

After a year off, the [Milwaukee Marathon](#) is coming back with a new owner, new course designer and a new date.

And we should give it a third chance.

I know, I know, the reputation of this race is a disaster after the course was set out incorrectly the last two years – [too long in 2016](#), and [too short in 2017](#). Last year's race angered runners, became a running joke in the city and made national headlines. The race was only three years old (and it had other problems, too).

And then it disappeared.

Here's why I'm thrilled it's returning. Rugged Races, which puts on 90 races a year and has been around since 2010, took over the Milwaukee Marathon and set a new date that doesn't conflict with other long-standing races.

But why am I talking about marathon running now, in the dead of winter? Because if you have plans to run the Milwaukee Marathon or half marathon on April 6, 2019 – you're training for it right now, or should be very soon.

Here's a little background on Rugged Races and the Milwaukee Marathon, along with reasons to be optimistic about the return of the Milwaukee Marathon and a few wait-and-see caveats:

Rugged Races

Rugged Races organizes the Rugged Maniac 5K mud run at Wilmot Mountain and [28 other Rugged Maniac races](#) like it all over the country. But they also produce dozens of endurance races and cycling events.

The Boston-based Rugged Races was doing well already when it got a big break on the TV show "Shark Tank" in 2014, [gaining the financial backing of investor Mark Cuban](#). Cuban was bought out in August by New Media Investment Group in which Wes Edens, a co-owner of the Milwaukee Bucks, is the chairman of the board.

Rugged Races took over the Milwaukee Marathon from Joe Zimmerman before Cuban was bought out but hopes to capitalize on the Edens-Milwaukee connection.

CEO Brad Scudder and vice president Rob Dickens run Rugged Races out of Boston, and while they've gotten bigger as a company, they still get it that most people don't just want a race and a T-shirt anymore. They want an experience: a social gathering, a community connection, photo opportunities, medals, memories created and for most, a competitive environment.

Milwaukee Marathon

Local runner and race organizer Chris Ponteri had a vision: a marathon with every step within the Milwaukee city limits. In 2015, the first year, he brought in top racing talent to challenge as the overall winners at the full and half marathon, and he scheduled it the first weekend in November.

The race was a success in 2016 with a move to a scenic start and finish line at the lakefront – but there was one glitch. Some of the lead runners ran a mile or two more than the standard 26.2 miles. The suspicion at first was that someone tampered with the course markers before it was discovered and corrected, then it was realized the course was wrong. Either way, the marathon winners logged extra mileage.

The 2017 Milwaukee Marathon, under the ownership of Joe Zimmerman, moved the start and finish line once again, this time to the Third Ward, but continued Ponteri's vision as a runner-friendly event, with four race distances – marathon, half, 10K and 5K. It had a fun 1-mile race for burritos. It had a great running exposition.

But the race itself had its challenges from the get-go.

Runners complained about having to park too far away. It rained the night before, when the course was set. The morning of the race – a [6:30 a.m. Sunday morning start time](#) – it was dark and cold with temperatures plummeting. Strong winds affected everything, from the runners' performance to the post-race atmosphere. Vendor booths and food trucks had no lines.

And then it was discovered that the race was set short: 25.4 miles.

This stung. Runners want the sense of accomplishing a full 26.2-mile marathon. It also meant that the Boston Marathon would not accept any qualifying times from the 2017 Milwaukee Marathon – although this probably didn't affect many runners. (Most would have run the faster, downhill, straight shot Lakefront Marathon two weeks earlier to try to qualify for Boston.)

Reasons for new optimism in 2019

Despite the race's problems, Rugged Races felt it was an event worth saving. They're right.

Marathon experience: Rugged Races may be best known for its obstacle course mud runs, but it also organizes full marathons. That's really important. A 5K mud run can be off in distance. A marathon cannot.

Setting a marathon route is a precise endeavor that requires the right layout and markers, and the race itself needs the cooperation of local law enforcement. It's a big deal.

Rugged Races has produced 25 full marathons, including the Maine Coast Marathon, the Loco Marathon in New Hampshire and the Santa Rosa Marathon in California – without any issues.

New course markers: Rugged Races will not be using previous contractors who set out the courses in 2016 and 2017. Instead, Rugged Races will develop and lay out the course with the assistance of Enmotive.

Enmotive produces the 5K and 15K Hot Chocolate Race series in Chicago in early November with 40,000 participants.

"Enmotive is one of the largest race producers in the country, so we're bringing a lot of talent and experience to produce this event," said Scudder. "We're going to properly measure and mark the course; it's like getting out of bed for us in the morning."

Leaving Lakefront alone: The Lakefront Marathon is a different race. It's been around for 38 years, starts in Grafton and runs a flat, fast, hassle-free route to Milwaukee. It's always the first Sunday in October.

The Milwaukee Marathon encroached on Lakefront's race date its last two years, especially in 2017 when the Milwaukee race was two weeks after Lakefront. That was an issue, because there are only so many marathon runners out there, and that small population had to pick a race – not both (that would be really hard on the body).

"There's a longstanding race in the community that we didn't want to compete with," said Scudder, referring to the Lakefront Marathon. "That's just not how we do business and that's not a recipe for success. We wanted to find a spot on the calendar that didn't conflict with that long-standing event."

A better price: The old marathon cost about \$100. And that's the going rate for a race of this magnitude, but here in Milwaukee, it was a little steep for some.

Rugged Races is charging \$79 for the marathon distance and offered 20 percent off that – charging \$55.20 – over the Thanksgiving holiday. The company is willing to lose money the first year. That price is a steal for a marathon, a medal, race shirt and sweatshirt, and it was excellent marketing to get people to sign up.

“The price point for this event could be substantially higher – but we wanted to come into the city and establish a race,” said Scudder. “We want to get people out to it, show them what we could do. For us it's about getting the numbers to the event and building a great experience. The best way to do that was to offer a lower entry point to the event. We'd rather have more people at the event than fewer people paying more.”

But what about that discount: Some of you may recall that after the 2017 short Milwaukee Marathon, Zimmerman offered a \$30 discount to marathon runners for a future race. Rugged Races response:

“We offered all previous runners of the event a discount that exceeded the discount offered by the previous operator,” said Scudder. “So, in a sense we honored the previous discount, but went even further.”

Good numbers already: The response seems to reflect those reasonable prices. Rugged Races vice president Rob Dickens said more than 1,000 signed up for the Milwaukee Marathon in the first two weeks in mid-September and by Nov. 5 the race had 3,000 runners. Scudder said the original goal of getting 5,000 runners has been increased to 7,000 – for all three races – which would far exceed past participation.

Awards posted: Rugged Races kept the newly designed Milwaukee Marathon logo from 2017 (a good call) but also updated the website and included information on how elite marathon runners with sizzling qualifying times can get a complimentary race entry. There's also [prize money for podium finishers](#), starting at \$1,500 for the marathon winners.

The future and Marquette: The Milwaukee Marathon is also working with Marquette University students on expanding the sponsorship and community involvement. This is a great idea.

Reasons to temper expectations

Milwaukee alderman Robert Bauman: He was not happy last year. Bauman had concerns about access during the race to churches on Wisconsin Avenue in his 4th District and heard similar concerns about access to condo developments in the Third Ward.

Holding a marathon is a major event; city streets have to be shut down, law enforcement oversees traffic, hundreds of volunteers are needed and people may have to take alternate routes to get to public buildings and private residences. But ultimately, Bauman wanted all the fuss to be worth it to have another city marathon.

“One of the central concerns is, can the operator get the right distance?” said Bauman. “I think we got an awfully bad reputation in the running world for that.

“But we appear to have an owner group with a stronger track record, will avoid the Third Ward, will have the race on a Saturday avoiding churches. So all those changes – I think it’s worth taking another look at it.”

Start line: The starting line for the race has moved again, for the third straight time, but now may have found a permanent home: the area in front of Fiserv Forum.

“That’s a beautiful space, wide open,” said Scudder.

With a 7 a.m. start for the marathon and 7:30 a.m. start for the half, runners simply want to be able to find accessible, affordable downtown parking. That will be covered here.

The route: The specifics of the route are still being determined, said Scudder, so don’t attempt to decipher those online maps yet. The route will share some similarities with past years – the lakefront, downtown – but fewer tight, narrow run-ways.

“The course got on to some skinny paths or had tight turnarounds,” said Scudder. “We’ve gone through and eliminated those. This event is about having a lot of people out there – so we need to get the crowds through.”

Wisconsin weather: On April 14, 2018, we got a blizzard. On April 18, we got another snowstorm of a half a foot. We know that April in Milwaukee can mean anything weather-wise. Wisconsin runners know how to dress for the cold and biting wind, but running in snow or on ice is another issue. It’s dangerous. It was a risk Rugged Races was willing to take with the April 6 date.

There are races in May in Wisconsin that are well-established, including the Wisconsin Marathon in Kenosha and the CellCom Marathon in Green Bay. There are also well-

established October races besides the Lakefront Marathon that draw runners from our area, the Twin Cities Marathon in Minneapolis and the Chicago Marathon.

Rugged Races wanted to avoid competing with these.

“If we want to build this into one of the premier races in the country, then we can’t be competing with the other two large races in the region that both happen to be in the fall, like Chicago and Minnesota,” said Scudder.

“After speaking with the city, we said, where is a spot on the calendar where we can plant our flag and build this thing for the long haul? Summer in Milwaukee – there’s a lot going on. There’s too much to try to do this on a Saturday in the summer.

“We decided April was a great date.”

But what about Boston? Runners who will want to use the Milwaukee Marathon as a way to qualify for the Boston Marathon can do that. They’ll just have to wait. The Boston Marathon is also in early April, which means runners with a Boston-qualifying time at the 2019 Milwaukee Marathon will have to wait to run in the 2020 Boston Marathon.

Outsiders: Milwaukee Marathon’s original creator, Ponteri, is from the area and was always hands-on, accessible and available to answer questions. Will Scudder and Dickens be so as well?

Scudder said he’s already been to Milwaukee four times in planning this race and he seems to have a genuine curiosity and interest in our city. Let’s hope that continues.

“I think this event will attract people from around the country and also give Milwaukee a bit more attention that it deserves,” said Scudder. “It’s got a great community and I think there’s a lot of potential.”

I agree. We’ve already lost one big, popular, well-run race – the Summerfest Rock ‘n Sole – that showcased some of the best parts of the city. It would be nice to keep the Milwaukee Marathon around, and give it another chance.