

SunTrust Richmond Marathon

Courtesy of the SunTrust Richmond Marathon



“Friendliest Marathon” Is an Operating Philosophy, Not Just a Flippant Motto.

Once the capital of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia, has lost little of its importance as a major city south of the Mason-Dixon line. In fact, in some ways, it has taken very positive steps to maintain its importance as a gateway city to the American South.

There is always something happening in Richmond, a charming city of nearly 200,000 built on the banks of the James River. Whether it’s a farm team baseball game or the Richmond Symphony or NASCAR racing at what was once a half-mile dirt bullring out at the fairgrounds but today is a modern, fast-action 3/4-mile paved oval in the Nextel Cup series, Richmond is a happening place.

Even the usually sleepy month of November has plenty of action. This time it’s not the thundering NASCAR stock cars racing in a circle but rather the 26.2-mile SunTrust Richmond Marathon footrace winding through the history-drenched streets of the capital city.

The Basics

SunTrust Richmond Marathon
Richmond Sports Backers
100 Avenue of Champions, Suite 300
Richmond, VA 23230
804/285-3132

PHONE: 804/673-RACE

E-MAIL: marathon@sportsbackers.org

WEB SITE: www.richmondmarathon.com

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Tracey Russell

YEAR RACE ESTABLISHED: 1978

CERTIFICATION: USATF; Boston qualifier

START TIMES: Marathon: 8:00 A.M. Kids race: 8:15 A.M. 8K: 8:35 A.M.

COURSE RECORDS: Men: Elly Rono, USA 2:15:36, 2003 (Rono won 3 times)
Women: Irena Suvorova, Russia, 2:31:25, 2000

AWARDS \$22,000 in total prize money. Other awards are presented to the top five overall finishers and the top three masters in both races. Additional awards are presented to the top five in all age groups in both races. Overall awards are determined by clock time; age-group awards are by Chip time. In 2004, a one-year lease on a Volkswagen New Beetle was offered to the male and female winners if they broke the course record. All finishers receive a medal and finisher's certificate.

NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS: 1,400

MARATHON FINISHERS IN 2004: 3,225: 63 percent male, 37 percent female

COURSE MARKINGS: digital clocks and mile markers are provided at every mile

WATER AND MEDICAL AID STATIONS: Water stops are positioned at the start/finish and every two miles on the course until mile 20, then every mile to the end. PowerAde is available at each aid station. Medical stations are available sporadically along the course. Port-a-johns are stationed at the start/finish as well as at every water stop.

FUTURE RACE DATES: Saturday, 12 November 2005

ENTRY FEES FOR 2005: \$60 through June 30, 2005; \$70, July 1 through September 30, 2005; \$80, October 1 through November 11. There is no race-day registration.

EXPO: Health & Fitness Expo is held at the host hotel and includes dozens of vendors. Packet pickup is at the expo. Although the expo is not grand in size, it does provide a good number of friendly vendors. The flow of the expo has the potential to become gridlocked at times but is well worth it if you have the time to browse for bargains.

LODGING: The event site has the best travel and accommodation information: www.richmondmarathon.com. The Omni Richmond Hotel, located at the finish line, is the host hotel: 804/344-7000. For additional accommodation info, call the Richmond Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau at 888/Richmond.

GETTING THERE: For the best directions available, consult the race Web site: www.richmondmarathon.com.

In spite of its near-death experience in the early '90s, the Richmond Marathon has now been run 27 times. The race was originally organized by the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* newspaper and was known affectionately as the Newspaper Marathon or the Richmond Newspaper Marathon. Back in its inaugural year of 1978, some 1,183 runners toed the starting line—not bad for a first-year event. Add in the half-marathon and 8K, and 2,722 aerobic athletes were running around the streets of Richmond.

The second year was even more successful, with a total of 3,673 runners for the three distances. The future was indeed looking bright for the Newspaper Marathon. The race was essentially put on by volunteers who worked for the newspaper along with a full-time staff of one.

A PERIOD OF STAGNATION

But the initial enthusiasm did not endure. More and more cities began hosting marathon events, and the Newspaper Marathon sort of stagnated between 1980 and 1997, with the marathon entrants gradually dropping to a mere 400.

To put it mildly, the marathon was on the endangered species list. The increasing complexity of marathon production had become too much for the newspaper's volunteers in a period when newspapers had to spend all their resources just to survive against the onslaught of cable news channels as well as the availability of instant news on the Internet. Some emergency lifesaving measures had to be taken to save the marathon.

Enter the Richmond Sports Backers. Founded in 1991, the Richmond Sports Backers is the area's largest nonprofit sports advocacy group. The group's sole mission is to drive the economic development of the area by hosting popular sporting events while also working to improve athletic facilities in the area.

In 1998, the Richmond Sports Backers joined forces with the Richmond Road Runners and Crestar Bank (now SunTrust) and rescued the city's marathon.

Numbers rose immediately, from 474 runners in 1997 to 1,584 in 1998. The organizing group did make some compromises. It kept the 8K but dropped the half-marathon as a concession to the city's concerns that it unnecessarily caused traffic hassles.

The group's goal was to get the marathon into the top 10 of American marathons, not an easy goal when you consider that there are more than 360 marathons in the United States. One way to get attention is to give a marathon a certain personality. In this case, the backers wanted to make the SunTrust Richmond Marathon "the friendliest marathon in America." Their efforts were apparently on track because the combined entrants for the two events rose from 1,584 in 1998 to 8,789 in 2004, with 3,986 of those entrants coming from the 8K.

Along the way, the Richmond Sports Backers decided to get even more local folks involved in race weekend, so in 2003 a mile fun run for kids was added. The inaugural year drew 288 kids, which grew to 582 in 2004.

A MARATHON WITH A MISSION

A great deal of effort is put forth to make the friendliest marathon friendly toward charities. The primary charities the marathon supports are the United Network for Organ Sharing and LifeNet (organ and tissue donation).

To help achieve success for local runners, the Sports Backers offers a 25-week marathon training program.

The marathon's charities are certainly well exposed to potential race applicants on the race's Web site. Runners are encouraged to sign up either individually or as a team to get pledges in advance of running. Prizes are awarded to individual fund-raisers based on reaching certain levels.

The Web site is easy to navigate, with simple and clear information and instructions and three race-history buttons: Past Results, Past Winners, and Entry History. All marathons would do well to give more space to the history of the race to give new runners a perspective on the historical significance of the race they are about to enter.

The SunTrust Richmond Marathon home page leads off with its recent recognition by *Runner's World* (January 2005) as one of "The Best Little Marathons in 2005." The magazine confirms that Richmond has achieved its long-range plan of becoming "America's friendliest marathon." It cites two junk food stops (miles

Must See/Must Avoid

MUST SEE

Richmond is very much a family-oriented city. It also boasts some 25 golf courses, so it's a golfer's paradise. There are numerous parks in the area, the largest of which is the 7,600-acre Pocahontas State Park. Here are a few of our favorite tourist attractions.

Agecroft Hall (4305 Sulgrave Road in Windsor Farms; 804/353-4241). This splendid hall was built in Lancashire, England, in the 15th century and shipped to Richmond in the 1920s, where it was reassembled on the banks of the James River. It features the original hand-carved oak paneling, leaded-glass windows, and furnishings from the Tudor and early Stuart periods (1580-1640). It sits on 23 acres.

Maymont (2201 Shields Lake Drive, 804/358-7166). This is an excellent example of a residence of what has come to be known as the Gilded Age; translate that as opulence with a capital "O." The 33-room mansion was built by Major James Dooley in 1893 and overlooks the James River. The Robins Nature & Visitor Center is on the grounds and features 400 animals.

The Museum of the Confederacy (1201 E. Clay Street; 804/649-1861). Founded in 1890, the museum is jammed with 15,000 artifacts of the Civil War, including 500 flags relating to the Confederate armed forces and government, military equipment, and clothing (including some from Confederate president Jefferson Davis, General Robert E. Lee, J. E. B. Stuart, and Stonewall Jackson), as well as the famed 1869 painting "The Last Meeting of Lee and Jackson," which is 15 feet wide. Give yourself plenty of time to absorb the entire museum; it's not a place you want to rush through.

Virginia State Capitol (Capitol Square; 804/698-1788). The capitol building was designed by Thomas Jefferson, inspired by the Maison Carree in southern France, a temple built by the Romans during the Christian era. The central building was completed in 1788, while the wings were finished in 1904-1906. Featured in the rotunda is the Jean-Antoine Houdon statue of George Washington, the only statue for which he posed. Trivia question: which state produced the most American presidents? Answer: Virginia. This building holds busts of all eight of them. (Note: Because of interior restoration to the capitol building, interior tours are suspended for 2005; outdoor tours are still available.)

Paramount's Kings Dominion (half a mile east off I-95 exit 98; 804/876-5000). OK, we'll admit it: we love amusement parks, and this is a swell one. Years ago when it first opened, we used to love to ride the Rebel Yell, a wooden

roller coaster; today, there are a dozen roller coasters in the park, including the Flight of Fear, which is indoors and runs in total darkness. Zowie! There are also lots of amusements for the youngsters, including KidZville and Nickelodeon Central.

Restaurants. Richmond is rich in culinary delights. Ask a local for directions to the Fan, Shockoe Slip, or Shockoe Bottom, areas within the city that boast some really terrific eclectic little restaurants and a vibrant night life.

MUST AVOID

There is not much in Richmond that you need to avoid because of safety concerns. Our unanimous vote for something to be avoided over the 2004 race weekend was the beauty pageant in the host hotel.

16 and 22), which are stocked with Gummi Bears, cookies, and soda as well as two wet face-cloth stations (miles 17 and 23).

The race also offers a free bus tour of the course for those who are interested in spending the night before the race visualizing where and how they must run to accomplish their goals.

EXPO, PASTA, AND RULES

The race, which is held on a Saturday (November 12 in 2005), features a two-day expo at the race hotel, the Omni Richmond. The Health & Fitness Expo is the site for packet and T-shirt pickup and features sports equipment, clinics, and lectures. For 2005, the expo runs from 4:00 to 8:00 P.M. on Thursday the 10th and 11:00 A.M. to 9:00 P.M. on Friday.

The pasta feed is also at the host hotel and runs from 6:00 to 8:00 P.M. on Friday. The cost is \$20 and the seating is limited.

The marathon is run under USATF and RRCA rules. Hence, no strollers, headphones, in-line skates, skateboards, bicycles, or animals on leashes are allowed on the course. Also, the course closes after seven hours, which is truly generous and an indication that Richmond is willing to go out of its way to accommodate the race.

RACE DAY

The course is a loop, so the start and finish are both in the historic downtown and there are no bus rides to the start.

Traditionally, the race has started in Shockoe Slip (Shockoe Bottom to the locals, which is just part of the “slip”), through the Fan District and West End, over the Boulevard Bridge, out Forest Hill Avenue, through Stratford Hills and

to the Huguenot Bridge. In the past, when the race reached that point, it went up the Cary Street hill. This was referred to as “Lee’s Revenge,” as the hill was nearly a mile long and came after the runners had already run 17 miles—sort of Richmond’s version of Boston’s Heartbreak Hill.

In 1998, however, the race committee made some slight changes to the course, and the changes were to the benefit of the runners. The course was revised so that the finish ended up on a downhill slope at Cary and 10th streets in front of the James Center. It’s no wonder so many PRs are set on this course and that so many knowledgeable veterans advise first-timers to pick Richmond for their debut.

With an average temperature of 40 degrees at race time, the November date is great for comfortable racing. Most starters congregate at coffee shops or in nearby hotels until the very last minute before scooting out to the starting line at Seventh and Broad streets. Lots of energy is in the air as the runners are kept hyped by race officials and bands. Several pace groups are available for nearly every level of ability. The crowd support at the start is tremendous for such a small city.

STATE CAPITAL AND CAPITAL OF THE CONFEDERACY

The fast loop course begins with virtually no elevation change. The course takes the runners on a tour of the historic downtown section, which is generously spread with supportive spectators. The course travels up Monument Avenue, in the process passing statues of Confederate soldiers. Though no opportunity is missed to remind folks that Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy, the course runs past the monument to Richmond native and tennis champion Arthur Ashe.

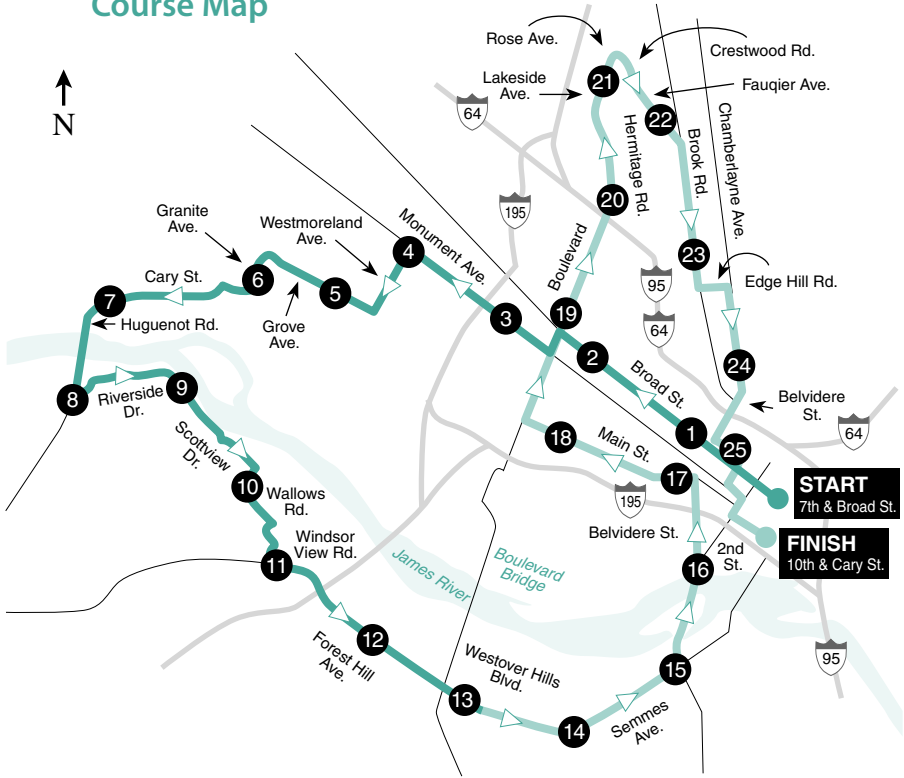
As the course enters the grounds of Virginia Commonwealth University, spectator support intensifies. As runners leave the campus, the course spends several miles touring many of the smaller neighborhoods, leading eventually to the Huguenot Bridge. The bridge is quiet, with no wind, and offers a spectacular view of the James River. We use the word “quiet” to describe this section since there were no spectators and no automobile traffic at all. It’s a terrific section of the course on which runners can collect their thoughts, reevaluate their race strategy, and prepare mentally for the next section.

As runners leave the bridge, they round the bend onto Riverside Drive, where there is once again crowd support. There is a small hill, but the course levels out again rapidly. The fact that the few hills are even noticeable is an indication of just how flat the course is overall.

Near mile 16, the runners are directed over the Robert E. Lee Bridge. On a cold and windy day, this section has the potential to be quite challenging—as it was in 2004. It’s exposed and the wind can really whip across the span.

Once you cross the bridge, though, there is a reward for the effort you had to put in: one of the two junk food aid stations, featuring simple-sugar treats such as Gummi Bears and cookies.

Course Map



Once past the station of hollow calories, you are on Belvedere Street, but you quickly turn onto Main Street before the course takes a right turn onto Boulevard for miles 19 through 21.

At mile 22, runners encounter the last of the junk food stations. This helps keep runners hanging on until mile 23, where they can pick up a warm washcloth to freshen up for those upcoming finish line pictures. Staying consistent with this ever-flat course, runners are directed back into the historic area, around one last corner, and onto an electric downhill finish at 10th and Cary streets.

FINISHED, BUT NOT DONE

Once you cross the finish line and receive your medal, there is much to do.

Just a block from the finish is what you might think of as the athletes' village. Food, food, and more food! Bands galore are playing, there are free goodies, and the elite athletes are milling around as well. There is much to see and do if you have saved a bit of energy to get you through the rest of the day. This is truly an event organized by runners for runners.

Richmond is a metropolitan area with the charm of a chain of small towns and neighborhoods, many of which the marathon course brings together. In short, Richmond is an unbelievable town with awesome energy and strong historical connections. It is an excellent venue to run your first marathon or to go for your PR. The course puts punctuation on the words “flat” and “fast” and gives you the confidence to keep coming back for more. The race has a very high return rate of runners, and after running it once, you’ll have no trouble understanding why.

Runner’s Highs/ Runner’s Lows

HIGHS

- Flat and fast course
- Colorful and historic city
- Attention to runners’ needs
- Terrific postrace party
- Earns its rep as friendliest marathon

LOWS

- It happens only once a year

The Bottom Line

We have weighed various aspects of a marathon within a 1,000-point scoring grid. Besides the author of the article, two-dozen runners at the race were randomly chosen to score the race for us (SRM = SunTrust Richmond Marathon). The results follow:

1. HISTORY/TRADITION

Evaluate the race’s sense of history and tradition.

[Possible points: 30 SRM score: 28]

2. ENTRY FORM

Is the race entry form clear, concise, attractive, complete, and easy to fill out?

[Possible points: 20 SRM score: 19]

3. ENTRY COST

For most races, the entry fee covers between 30 and 50 percent of the cost of putting on the event. Rate the value of your dollar relative to this race.

[Possible points: 30 SRM score: 25]

4. LOCALE/SCENICS

Is the race held in an area that is easy to get to and scenic and offers adequate food and housing services and nonrace activities for family and friends?

[Possible points: 50 SRM score: 45]

5. REGISTRATION

Is registration well organized and efficient? Does it bog down unnecessarily?

[Possible points: 20 SRM score: 8]

6. PRERACE ACTIVITIES

Evaluate activities, such as pasta feeds, parties, and so on, during the days before the race.

[Possible points: 50 SRM score: 39]

7. EXPO

Does the expo offer a fair number and variety of booths relative to the race's size? Are there quality exhibitors and good guest speakers?

[Possible points: 50 SRM score: 29]

8. COURSE

Take into consideration the following: degree of difficulty, certified, sanctioned, quality of road or trail surface, adequate mileage and directional markers, aid stations, medical coverage, race communications, accessibility to course for friends and family, typical weather, and so on.

[Possible points: 400 SRM score: 373]

9. RACE AMENITIES

This category includes race T-shirt, finisher's medal, finisher's certificate, adequate and efficient finish area, ease of sweatbag retrieval, showers, postrace refreshments, awards ceremony, raffles, results postcard, results book, and so on.

[Possible points: 250 SRM score: 213]

10. VOLUNTEERS

Are the volunteers experienced and adequate in number?

[Possible points: 100 SRM score: 91]

TOTAL SCORE FOR SUNTRUST RICHMOND MARATHON

870 out of 1,000 points

