

Lehigh Valley Health Network Via Marathon

Interest in Boston creates boom for Via Marathon.



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To say that the Lehigh Valley Health Network Via Marathon has grown would be an understatement, as the marathon, half-marathon, and relay drew 100 percent increases in participation in all events in 2013. The Pennsylvania race, which began in 2007 with just over 150 marathon runners, has never previously had more than 912 runners, which came in 2011. In 2013, the marathon division swelled from 697 entrants in 2012 to 2,037 in 2013.

According to officials, the reason for the sudden growth was due in large part to increased interest in running the Boston Marathon. And while there are dozens of qualifying races for the event held

each Patriots' Day in Boston, the Via Marathon has separated itself from the pack.

The race has the fourth-highest qualifying percentage of any Boston Marathon qualifying race, with almost 25 percent of participants qualifying. It also has a faster finish time than many other qualifying races, with an average time of 3:57:13.

The Basics

NAME: The Lehigh Valley Health Network Via Marathon

ADDRESS: Lehigh Valley Hospitalm Cedar Crest & I-78, Allentown, PA 18103

RACE DIRECTOR: Barb McKeever, *RaceDirector@ViaMarathon.org*

WEBSITE: *http://www.viamarathon.org/*

YEAR RACE ESTABLISHED: 2007

START TIME: 7:00 A.M.

AWARDS: All participants receive finisher medals upon crossing the finish line. For those competing in the relay, the last runner collects medals for the whole team.

Marathon, half-marathon, and 5K; top five male and female overall finishers; top five masters male and female overall finishers (age 40-plus); top three finishers in each age group; team relay; top three overall team finishers; top three finishers in each race category

TIE-IN EVENT(S): Half-marathon, five-person team relay, 5K run, family fun walk, and kids race

FUTURE RACE DATES: September 7, 2014

NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS: 650+

MARATHON FINISHERS IN 2013: 1,359

MALE/FEMALE RATIO OF FINISHERS: 61 percent male, 39 percent female

COURSE MARKING: Every mile

AID STATIONS: Every 1.5 to 2 miles

ENTRY COST FOR 2014 EDITION: Before 19Mar14: full \$85, half \$55, relay \$225; before 7May14: full \$95, half \$60, relay \$250; before 30June14: full \$105, half \$70, relay \$265; after 01July14: full \$115, half \$80, relay \$285

AREA HOTELS: In Easton—Marriott TownePlace, 610/829-2000; in Allentown—Hilton Garden Inn, 610/443-1400; Allentown West—Hilton Garden Inn, 610/398-6686

GETTING THERE: The race starts at Lehigh Valley Hospital, Cedar Crest and I-78, in Allentown, PA. The race website offers detailed driving directions to the hospital from all directions.

“Runners are looking for a fast race, and we’re faster than the most popular Boston qualifiers,” said Lisa Walkiewicz, Via’s vice-president of communications. “The race people use most often as a qualifier is the Chicago Marathon, and the average time there is 4:32. Our average time is 35 minutes faster.”

Course favors the fast

Some of the major factors affecting speeds are terrain and weather. September in the Lehigh Valley is typically very favorable, and race day was no different in 2013, as temperatures started in the low 60s and finished near 80 degrees under partly sunny skies, with a touch of humidity.

Bart Yasso, chief running officer at *Runner’s World Magazine*, designed the course, which prominently features the Lehigh River. As Yasso has said, “It’s a course designed by a runner for a runner.”

The course, which features net descent, starts marathon runners and relay teams at Lehigh Valley Hospital in Allentown, Pennsylvania. It’s perhaps an odd location to start, but it’s easy to find and has plenty of parking. It’s a quick trip to the Lehigh Parkway, past the Fish Hatchery, across a covered bridge, and heading toward the Lehigh River. At mile seven, you enter the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor. Mile 12 places you in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, with a run through the 18th-century industrial quarter. Canal locks, a boat launch, and several parks make up the run to Easton. At mile 25, the confluence of the Lehigh and Delaware Rivers is right before you. Just one more mile places you at the finish line in Easton.

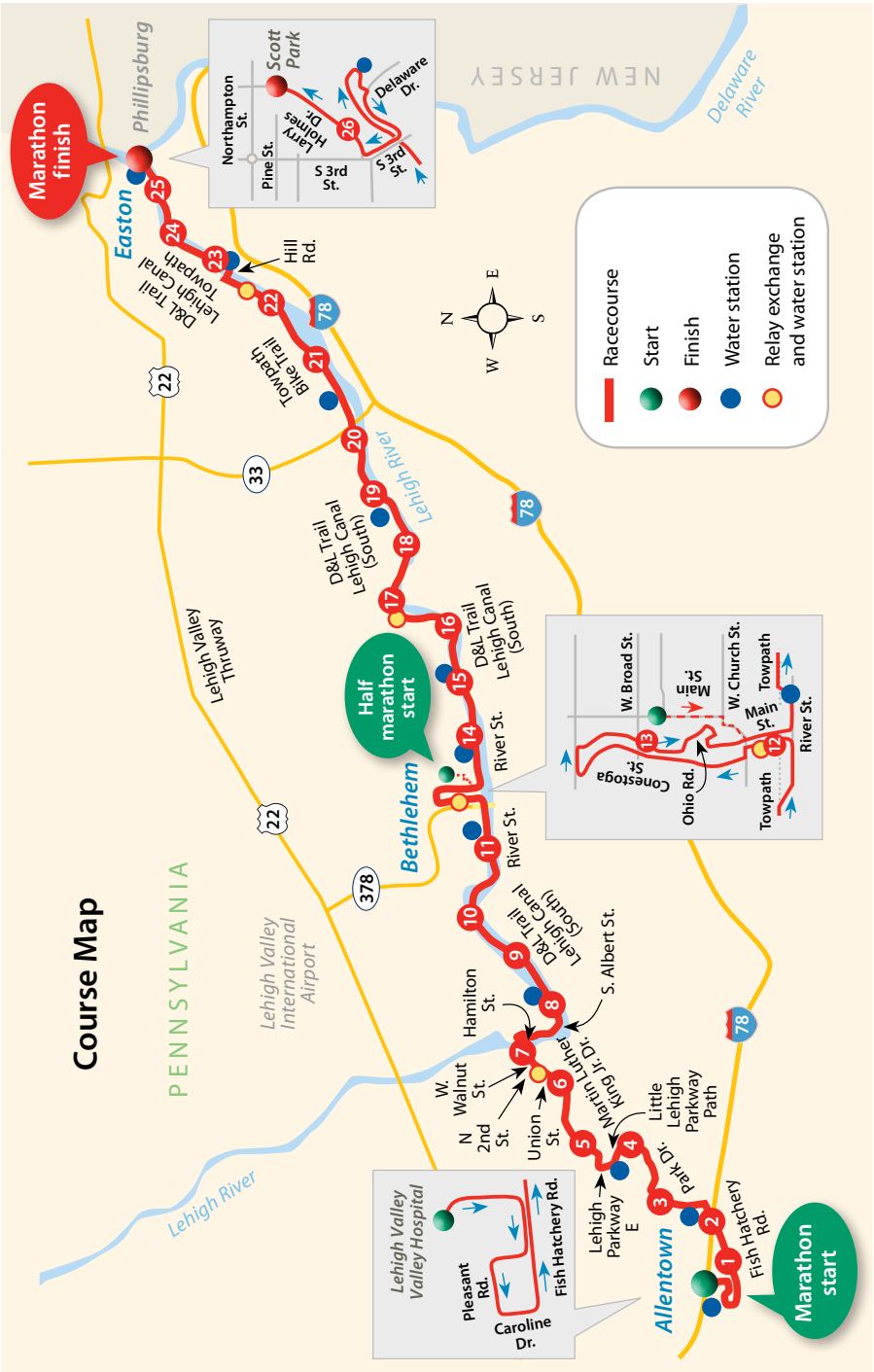
Trickle-down effect

The Via Marathon also had more participants than ever before in its half-marathon, which took place on the same day. While the marathon course goes from Allentown to Easton, the half-marathon course runs between Bethlehem and Easton.

The race, which had 881 participants in 2011 and 798 in 2012, had 1,059 registrants in 2013. And much like the marathon, the half-marathon is also seeing a spike in non-Lehigh Valley participants.

The race generally draws about half of its participants from the Lehigh Valley. The 26.2-mile race drew 90 percent of its runners from outside the Lehigh Valley and 75 percent from outside Pennsylvania. Runners from 37 states, Puerto Rico, Washington, DC, Canada, and Singapore participated in the weekend’s activities.

That increase in out-of-the-area participants translated into good business for many local hotels. Most of the hotels in the area that the marathon partnered with sold many of their rooms for the weekend. The marathon offers a lengthy list of hotels and their proximity to the starting line. The hotels also donate \$10 to Via for every race reservation.



must see/must avoid

For those taking part in the Via Marathon, the opportunity to see what the event had to offer was tripled with the race moving through Allentown and Bethlehem before finishing in downtown Easton. The following is a short list of places worth seeing throughout the three lively cities.

MUST SEE

America on Wheels Museum. When in the Lehigh Valley, you must visit the America on Wheels Transportation Museum on Front Street in Allentown. It's a fabulous museum with fascinating exhibits of the history of vehicles and transportation in America. It's education for all ages presented in a most entertaining fashion. And the Hub Cap Café, a 1953 soda fountain and grill, offers wonderful ice cream treats and light snacks after your tour. The guides are all very knowledgeable and provide insights into the many exhibits. www.americaonwheels.org

Allentown Art Museum. It's worth a trip just to see the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed library that is part of the permanent exhibit. Sunday is family day, there are activities for children, and admission is free. The museum has reciprocity with the America on Wheels Museum, so if you join you get free admission to AOW. www.allentownartmuseum.org

Allentown Fish Hatchery. If you go early in the morning, you will be treated to great blue herons scouting around looking for breakfast. The ponds are all covered with netting to discourage them, but they get lucky once in a while. It's great watching the fish swarm around when you feed them with the food available to purchase. The Fish Hatchery is in the Lehigh Parkway, which is a wonderful park with walking and riding trails, disc golf and fishing, tubing, a covered bridge, and numerous places to picnic. 2901 Fish Hatchery Rd, Allentown, PA 18103. 610/437-7656

Coca-Cola Park. The stadium, located in Allentown, is a great venue to see the Philadelphia Phillies AAA affiliate, the Lehigh Valley Iron Pigs. Every seat is a good one, and there is a great selection of food. You can walk around the entire park, sit on the lawn in the outfield, or dine in the picnic area in right field. There is always great entertainment between innings. The park is very family friendly with mascots, food, and a playground in the outfield. Parking is reasonable and usually available nearby. With major-league baseball so expensive, this is a great family choice. 1050 Ironpigs Way, Allentown, PA 18109. 610/841-7447

SteelStacks. SteelStacks is a one-of-a-kind multivenue. You can walk around the whole area and see the black, hulking steel mill in addition to the foundations of other related buildings of Bethlehem Steel. Incorporated into these remains of past industry are art and music venues. You can go here both for Musikfest and the Arts Quest center to see a variety of concerts. The Arts Quest center is filled with history, art, a theater, a bar, and more. If you are going for a concert, get there early to allow for enough time to see what the venue has to offer. The expo and packet pickup, Via Walk, 5K run, and kids race were all held at Arts Quest and SteelStacks on the Saturday before the marathon. www.steelstacks.org

State Theatre Center for the Arts. The State Theatre in Easton is a gem from a time gone by. Extensive renovations saved it in the 1990s and recent upgrades have addressed needed areas of concern. The theatre is beautiful and a great venue for entertainment. The season offers something for everyone and for all ages. It is big-city entertainment in Easton. The Beatles' Ringo Starr has come back several times after falling in love with the place. Park in the nearby garage and take the trolley. Easton offers great places to eat on theatre nights. www.statetheatre.org

MUST AVOID

Nothing. Those taking part in the weekend's festivities are treated to a nice blend of activities spread across three cities with unique and vibrant cultures. The opportunities to stay busy are endless, and no matter your interests, there is plenty for all to do and see during the time spent at the race.

Running for a cause

There are some things in life we might take for granted, such as a great job in a great community and plenty of friends with whom we share the experience. For people with disabilities, those life goals can be difficult, to say the least. The nonprofit agency Via works every day to help people achieve this reality. For more than 55 years, the dedicated and committed care providers at Via have worked to help children overcome developmental delays, help young adults find meaningful and sustainable jobs, and provide the resources and opportunities so people with disabilities can lead active and enjoyable lives right in their own community.

Via started the marathon in 2007 as the Via Lehigh Valley River Relay Marathon. The following year, the agency started a multiyear partnership with a new sponsor, the Lehigh Valley Health Network, and the race took on its current name.

Because of its substantial growth, the Via event stands to have a bigger impact on the Lehigh Valley in 2014 than ever before. Since 2009, the agency has tallied race-related hotel stays, restaurant patronage, and other factors to determine how much money the event brings into the area. In 2009, the estimate was \$836,000. Last year, it was nearly \$1.3 million.

“The economic impact is so significant that we want all of our partners to be aware of it,” Walkiewicz said. “We are running through nine municipalities. When business owners say ‘How does this help us? How does this bring people to the Lehigh Valley?’ we can say ‘Here’s the economic impact, the gross revenue, the gross expenditures, the overnight visitors.’”

First time for everything

There’s no doubt that racing on a big stage can bring out the best in some people, and Boston native Brian Harvey is no different.

The first-time marathoner did not exactly plan on winning, but that’s just what the 26-year-old did.

“I was running this as a qualifier for next year’s Boston Marathon,” said Harvey, a member of the Boston Athletic Association. “I went out a little bit too fast; I was planning on going out a little bit slower. My focus was really on next month’s marathon in Hartford [Connecticut]. But then you get out there and the adrenaline kicks in and just takes over. This course was just awesome.”

Harvey accelerated to the finish to the cheers of several hundred fans, crossing the line near the Ringside Restaurant in 2 hours, 31 minutes.

runner’s highs/ runner’s lows

HIGHS

Scenic, shady course with a net descent drop of 240 feet

Net downhill, no major hills, and forgiving surfaces for the most part

Well staffed and supported stations

Well managed finish line and bag-check areas

LOWS

Poorly managed prerace parking—massive traffic jam coming into the parking lots resulted in many people not getting to the start on time.

Transportation back to the starting line after the race was also problematic. Many participants waited several hours for a shuttle and had rooms to check out of and flights to catch. The wait made for a rather uncomfortable experience for many, especially the large number of runners from out of the area.

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Another first-time marathoner, Cassie Hintz of Raleigh, North Carolina, won the women's race in 2:52. Hintz, a professor of civil engineering at North Carolina State University, ran competitively at the University of Wisconsin. Her only previous visit to the Lehigh Valley was for the Paul Short Invitational at Lehigh University.

Much like Harvey, Hintz had high praise for the course.

"It was great," the 25-year-old said of the race. "This was one of the most beautiful courses I've ever run on. I thought winning was a possibility, but I just came out more to have fun and enjoy the race."

The positive reactions and tales of success had Walkiewicz beaming afterward, saying the event exceeded the race committee's initial expectations.

"We never could've dreamed this event would be so important to Via's fundraising efforts," she said. "More and more runners are coming every year, and we just try to put on a great, safe race for all of our participants."

Evan Close of Lakewood, Ohio, won the men's half-marathon in 1:14.12, while Jennifer Cronin of Lehigh, Pennsylvania, won the women's half in 1:21.02.

The finish

2013 was the first year the finish line was at Scott Park on Larry Holmes Drive since being moved from Centre Square. The change of scenery created a picturesque setting for all who gathered for the final lap, which was at the confluence of the Lehigh and Delaware Rivers.

"You couldn't ask for a prettier finish," Walkiewicz said. "It's one of the most beautiful spots in the Lehigh Valley to finish."

The amenities

The Finish Festival was held at Scott Park on Larry Holmes Drive from 8:00 A.M. to noon on race day in downtown Easton. Runners had quite a selection of post-race goodies afterward. There was a hydration station featuring water, Gatorade Endurance Formula, and food, free for runners; massage services provided by Lehigh Valley Health Network; a beer garden sponsored by The Just Beer Project and The Traveler Beer Company; a Lehigh Valley Health Network medical tent; and shuttle services to the marathon and half-marathon starting lines provided by Easton Coach. There was also a nice selection for those not participating in the races, including race merchandise for sale, food vendors, and a Lehigh Valley Health Network medical tent.

There was a rolling awards ceremony at the Finish Festival with awards available for pickup on race day or at Via of the Lehigh Valley's main office on designated days following race day.

Looking ahead

With the 2013 edition of the Via Marathon in the books, the time to start planning for this year's race is now. Via Marathon staff have been working with officials to address the race morning parking and postrace runner transportation issues to ensure a better race experience for 2014. The marathon, half marathon, and team relay will take place on Sunday, September 7, 2014, with opening ceremonies scheduled for 6:40 A.M. and the races slated to begin around 7:00 A.M. at Lehigh Valley Hospital—Cedar Crest and I-78 in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Marathon, half marathon and team relay registration closes at 11:59 p.m. on August 10, 2014 or when sold out. As the race continues to grow and receive positive reviews from those that have competed in it, there's little reason to believe that the event will take a step back this year.