

TY BURR

A look onscreen at Marathon history



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The men's start at the 2014 Marathon as seen in "Boston: The Documentary."

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What happened in this city on April 15, 2013, should never be forgotten. That said, it would be a mistake to let the Boston Marathon bombing overshadow the race itself. Hold close to your heart the response of individuals, civic institutions, responders, and the larger New England community, but the incident should remain a passing blot on a

proud history of sweat and inspiration.

That's why "Boston: The Documentary" is such a rejuvenating experience: It doesn't let 2013 define the other 121 years. And it reminds you that this local event is truly a celebration of global endeavor.

The movie, a smartly produced and remarkably well-researched history of the Boston Marathon up to and including the 2014 race, isn't exactly new on the scene. An independent production directed by filmmaker-marathoner Jon Dunham and presented by John Hancock in association with the Boston Athletic Association, it premiered at the Wang Theatre last year at this time and went to DVD and streaming outlets last December.

I bring it up now only because the film's getting a belated theatrical release April 12-19 at the new Showplace ICON theater at the Seaport. Advance sales have been strong enough that they're adding extra matinee shows. You can watch "Boston: The Documentary" at home anytime you want, but there's something to be said for experiencing it in a room full of strangers who are also fellow Bostonians. It's that rare kind of bonding experience.

In development for several years prior to the bombings, the movie feels anything but opportunistic, even if it uses the 2014 Marathon — the big civic comeback — as the fulcrum around which its history of the race turns. We regularly return to race director Dave McGillivray meeting and planning with the wide array of people who make the event happen, with special attention paid to preparations of the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency.

Everyone's calm; everyone's holding their breath. There's some speechifying from politicians like Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, but the documentary, to its credit, keeps the stem-winders to a minimum. It understands that this is a people's race.

Indeed, for a casual Marathon observer (like myself), the most rewarding aspect of “Boston: The Documentary” is the outrageous abundance of human interest stories it piles up across a full century-plus history of the race. The filmmakers appear to have rounded up most if not all of the living winners, and such storied figures as Amby Burfoot (1968) and the legendary Bill Rodgers (1975, 1978-1980) come close to serving as our on-camera guides, so generous are they with their insights and time. (Matt Damon provides light narration; it’s nice he’s here but it’s not really necessary.)

Rodgers especially is an on-camera natural, and if you squint you can still see the hard-partying college runner — his more driven college classmate Burfoot recalls long Sunday morning runs where he’d pick up a hungover Rodgers halfway through the campus — who got back into the game only after his motorcycle was stolen in his late 20s and he decided to quit smoking.

“Boston: A Documentary” draws lines of personal and athletic connection between these men and those who came before them, like Johnny Kelly, the mailman’s son who ran the annual race 61 times, finished 58, and won it twice (1935, 1945). Through Kelly, the film reaches all the way back to men like BC medical student Ronald MacDonald (1898), Native American Tom Longboat (1907), and Bill “Bricklayer” Kennedy (1917).

Director Dunham takes his camera through the archives and across the globe, to Athens and Tokyo, Greece and the Great Rift Valley. We meet Kenya’s Ibrahim Hussein (1988), the first African to win; Kenji Kimihara (1966), one of the Japanese elite runners who dominated the race in the 1950s and ’60s; Stylianos Kyriakides, who met Johnny Kelly at the 1936 Olympics and narrowly beat him in the 1948 Marathon, where he raced to raise money for Greek famine relief and so became the event’s first charity runner. (A 12-year-old Mike Dukakis was in the crowd and reminisces here.)

The section on the women runners is absurdly satisfying, with Bobbi Gibb telling

Dunham how she applied for the 1966 race, was informed that “women are not physiologically capable of running a marathon distance,” and ran it anyway. (Local news headline: “Hub Bride First Girl to Run Marathon.”) By 1972, women were officially admitted, with Nina Kuscsik the first women’s champion; when we get to the section on Rosie Ruiz, who faked her way to a 1980 win, the film refocuses a welcome spotlight on Canada’s Jacqueline Gareau, the actual champion.

We learn about the quiddities of the route that make the modern world’s oldest marathon its most troublesome even for experienced runners, and we learn about the strategies that make it conquerable. We hear about the “Scream Tunnel” at Wellesley College; and we learn why Heartbreak Hill is called Heartbreak Hill. (The story involves Johnny Kelly. Of course.) We’re taken back to the early 1980s, when elite runners boycotted Boston until it could match the big purses of rival races, and the event came close to going under.

And eventually, we have to get to the 2013 Marathon, a tragedy that “Boston: The Documentary” manages to look at squarely without letting it take over the proceedings. (The HBO documentary “Marathon: The Patriots Day Bombing,” produced in association with the Globe, is a solid entry on the subject, and there are the two dramatizations, “[Patriots Day](#),” with Mark Wahlberg, and the stronger “[Stronger](#),” with Jake Gyllenhaal.)

Interestingly, it’s the ensuing sequences, set a year later at the 2014 Marathon, that pack the greater emotional wallop. Burfoot was running as part of MR8, the charity team raising funds in memory of 8-year-old bombing victim Martin Richard. Marblehead’s Shalene Flanagan, an Olympic runner (and 2017 NYC Marathon winner) was in it to win it for Massachusetts. Meb Keflezighi, an Eritrean raised in California, hoped to be the first American man to win since 1983.

If you see this movie, you’ll probably lose it

and start blubbing somewhere during the 2014 sequences. (For me, it was the footage of wheelchair racer Tatiana McFadden crossing the line for the win.) “Boston: The Documentary” forgoes easy slogans — the words “Boston Strong” are only heard once or twice — for the hard, hard work of gluing back together a community and the cherished event that has helped define it for 120 years. The movie celebrates the one time the Boston Marathon was run and everybody won.

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