

Show Us Your Grit

How the New Orleans running community is recovering, one race at a time

By Candace Karu

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In the December 2005 *Running Times* I wrote about my experience in New Orleans covering the 2000 Crescent City Classic 10K. In that column I vowed to go back to cover the first post-Katrina version of the race. The good news is that the running community there has emerged, battered but unbowed in their courage and determination to be an integral part of the cleanup and rebuilding effort. The more complicated news is that their job is overwhelming in its scope and is one that will require years, not months.

The mistake I made prior to my arrival in New Orleans was thinking that because I watched countless hours of news coverage on television about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and because I had friends living along the Gulf Coast, I somehow understood the devastation wrought by the storm. It's akin to the feeling people have that they know a celebrity because they see him on TV or read about him in a magazine. During the week I was there, I ran, drove, and boated through the Crescent City. Although it was almost eight months after the hurricane hit, nothing I saw on television or heard from friends prepared me for the experience, especially my visit to the neighborhoods of the Lower Ninth Ward and Saint Bernard Parish. "What you see on TV is like looking at the city through a straw," a cab driver told me. "You have to be here to get what it's really like." And yet, in spite of the overwhelming devastation, everywhere I went, I encountered hope and optimism. Though it will never be the same, the people of New Orleans remain committed to the belief that their beloved city will recover.

Chuck George, Executive Director of the New Orleans Track Club, has been a member for 26 years. He joined to prepare to run the 1980 Crescent City Classic 10K. A non-runner, George signed up six days before the race. That he actually finished without any lasting ill effects is a testament to his ability to remain resolute and focused in the face of a challenge. This is a trait that has served him well in the intervening years, but never more than in the months following the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina.

Led by George and Race Director Bill Burke, the NOTC accomplished what many other groups would not have even attempted. This year, in spite of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the group salvaged the 41st Annual Mardi Gras Marathon, Half Marathon and 5K. The races were held a little more than four months after a storm that wreaked havoc along the Gulf Coast states of Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. In a time when much of the affected area was still without electricity and running water, George and Burke used the races to make a declaration to the world. "Through the running of this event, we hope to show the world that the Big Easy will be back," Burke was quoted as saying. The race would be the first major sporting event held in New Orleans after Katrina. The NOTC organizing committee announced that 100 percent of the net proceeds of the race would be donated to a relief fund called "Back to the Big Easy."



Runners gather for the post-race celebration at now dried-out Tad Gormley Stadium.

"We had to pull it off," George explains emphatically. "We needed to show people what had happened to New Orleans. And we wanted to do it with the same start, the same course and the same amenities that the race had in past years."

That meant starting at the Superdome, a location that for many Americans was emblematic of the devastation visited upon the Gulf Coast by the largest natural disaster in our history. In previous years the start and finish of the marathon as well as the post-race festivities were held inside the stadium. Extensive repair and cleanup at the Superdome was underway on February 5, so the marathon would have to begin and end outside. But the enthusiastic support of the New Orleans Police Department and the dedication of the members of the NOTC allowed race organizers to retain about 95 percent of the original course.

Although there was little change to the marathon route, the changes in the scenery were almost impossible to imagine. Runners passed abandoned cars and boats and ruined houses. Between miles five and twelve, an area that was heavily flooded for weeks after Katrina, markers indicated former flood levels as well as miles run. The damage to City Park, one of the largest and most beautiful urban parks in the country, was heartbreaking. Unlike other races, where a festive atmosphere traditionally prevails at the back of the pack, Mardi Gras runners were uncharacteristically subdued, taking in the devastation in relative silence.

A total of about 3,500 people participated in the three races. The numbers would have been closer to 2005's figure of 5,500-plus runners if groups like Team in Training could have participated as they had in years past. Although the charity runners were eager to come to show their support of this historic event, there was simply not sufficient hotel space to accommodate the 1,000-plus people in the various charity groups. At that time, displaced families and FEMA workers occupied most usable hotel rooms in New Orleans.

At the finish, in spite of the comparatively Spartan post-race accommodations, there was a palpable sense of optimism for the future of the race and of the city. Local favorite and native New Orleanian Brendan Minihan, Jr., won the men's marathon in 2:35:11. The schoolteacher from Metairie wore a singlet that bore the inscription "New Orleans, Proud to Call It Home."

Although there are estimates that the population of New Orleans has been reduced by up to 50 percent, the New Orleans Track Club has fared better. Chuck George estimates that the current membership is down about 400. The former members have, for the

most part, moved out of the area, having lost jobs or houses or both. George, who directs more than 30 road races a year, believes that running and racing are playing an important role in the rebirth of New Orleans.



The flat course provides ample opportunities for fast times, world and national records and PR's.

"We've looked closely at the races we produce and they're doing better than we had expected. People are coming back to New Orleans to race, even if they've moved away," George reports. "These races provide those who are living away an opportunity to see friends and family."

The NOTC has recently received funds from the Road Runners Club of America to aid runners in the New Orleans area. Local runners whose lives were forever changed by Katrina, especially those who lost their homes and their possessions, were encouraged to send their stories to the NOTC. With the RRCA contributions, along with donations from Phidippides Footwear and G.N.O. Cyclery, the club has been able to give out more than \$11,000 worth of gift certificates to runners, helping them to replace their lost gear.

NOTC members were also able to help other clubs overwhelmed by the storm. This kind of aid went to the Chalmette Track Club in St. Bernard Parrish, one of the hardest hit areas of the city. In the months following Katrina, St. Bernard could be seen from the river, wrecked and abandoned, shrouded in an eerie silence. Before Katrina hit, the Parrish had a population of 67,000 residents, many of whose families had been there for generations. According to George, only 10 to 15 houses in the Parrish were left unscathed in the wake of the winds and flooding.

"These are really hardy people," George says. "They just don't give up. Once a month the Chalmette Track Club holds races in the devastated area. They're survivors and they will be back."

If the 2006 Mardi Gras Marathon was the running community's declaration of intent, then this year's Crescent City Classic 10K was a celebration of a city on the mend and the indomitable spirit of her people. The race, first run in 1979, is held every Easter weekend. In the season that celebrates renewal and rebirth, the Classic was reborn.

Two weeks after the hurricane, Gary Gomez, Elite Athlete Coordinator of the race, was online, reassuring friends that he and his family had made it through the storm with only minor damage to their home. Gomez, whose title doesn't begin to describe his myriad race responsibilities, is a native of Louisiana whose family has lived there for generations. In the weeks following the hurricane, he told everyone who asked that come hell, high water, or natural disaster, the race would go on.

Gomez and Race Director Rick Lusky were as good as their promise and, on the Saturday before Easter, they managed to stage a world-class event in the wake of a world-class disaster. The CCC course is point to point, starting in the French Quarter and finishing at historic Tad Gormley Stadium in City Park, the site of the 1992 Olympic trials. It is an impossibly fast course, where numerous world and American records have been set.

While the French Quarter was spared the worst of Katrina's fury, the rest of the route was not as lucky. There was uncollected debris and abandoned cars on the course until the night before the race. In the weeks after the hurricane, Tad Gormley Stadium was filled with six feet of water. Like the Superdome, photos of the stadium, looking like an overflowing soup bowl, were frequently featured on the nightly news. The entire electrical system was demolished and by race day there was still no electricity. Generators were installed to power the legendary post-race party, which, as in years past, featured live music, dancing, beer, and incredible food, including steaming vats of world-class jambalaya.

On race day, nearly 17,000 runners crowded the French Quarter, lining up on street after street for the staggered start. The invited athletes warmed up in front of the Café du Monde, the scent of its mouthwatering beignets mingling with the unambiguous aroma of the Vieux Carre, a unique odor that is made up of equal parts damp Mississippi River air, stale beer, and magnolia blossoms.

At the back of the pack it was clear that this was a celebration of a city on the mend. "I just want to forget about all the Katrina stuff for a while," said one runner. "This race is a chance to feel normal again." Normal in New Orleans often involves a party, so the Classic and the attendant post-race festivities were just the things to make runners reconnect with the joy of running, racing, and camaraderie on the road.

The front-runners had winning on their minds. Three-time women's winner and perennial favorite Isabella Ochichi was looking for her fourth consecutive Classic victory. Leading the entire way and making it look easy, she cruised in 34 seconds ahead of her nearest competitor, Australia's Benita Johnson, who crossed the finish line in 31:28, which earned her the Australian record and a PR by 11 seconds.

Gilbert Okari outkicked last year's winner Sammy Kipketer and Boaz Cheboiywo for the men's win. Kenyan runners filled the top ten spots in the men's race.

Riding back to their hotel after the race, many of the elite athletes were able to see firsthand the damage that Katrina left behind. "It is



Both trees and runners have managed to survive the post-Katrina disaster. The Crescent City Classic 10K lives on.

just so sad, so sad," Kipkeeter said, barely audible, shaking his head. The rest of the ride passed in silence as the group made its way through ruined neighborhoods.

The Crescent City Fitness Foundation, a non-profit organization made up of committed runners and volunteers, owns the Classic. They wanted to find ways they could help the community recover. To that end CCFF developed "In Spirit" race applications for anyone willing to aid the effort. People not planning on being in New Orleans for the 2007 CCC can instead sign up to run next year's race "in spirit," donating their \$20 application fee to the foundation. All proceeds from the "In Spirit" drive will go toward the restoration of Tad Gormley Stadium. It's estimated that electrical renovations alone will cost more than \$500,000. City Park, including the stadium, is operated not by state or federal funds, but by a private organization, and will have to fund most of the renovation and restoration privately. The CCFF is committed to being a part of the fundraising.

For residents, politicians, and visitors, the future of New Orleans remains a question mark. There is disagreement about virtually every aspect of the rebuilding effort. What seems to be clear to the running community is that as long as there are New Orleans runners, there will be world class races to run in the Crescent City.

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