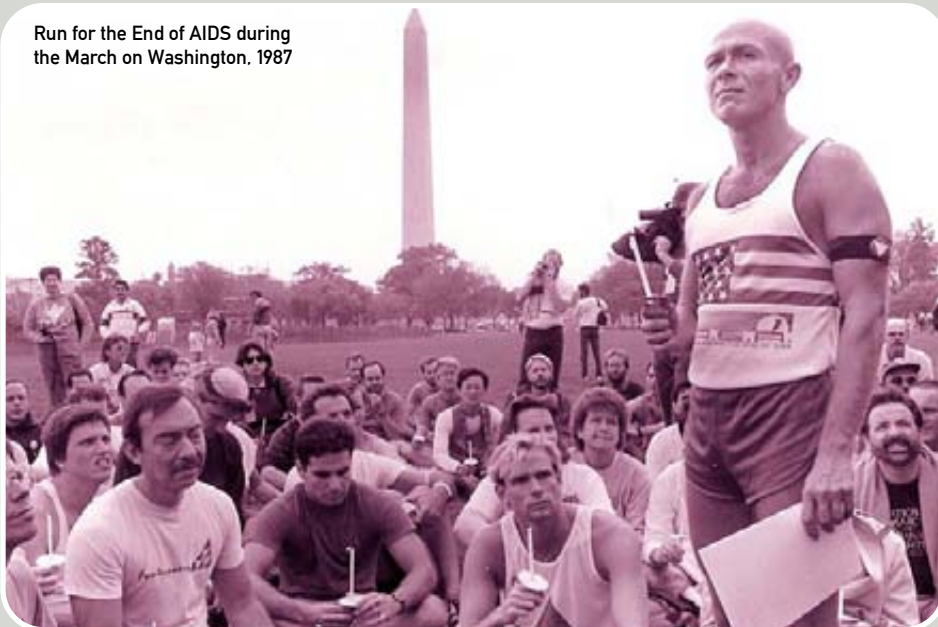


FRONTPAGES



Run for the End of AIDS during the March on Washington. 1987



Fast Forward

DCFR Coordinators reflect on the club's 25 years by Marcel Acosta

AUGUST 1981 | Several months after a June DC Pride Week Fun Run, a small group of local gay runners decided to permanently establish a new running club. The new group, called DC Front Runners, celebrated fun, fitness and friendship for gay people of all ages, races and paces.

Twenty five years later, the same club is now a thriving and integral part of Washington DC's gay and lesbian community.

The club's fourteen Coordinators have dedicated their own personal time, energy and talent to help guide DCFR through its good, and sometimes more challenging moments. This special edition of FRONTPAGES celebrates the club's 25th Anniversary through the views and stories from some of our Coordinators.

It's About The Running

DC Front Runners is a club that serves all runners and walkers in our community: fast and

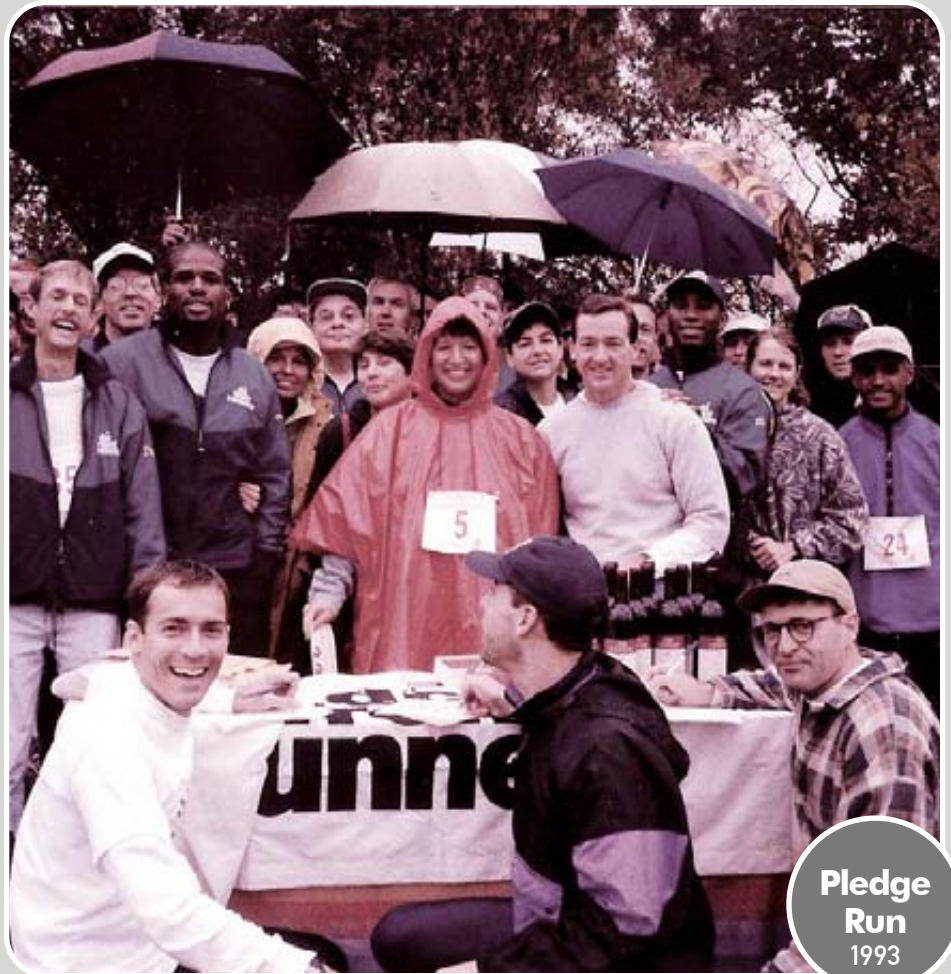
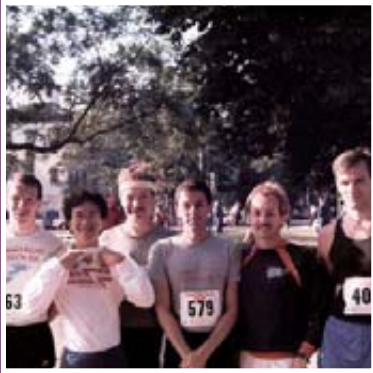
slow; marathoner and weekend warrior; experienced or beginner. The popular Saturday morning, non-competitive "fun runs" form the centerpiece of the club's activities, drawing runners and walkers of all abilities.

J Ford Huffman '94 believes that the club's inclusiveness—welcoming all runners and walkers, regardless of their age, gender, experience or physical condition—is its most important trait. Huffman originally joined the club as a walker. "I wasn't physically fit before joining the club," said Huffman, "If you told me that I'd run in twenty marathons before joining Front Runners, I'd say that you were hallucinating." For Huffman, joining Front Runner was a "life changing experience."

Part of the reason for so many member successes—whether training for his or her first run, 5K or marathon—is the supportive environment that running with a group of friends



DC Front Runners was founded in August 1981 after a group of local gay runners decided to establish a club after a DC Pride Run.



**Pledge
Run
1993**

provides. “I’ve met people who have really inspired me to greater things,” said Taneen Carvell ‘01. “I would never have the desire or commitment to qualify for and complete the Boston Marathon or Ironman without the foundation and support that I had with Front Runners.”

Tony Anderson ‘90 recalled that the club seemed a little bit more competitive in its early years. There was pressure on some of the early members to prove that Front Runners was a legitimate running club.

“While there was a certain level of acceptance of Front Runners in the general running community, there were also some nay-sayers,” said Anderson. “We wanted to prove that gay runners were just as competitive—or even better—than the other runners. Back then, the club did more track and speed work, and as a result, some of our members ended up in the top 5 percent in many of the local races.”

One of DCFR’s all-time best runners was Chris Winters ‘81, the club’s first coordinator. “Chris was a phenomenal runner,” said founding member Alex Wilson ‘96. “No one has yet been able to quite match Chris’s amazing gifts as a runner.”

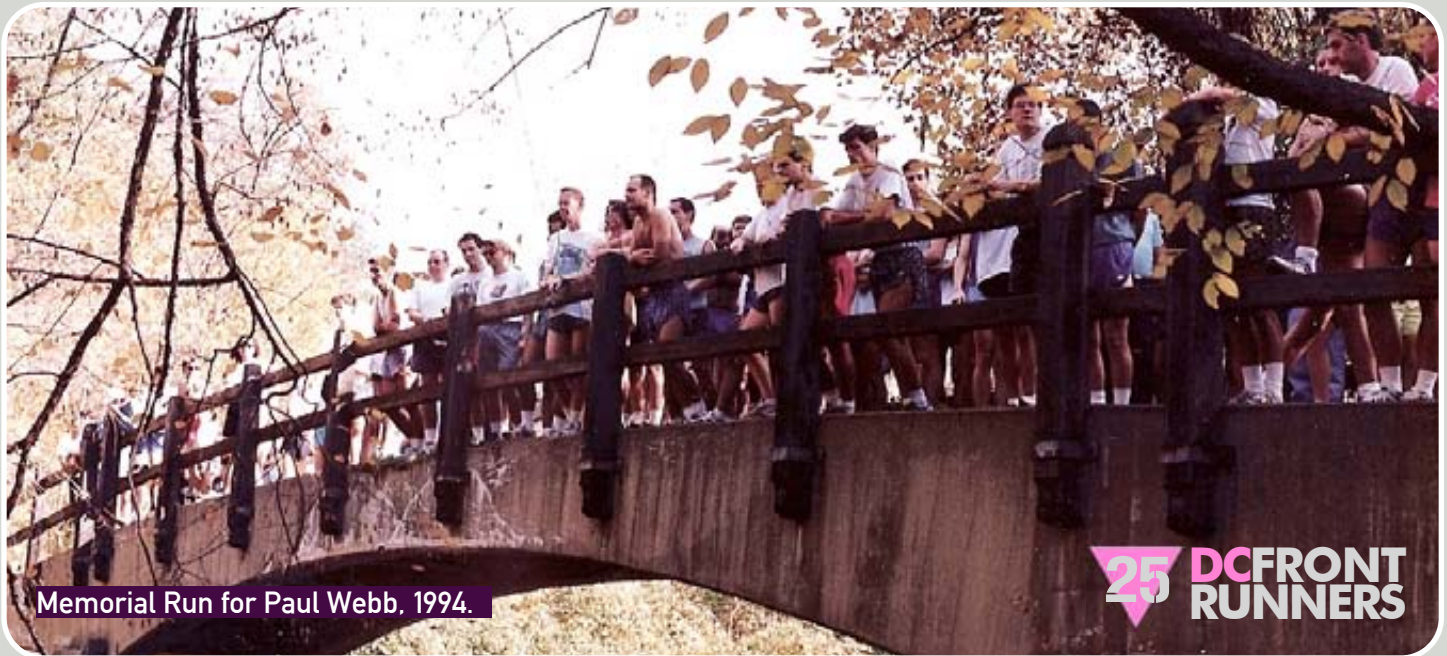
Today, Front Runners has carried on its tradition as a serious running club. “The talent in this club is so deep and there are some great competitive runners,” said Paul Kugelman ‘03. “It’s a true running club, in every sense.”

A Safe Place

While the club has primarily focused around running, its role as a place for gay people to meet and socialize was especially important in its formative years.

“In the early years, there were very few options for gays and lesbians to come together,” said Maryann Krayer ‘92. “People were looking for an alternative to the bars. In the eighties and early nineties, gays and lesbians experienced a lot more alienation from the mainstream society and Front Runners was one of the few places in the city where people could really feel comfortable.”

Unlike today, there was a general fear by many members of being outed, so the club instituted measures to protect the identity of its members. “For years, we would only publish the first initial of our members’ last name in the newsletter because too many people were afraid of being outed. We also had to be careful because



we had members from the military,” said Krayer. “There was a big debate amongst the membership when we decided to print full names.”

Despite the growing acceptance of gay people by the community at-large and an increasing number of GLBT sporting and community service opportunities, Front Runners still provides a comfortable place for those who are ready to come out. According to Alex Wilson, many members still value the combination of athletics and gay life as a healthy and positive way to come out and engage with the community.

In 1986, Doug Ward '88 was still deep in the closet, but was thinking about coming out. After “ducking” into the Lambda Rising bookstore to pick up the WASHINGTON BLADE, he read an announcement for the DC Front Runners Tuesday night runs on the National Mall.

“I would tailor my own personal run to check out the Front Runners,” said Ward. “I finally got up the nerve one Saturday to go to a club run. I was absolutely petrified. Frankly, the first gay man that I ever spoke to in a non-sexual way, and my first gay friend were Front Runners.”

For Paul Kugelman, joining the club in 2002 was the final step of his own coming out process. “A friend gave me some advice about coming out and referred me to Front Runners since I was looking for a place to meet new friends while doing something that I enjoy,” said Kugelman. “While I have been in a relationship and had gay friends, I wasn’t yet out to the entire world. The club has helped me so much in making that transition. I’ve met so many down-

to-earth guys and women who had lives beyond the club scene.”



A Tradition Of Community Service

The group’s focus has mirrored many of the forces shaping the broader gay and lesbian world. In the eighties and nineties, much of the club’s attention was focused on the prevailing issue of the day: AIDS.

“Our club suffered AIDS early and hard,” said Alex Wilson. “We’ve lost so many members and more importantly, our friends.”

To honor those members and others in the community who were affected by AIDS, DC Front Runners regularly sponsored “Pledge Runs” to raise money for a number of local charitable and health service organizations, such as Whitman-Walker Clinic, Food and Friends and Schwartz Housing Services. The Pledge Runs started in 1981

by Michael Mastrobattista for DCFR member Tony Ferrara, one of the first people with AIDS to testify before Congress. This tradition of community service still continues with this year’s DC Front Runners pledge run for Whitman-Walker’s Lesbian Services Program.

“Community service was ingrained in every member,” said Tony Anderson. “When I served as Coordinator in 1992, I accepted an Outstanding Volunteer Service award from Whitman-Walker Clinic on behalf of the club. I have never been so proud of the DC Front Runners than that moment.”

The club also honored its lost members in many other ways—for instance, members crafted a DCFR AIDS quilt panel in 1987 and planted a memorial grove of trees in Rock Creek Park in 1990 (STORY ON PP. 16.) One of the club’s most moving moments was a tribute to member Paul Webb in 1994.

“Paul Webb did so much for Front Runners by organizing brunches, Spring Flings and other events,” recalled Anderson. “Paul loved flowers and after his death in 1994, Jim Ray organized a memorial run to the footbridge in Rock Creek Park. Each member tossed a flower into the creek in memory of Paul.”

Membership Has Its Privileges

A benefit of belonging to Front Runners is the long-lasting friendships that are made. “There are Front Runners who I’ve met in the very early years that I consider some of my closest friends,” said Alex Wilson. “I’ve made long time friends who I now consider part of my family,” echoed Maryann Krayer.

25 DCFRONT RUNNERS

There are over 100 Front Runner clubs around the world. The first Front Runner club started in San Francisco in 1974, and other FR clubs quickly began forming soon after. The DC Front Runners club was established in 1981.

Some of the clubs have hundreds of members, some startups only a few. Many include walkers, not just runners, and at least one club has many more walkers than runners. Some of the clubs elect officers, have by-laws and a membership dues structure, many don't. Most have regular weekly runs/walks and many also get together at local restaurants after their runs. And the fact that there are three different spellings of the name—FrontRunners, Front Runners and Frontrunners—is just a further example of the clubs' diversity.



The clubs take their name from Patricia Nell Warren's (photo, right with Paul Kugelman) 1974 novel of the same title, a gay love story about a track coach and a young runner. ▼

Source: International Front Runners Website

Like a family, many members travel together, socialize with their DCFR friends outside of running, or even become life partners. J Ford Huffman values the various running trips that he has taken with his fellow Front Runners. "I've traveled with a core group of Front Runners to run marathons in Amsterdam, Dublin, Venice, Budapest and throughout the world. We've become good friends because we share many of the same interests."

In prior years, the club held monthly potlucks and member meetings at people's homes. The Front Runners have sponsored June Pride Pledge Runs and encouraged costumed runs, such as the Jingle Bell 10K and at Halloween. Today, the frequent DCFR Happy Hours, Spring Fling Weekend and Holiday Party have become more popular venues for members to gather. Taneen Carvell noted that the Holiday Party became a more popular, signature event for the club during her tenure as Coordinator. While the popularity of specific events might rise and fall, the club continues to be an important place to socialize.

Change also has occurred in the way the Front Runners is governed. "When the club was founded, the members did not want to have a President," said Anderson. "We primarily ran the club by consensus. Our monthly meetings were heavily attended by the membership and every member had an opportunity to discuss issues. Everybody felt involved in the decision making process."

According to Anderson, people stopped attending these meetings over the years. "It was not really manageable, and I believe the membership realized that someone had to be 'quasi-responsible' for organizing the club's activities." Doug Ward recalls that one of the monthly meetings that he presided over devoted three hours of member critiques over a potential club t-shirt design. Carvell noted that "Today, people don't have a lot of time to spend because of other things going on in their lives, and there is more of a need

to run the organization more efficiently, while achieving the same outcomes."

Looking Into The Future

What will happen to Front Runners over the next twenty-five years? Will the club survive to celebrate its Golden Anniversary? The Coordinators believe that the club will continue to thrive and prosper.

"Over time, the club will see a lot of new faces, and find new energy," said Taneen Carvell. "We need to make sure that more members stay actively involved to ensure that this is a viable outlet." J Ford Huffman also noted that, "The club needs to stay inclusive and welcome all runners if it is to succeed in the future."

Maryann Krayer added, "There will always be a DC Front Runners. It might look different, but as long as a couple of people gather at 23rd and P Streets to run, the club will keep going."

"It's hard to predict what will happen to Front Runners in 25 years and much will depend on how society treats gay people in general," said Paul Kugelman. "That said, there will be a place for Front Runners. If we keep our focus on running and training, the club will stay relevant to our community. I'm optimistic that gay people will continue to need an outlet to socialize and meet."

Current Coordinator Jim Chandler '05 believes that he is extremely fortunate to enjoy the benefits of leading a club with great traditions and a wonderful legacy. "This club has its own rhythm and momentum and as long as you take care of the basics, listen to the membership and keep it fresh, the club will continue to grow," said Chandler.

"In the DC Front Runners," Chandler added, "I have discovered the best of what DC's gay and lesbian community has to offer. I hope tomorrow's members will be as proud to be a part of this organization as I am, and will continue to share this opportunity with DC's GLBT community." ▼

