

## Fiona in Focus

**Long-time runner Charlie Hart slows down by taking on a pacer's job at Cowtown**



Hart, center, with RWB members at the 2012 Cowtown



Hart finishing the 2010 Cowtown

For the past three years I have been telling people I am 50. When I asked Charlie Hart his age, his response was “59 and a half.” This precision is probably what makes him a good marathon pacer. Last Sunday (Feb. 28) Hart helped a group of runners hit their goal of running a 4:10 marathon at Cowtown, while smiling and holding a sign for the entire 26.2 miles. This is no mean feat, especially for someone who will soon be entering the 60-65 age group. Hart apparently took it all in his stride, which leads to the question “What does it take to be a marathon pacer, apart from an obvious love of running?”



Hart always has been active and enjoyed a variety of sports growing up. While training at the U.S. Military Academy, he joined the Marathon Club and ran his first marathon at Niagara Falls in 1976. Since then, he has been a fitness buff but most of his energy has been spent helping others achieve their goals. When he retired from the Army in 2007, he decided to focus on himself for a change and became hooked on running and racing, starting with 5ks and gradually increasing his distance to the marathon. Although 26.2 miles is not necessarily his favorite distance, he embraces the challenge as he is convinced that endurance training is key to building strength for shorter races. To date he has run 15 marathons, including Athens, Greece, Berlin and Boston. He ran his PR of 3:02 in Berlin in 1979 but is most proud of his performance in Houston last month. where he clocked an impressive 3:33.

While Cowtown was the first time Hart had actually led a pace group in an official capacity, he is no stranger to leading running groups. When he served in Korea, he led his entire company (180 men) to complete a half-marathon. He also has paced several friends in their first marathons. When asked what prompted him to volunteer to be a pacer at Cowtown, Hart replied “I was active in [TeamRWB.com](http://TeamRWB.com), a charity dedicated to assisting transitioning veterans through physical and social activities. Last year we tried to get as many Team RWB members as possible to serve as pacers as a way to build camaraderie and bring attention to our cause. So, I volunteered with the Cowtown and was fortunate to be selected.”

In order to be ready to pace the 4:10 marathoners he needed to practice running at a 9:32 pace, which was considerably slower than his usual pace. This proved to be a little challenging as he likes to vary his speed while training on his own. He also had to practice jogging around his neighborhood carrying a sign so this would not throw him off on race day. Several events for pacers were organized by local runner Gary Bromley before the event to allow them to get to

know one another and exchange stories and tips. This gave Hart the opportunity to meet some inspirational running celebrities such as 58-year-old Marie Bartoletti from Pennsylvania. Bartoletti, who has run more than 300 marathons, has the distinction of being selected by General Mills to appear on a Wheaties cereal box as an “everyday champion” in 2001. He also met Iranian born Parvaneh Moayedi, who holds the Guinness World record for being the female who has run the most marathons in a calendar year. She ran a total of 168 starting with the Rock ‘n’ Roll Marathon in San Antonio in November 2012 and ending with the Fort Worth marathon in November 2013.

On Sunday morning, Hart started out with about a dozen runners. As the race progressed, some dropped off while others joined him for a few miles. Hart acknowledged that pacers not only assist the runners in their own group but also serve as markers and motivators along the course for other runners who have a specific time goal in mind.

When asked what was challenging about being a pacer, he said “The hardest part is continuing at the same pace after people you make friends with start to slow down. I wanted to slow down with them and continue the conversation but I had a responsibility to keep going at a pre-designated pace.” Surprisingly carrying a sign for 26.2 miles didn’t bother him. “That was one of the biggest surprises for me. Carrying the sign was no big deal. I expected to have tired arms, but my arms were not nearly as tired as my legs and back. I also had sore cheeks from smiling the whole way.” As for the race highlights: “I’m always impressed with the number of people who are willing to take on a challenge like the marathon. The photo session with my TeamRWB buddies is always fun. Running up the South Main Street hill gave me a chance to see hundreds of people in the distance, all giving their best and determined to finish. Another highlight was any time I saw someone I knew cheering along the sidelines. Mayor Betsy Price was at the starting line and then I said “hi” to her again on Houston Street (near mile 10). That was inspiring. When I passed my neighbor George and wished him well as he headed in a different direction with the half marathon crowd, it reminded me of all the running tips I have given him over the years. Having a beer and sharing stories with the other pace group leaders afterward was very therapeutic. Getting a rain jacket for finishing was a nice surprise.”

The race had its share of funny moments, too. “I drank too much Gatorade that morning, so right after starting, I had a sudden urge to use the porta-potties. I hated to abandon my group so soon, so I told them to keep on going and I would catch up. It took me almost a mile of running fast to catch up to them. It was embarrassing to run that fast while holding a sign that said 9:32 per mile. Around mile 19, a dead possum in the road prompted a few in my group to say, “EEUUW!” and slow down. I remarked, “What a shame! Dying with the finish line so close! and that seemed to put a spark into the group.”

Asked what tips he would give anyone considering pacing a marathon group, Charlie offered the following advice “Be in the best possible condition and ensure that you are injury-free before taking this on. Also, remember that it’s not about you.”

His running goals for the future are simple “1: Stay healthy and injury-free. 2: Complete the Boston Marathon in 2017. 3: Break 20 minutes in the 5K after I turn 60. (That one is a stretch goal, but it’s my impossible dream.) 4: Get my wife, Mary, to say, “Gee, I’m so glad you are a runner! Why don’t you just neglect those household chores for a while.”