

Road Runner Akron Marathon
Bret & Dave's Personal Tour of the Half Marathon!

A great narrative of the *Road Runner Akron Marathon Half Marathon* race course from avid runners and course committee co-chairs, Dave Hunter and Bret Treier:

We know we have a challenging Half, but that is part of the price we pay for our topography and still enjoying the benefits of starting with the full marathon and finishing Olympic-style on the field of Canal Park. Since we added the Half in 2007, though, we have been thinking about ways to change the latter part of the course and avoid the two miles on a pretty tough and [desolate] stretch of highway called the Innerbelt in downtown Akron. The City of Akron recently dedicated a pedestrian bridge over the Innerbelt, connecting to the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath. This, we thought, was just the opportunity we needed to improve our course. So in 2009, we have a slightly different, and we think much improved, Half course, although runners should still beware – we won't say it's easier!

Our main goals in setting the Half course were to keep it consistent with the full marathon as much as possible, but still have the glorious finish in Canal Park. As a result, the first 11+ miles are identical to the full marathon before detouring for about 1.5 miles, before rejoining the marathon route with more than ½ mile to the finish.

The Start, North Hill and Downtown

The Half begins at the marathon starting line on Broadway, heading north. The first straightaway provides a downhill start for nearly a mile, and Half marathoners may want to start aggressively to take advantage of this fast opening mile. After running a half mile north on Broadway, runners step onto the All-America Bridge, a Y-bridge that provides a spectacular view of the Little Cuyahoga River and the Valley nearly 300 feet below, even with our 7:00 start. Later runners should be able to see the leaders returning southbound on the other side of the Bridge, adding to the excitement of this start. This scenic bridge crossing early in the race is reminiscent of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge at the start of the New York City Marathon. Runners pass the one-mile mark near the north end of the Bridge before finding themselves in the North Hill section of Akron for a short jaunt around the block. After three quick lefts runners turn right back onto North Main Street, and reach the two-mile mark as they step back onto the Y Bridge and return back to downtown Akron. Runners will notice that the Bridge has a slight saddleback, with the low point halfway across on each side.

Once over the bridge, you continue south on High Street past the dramatic Akron Art Museum and the Knight Convention Center (home of the runners' expo) and then climb slightly to the three-mile mark in front of the Summit County Courthouse. The three-mile mark is only one block west of the starting line and makes for easy viewing for family and fans who watched the start. Be alert here, as the first exchange zone will be coming up at about 3.5 miles. Stay to the left through the exchange zone, as it will be pretty crowded with relay participants.

As you continue running south, you will find wide roads featuring a gentle downhill that should allow you to lock in a good early rhythm. You pass the old Firestone factory sites at the five-mile mark in front of the Bridgestone/Firestone Akron Headquarters. Firestone Stadium, home of the Akron Racers, Akron's professional women's softball team, is on your right before making a short climb and turning left onto Wilbeth Road just before the six-mile mark. If it is a clear morning, sunglasses or a cap will be needed as you are now running due east into the rising sun.

Firestone Park

The next segment of the course winds through pleasant neighborhoods in Firestone Park. Runners turn back west and start a loop around the Park itself, with a nice downhill on the first side of the Park and a decent climb up the other side and past the seven mile mark. You reach Garfield High School just before turning left onto Brown Street and heading back downtown toward the University of Akron. You will cross the eight mile mark during slight descent for nearly a mile. This should be a good stretch to gain some time if needed. As you complete your trek through this more urban setting, you start a gradual climb up to the University campus where you reach the 15K mark and the second relay exchange. Again, you will stay on the right hand side of the road to avoid the relay exchange zone on the left. Just past 15K, runners cross East Exchange Street and will pass between the new Zips InfoCision Football Stadium on your right and Lee Jackson Field and Track on your left.

The University

Runners will next pass on their right the University Recreation Center and Field House as you step onto the brick walkways of known as Buchtel Commons, and begin one of the fastest parts of the course. The next two miles offer several downhill sections that should produce fast splits on race day. While marathoners may still be holding back here, Half marathoners are encouraged to push your pace and take advantage of these downhill sections (especially with the “rolling” finish ahead). You turn left down the Commons and run through the center of campus, past the shimmering Polymer Center Building and its open-air artwork on your left and E.J. Thomas Performing Arts Hall on your right as you reach the ten-mile mark and step back onto University street. In one block, you turn right onto Broadway and find yourself back at the starting line.

Perkins to Mustill Store

Runners continue downhill on Broadway but this time turn left onto Perkins Street when you reach the All-America Bridge. In two blocks, all runners turn right onto Howard Street and start a short, steep downhill toward the Towpath entrance at the Mustill Store. **Half marathoners need to be alert here.** All runners turn left onto North Street, but in ½ block at the Mustill Store, the marathoners and relayers turn right onto the Towpath northbound through the Valley, and Half marathoners turn left into a parking lot and join the Towpath southbound to return downtown.

Runners will quickly realize, what just went down, must go back up. There are several climbs over the next mile, ending as you cross the brand new pedestrian bridge over the Innerbelt. As you step off the bridge, you be facing the Akron City Centre hotel (where many out-of-towners may be staying) and will reach the 12 mile mark before making a quick turnaround on Mill Street. You will then run down a ramp under the Cascade parking garage and behind the Federal Courthouse, where you will rejoin the full marathon course by turning right onto West Market Street. You will have a slight uphill for one block to Main Street, turn right onto Main, and head south for the home stretch, with a little over ½ mile to go. You will cross State Street before turning sharply right down a brick access drive behind Canal Park and reaching the 13 mile mark before entering the baseball park through center field.

The Finish

An Olympic-style finish in Canal Park, our beautiful baseball park and home of the Indians AA farm team, the Akron Aeros, features 9,000 seats for your family and friends. Fans who watched runners at the start, the 3-mile and the 10-mile, have only a short downhill walk to reach Canal Park in time to watch you finish. You will hear these fans as you enter the ballpark in right-center field and run straight across the outfield to the finish line near second base.

Our Review

Because the Half mostly follows the full marathon course, we would not call our course “flat and fast,” but it is fair with a great amount of variety. We think that the uphill sections are very runnable (even if not fast) and that the changing terrain, the variety of the course segments and the outstanding fan and course support with an Olympic-style finish makes this a great half marathon, particularly for first-timers. But we also think most runners will not be looking for a PR here race day.

Along with all of the race organizers, we are gratified by the consistently positive and enthusiastic comments offered up by our participants over the past six years, including the Half marathoners the past two years. We hope this personally guided tour of our new half marathon course will help you on race day. We look forward to seeing you on September 26th!

Dave Hunter & Bret Treier
Course Co-chairs