturing facility and its grain silos. In one-half mile, we start over the All-America Bridge, a Y-bridge that offers spectacular views of the Little Cuyahoga River and valley nearly 300 feet below. On a clear day, sunrise should just be visible on the runners' right. Later runners should also see the leaders returning on the other side of the bridge, adding to the excitement of this start. We think this scenic bridge crossing early in the race feels like the crossing of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge at the start of the New York City Marathon. Runners pass the one-mile mark near the north end of the bridge and find themselves in the North Hill section of Akron for a short jaunt. After three quick lefts, runners turn right back onto North Main Street, and reach the two-mile mark as they start their return trip south over the Y Bridge back to downtown Akron. Runners will notice that the bridge has a slight saddleback, with the low point halfway across on each side.

Once over the bridge, runners continue south on High Street past the Akron Art Museum and the John S. Knight Center (home of our Expo) and climb slightly to the three-mile mark in front of the Summit County Courthouse. The three-mile mark is just one block west of the start and makes it easy for family and fans who were at the start to see their favorite runner again. Very soon runners will reach the first relay exchange at about the 3.5 mile mark. Marathoners and half marathoners bear left at the relay zone to avoid the relayers' exchange on the right side of the road.

As you continue running south, you will find wide roads featuring a gentle downhill that should allow you to lock in a good early marathon rhythm. You will pass the old Firestone plant and the five-mile mark in front of the Bridgestone/Firestone Akron Headquarters. Firestone Stadium, home of the Akron Racers, Akron's professional women's softball team, will be on your right, before you turn left onto Wilbeth Road, just before the six-mile mark. A clear morning on race day will also bring sun glare, as you are running due east, so sunglasses or a cap would be wise for a sunny day.

Firestone Park

The next segment of the course winds through the pleasant Firestone Park neighborhoods and their great fan support. Runners turn back west briefly and start a loop around Firestone Park itself, with a slight downhill on one side of the Park and a slight climb up the other side of the Park as you cross the seven mile mark. You will feel an increased effort here but not for too long. Runners will pass Garfield High School just before turning left onto Brown Street and heading back to downtown (veteran runners should know that one local running great hailed from Garfield – Martin McGrady – former indoor world record holder at 600 yards in the late 60s who was known as the original Chairman of the Boards).

You are now running north through an urban area towards the University of Akron and the eight mile mark. You will note a steady but gradual ascent, followed by a nice downhill leading up to the 15K mark and the second relay point in the University Park area. In another block, you will cross East Exchange Street and find yourself between the Zips' Lee Jackson Field and Track and the new InfoCision football stadium.

The University

Runners will next pass the University Recreation Center and Field House. At this point, you step onto the brick walkways of the University's Buchtel Commons, and begin one of the more runner-friendly and faster parts of the course. The next two miles offer several downhill sections that should produce fast splits on race day, although marathoners may want to hold back slightly to help avoid leg muscle fatigue later. You will turn left and run down the Commons through the center of campus, passing between the Polymer Center Building and E.J. Thomas Performing Arts Hall at the ten-mile mark, before you step back onto the pavement at University Street. In another short block, you will turn right onto Broadway, and find yourself back at the starting line. Your family and friends, who watched you at the start and the 3-mile mark, can easily see you again here.

The Towpath

As you continue past the start downhill on Broadway, you will turn left onto Perkins Street (instead of continuing straight across the Y bridge like you did at the start), and head down a steep hill before turning right onto Howard Street for the final descent to the river valley. Marathoners will find yourselves on a fairly steep downhill as you cross the 11-mile mark and pass under a train bridge before turning left onto North Street and arriving at the historic Mustill Store in about 100 meters. At this point, the half-marathoners turn left and start their return climb to the finish, while marathoners turn right. Here, marathoners begin a four-mile trip north on a crushed limestone path that is part of the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail (the Towpath continues north, winding for many more miles through the Cuyahoga Valley National Park). With the Little Cuyahoga River on your right and thick trees surrounding you, we think this area is one of the most scenic and enjoyable stretches of the marathon. It is also a little quieter, but you will have great fan support at the three water stops: the Mustill Store (11.3 miles), Memorial Parkway (20K marker), and Big Bend (14.5 miles). The Towpath is very flat, easy on the body and without any traffic, so it should provide you with a welcome physical and mental break. The halfway banner greets you about a half-mile north of Memorial Parkway. A mile later, those of you who also enjoy golf will see one of the three courses you will pass race day. Several holes of the Valley View golf course will be on your right as you cross a long boardwalk and reach the 14 mile mark.

Sand Run Park

Just beyond 15 miles, you reach the end of your Towpath trek and pass a larger-than-life statue of the Portage Indian (referred to by local runners as the “buff Indian” due to his six-pack abs). He commemorates the earlier Native Americans who portaged their canoes at this very spot of the Cuyahoga River. At the end of the path, you turn left onto the road and cross one of the course’s busier intersections at the corner of Merriman Road and Portage Path. You will run up a short hill and turn right (before the hill gets much steeper) to enter Sand Run Park at the 25K (15.5 mile) mark – the home of our third relay zone. Relayers getting ready for the fourth leg will be stretching and warming up on the expansive grass lawn in the Park, while you start the next segment of the course with a 3 mile tour of the shady, winding Sand Run Parkway.

As local runners know, the first mile of the parkway is a gradual downhill to a small ford that crosses the parkway. On race day, you will run across a footbridge built just for you and installed by our friends at FirstEnergy. You should still feel good here, but once you cross the ford, just beyond 16 miles, you will begin a fairly challenging part of the course – the “Rally from the Valley.” The next 1.7 mile stretch is a steady, but not severe, climb that reminds us of the Newton Hills area at the Boston Marathon. Although this climb feels a little easier and is definitely shorter than the entire Newton Hills (including Heartbreak Hill), the ascent is continual and you will feel the effort, particularly due to some of the early downhill sections.

West Akron

Revere Road marks the top of the climb and the western-most point of the course. You will turn left to start your return trip back downtown, and just ahead you will see the last relay zone at 30K (18.6 miles), marking the beginning of the last relay leg.

Shaded rolling hills on Revere provide some relief, but will still be challenging, as you reach Fairlawn Country Club (the second golf course) just beyond the 19 mile mark. Here you turn left onto West Market Street for a short stretch before turning left again into a nice neighborhood setting in West Akron. Large crowds and loud fans usually greet runners here on race day. In a block, you turn right and head east on Wiltshire, climbing a little rise to the 20-mile mark before heading back down a nice grade past our second high school, Firestone High School, at the 21-mile mark. Firestone, known locally for its arts and swimming programs, was the high school home of Challenger astronaut Judy Resnik and rocker Chrissy Hynde (but not too many running legends).

After crossing a set of railroad tracks and turning left onto Garman, you will soon reach the 22-mile mark at the top of “Heart Rate Hill” in front of the impressive gates of Stan Hywet Hall. Although the climb is brief, expect it to spike your heart rate to its highest level on race day, so be prepared to take it a little easy up this hill.

Stan Hywet was built in the early 1900's by F.A. Seiberling, founder of the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, and lies just ahead as you enter the tree-lined driveway (a great photo opportunity for fans is found here). You will loop by the manor house and exit under the coach house portico before turning right and proceeding due south on Portage Path, one of the grandest residential sections of town. Some slightly rolling terrain with tree-lined streets should provide some relief and allow you to enjoy the last neighborhood feel of the race. Many fans residing in these lovely homes think that race day is a great day for a party – just try to resist the urge to stop and grab a beer or margarita along the way! You will also soon pass Portage Country Club on your right, the third golf course along the course.

Back to Downtown

Near the 24-mile mark, you will turn left onto West Market Street and begin a very runnable downhill section, hopefully providing some physical and visual relief. Downtown is clearly seen ahead and you now know that your trek will soon be over. If you have anything left in the tank, start spending it here. After a nice descent, a short uphill takes you past the 25-mile mark and the third high school, St. Vincent-St. Mary High School – you might have heard of one of its graduates – a basketball player named LeBron. One final slight climb and a right turn onto Main Street at the U.S. Courthouse heads you south for the home stretch, with only about ½ mile to go.

The Finish

An Olympic-style finish in Canal Park, our beautiful AA baseball park and home of the Akron Aeros, features 9,000 seats for your family and friends. For the fans who watched runners at the start, the 3-mile mark and the 10-mile mark, they have only a short downhill walk to get to Canal Park in time to watch the finish. These fans cheer the runners as they enter the ballpark in right-center field and straight across the outfield to the finish near second base. You may even hear your name announced on the PA, or enjoy the live music from the infield.

Our Review

While we don't call our course "flat and fast," it is certainly fair with a lot of variety in the many segments. The uphill sections are runnable and spaced out along the route. The early downhills and flat portions, if not raced too hard, provide a good base for the later climbs. We think that the changing terrain, the wide variety of the course segments and the outstanding fan and course support make this a great course for first-time marathoners and veterans alike. The knowledgeable runner who is mindful of the terrain and measures their early efforts will have an advantage over other runners during the finishing miles. Most of all, we think you will really enjoy the scenic beauty of our course. It gives you a true and varied perspective of Akron, with nice stretches of natural beauty, scenic vistas, local landmarks and wonderful neighborhoods. If you plan well, you should be able to pick up your pace over the last few miles and finish with a smile in the ball park in front of your fans and family.

We hope this personally guided tour of our course helps you on race day. We look forward to seeing you on September 26th!

Dave Hunter & Bret Treier
Course Co-chairs