

The “Visible Hand” on the Footrace: Marketing the New York City Marathon, 1970-1980

Pamela Cooper

University of Maine at Orono

During the decade of the 1970s, United States marathon participation increased dramatically as the result of innovations and changes first presented in the New York City Marathon. These modifications served the purposes of managerial capitalism, the “visible hand,” which, in this case, used capital and technology to meet a demand that was as much created by road racing administrators and sponsors as determined by the market. A single entrepreneur, Fred Lebow, seized control of the New York City Marathon in the mid-1970s, and guided to a realization of its potential to attract corporate funding by increasing the number of participants regardless of their athletic ability. In doing so, Lebow changed the nature of the New York Road Runners Club, which administers the New York City Marathon, from a volunteer organization serving the athletic interests of its members to a business enterprise with a staff of salaried managers.

The national influence of the New York City Marathon was primarily the result of its urban setting, which assured a large, concentrated population which was easily accessible to marathon promoters. In 1976, the New York City Marathon was taken out of Central Park and run through all five boroughs of the city. The number of its participants quadrupled; as importantly, the NYC Marathon attracted new sponsors. The success of the 1976 NYC Marathon was to a great extent due to the media appeal of Olympic marathoners Bill Rodgers and Frank Shorter. Rodgers’s and Shorter’s personal influence was also part of an attempt to target the young, upwardly mobile professionals of the late 1970s.

The New York City Marathon developed a number of goods and services, such as the computerized finish line, which could register several runners at once. Many of these innovations were intended to make marathon running a significant experience for runners who had no chance of winning but whose presence in sheer numbers was important to sponsors and administrators. As increasing numbers of marathon participants were attracted and accommodated, a marathon boom resulted.