

The Answer to this Manchester Road Race Trivia Question is Complicated

By Rick Dyer, historical archivist

How many runners from Manchester have won the town's Thanksgiving Day Road Race since it began in 1927?

The answer to this trivia question is a bit complicated, and it depends on how the phrase "from Manchester" is interpreted.

Brothers John and Joe McCluskey were born in the Silk City and grew up in a house on Foster Street, not far from the road race course's East Center Street stretch. John McCluskey won the first Manchester Road Race in 1927 as an 18-year-old high school senior.

His younger sibling, Joe, won the race four times, in 1930, 1931, 1932, and 1947. Joe McCluskey starred in track at Manchester High School and Fordham University and won an Olympic bronze medal and 27 national titles during a storied athletic career.

Dr. Charlie Robbins had back-to-back victories at the MRR in 1945 and 1946. Robbins was born in Manchester and his family moved to Bolton when he was 10 years old. Back then, students from Bolton attended Manchester High School. Robbins was a standout track and cross-country performer at M.H.S. and the University of Connecticut. He finished third at the 1944 Boston Marathon and won several national distance championships. Earl Yost, the Sports Editor at the Manchester Evening Herald and the MRR's first historian, always included "Doc" Robbins on his list of local winners.

Pete Close was born in Hartford and grew up in Manchester. Close was a great track athlete at M.H.S. and won All-American honors as a miler at St. John's University. He later joined the Marine Corps and represented the United States in the 1500 meters at the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. Close won the MRR in 1958 and was the last Manchester resident to break the tape on Thanksgiving Day.

Then there's James ("Jimmy") Gwin, who was born in Tyrone, Pennsylvania and lived there until he won a scholarship to attend the Connecticut Agricultural College in Storrs, where he was a "poultry major." Gwin was a sophomore and member of the Aggies' cross-country team in 1928 when he hitchhiked and walked to Manchester on Thanksgiving Day and won the Turkey Day road race. Gwin, who went on to earn a doctorate in animal husbandry and became one of the world's foremost poultry experts, lived for several years during the 1930s on Ashworth Street in Manchester when he worked for the Connecticut Department of Agriculture.

Female athletes weren't permitted to run in the MRR until 1977, and to date no one from Manchester has won the road race's women's championship. Furthermore, since the late 1970s when elite international runners of both genders started making regular appearances here, it has become increasingly more difficult for a local man or woman to place first on Thanksgiving Day.

Counting John and Joe McCluskey, Charlie Robbins, and Pete Close, the correct answer is four. If you add Jimmy Gwin to the mix, the tally would be five. It all depends on your personal definition of who qualifies as a denizen of Manchester.

My personal preference is to include all of them. After all, each ran the Manchester Road Race faster than anyone else, and they all had strong connections to the City of Village Charm. They're all hometown heroes in my book.



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