

The Georgina Marathon: a gamble that paid off in spades

Creating a new marathon during a pandemic requires guts, which the co-race directors have in spades



Photo by: Edison Yao



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Training for a marathon in 12 weeks is possible with a good running base. How about building a new marathon from the ground up during a pandemic? That definitely requires confidence, to say the least. At the end of July, co-race directors **Cindy Lewis-Caballero** and **Sandie Orlando** received approval from the town of Georgina, on Ontario's Lake Simcoe, to put together the inaugural [Georgina Marathon and Half Marathon](http://www.georginamarathon.com), to take place Oct. 17. Both knew that two months seemed like an impossible timeline, but the window of opportunity had finally opened, and they were going through it.

Lewis-Caballero, a former pro triathlete, coach and chiropractor, had encouraged her athletes to continue training as if races weren't cancelled, but the frustration with extended border closures and race cancellations was building. She decided it was time to create her own race.

“When I first mentioned putting together a race earlier in the year, Sandie was in, without hesitation,” Cindy says. “We pitched three different races until we got a yes from Georgina.”

Georgina Marathon co-race directors Sandie Orlando and Cindy Lewis-Caballero. Photo: Edison Yao

Orlando’s background in event production, communications and organizing kicked into high gear alongside Lewis-Caballero’s vision to make this race a [Boston qualifier](#). First, they had to establish a route that could get the city’s approval for a permit. “Georgina’s Lake Drive is a familiar route for cyclists, so we knew runners would enjoy it too,” says Sandie. “Getting the road occupancy permit and traffic safety plan turned out to be a steep learning curve for us, and an expensive endeavour that we didn’t anticipate.”

Launching registration before many of the details were in place was a leap of faith. With a short timeline and limited budget, marketing the race started as a social media and grassroots effort. They reached out to the running and multi-sport community to spread the word and started promoting their Boston qualifier as it was being made official. “That took a lot of courage,” says Lewis-Caballero. “We didn’t want to say it out loud until it was official, but it was obvious how important that was to attracting runners.” They pushed ahead with the town of Georgina for approvals, invested in the course measurement and had assurance from the course measurer, **Peter Pimm**, that it would be certified.

[COVID protocols](#) made simple things complicated and shaped how the race would ultimately be managed. The guidelines established by Athletics Ontario encouraged athletes to be self-supporting, but offering a race that’s fast, flat and scenic to appeal to runners looking for their Boston qualifier meant aid stations had to be approached carefully. “We drew on our background as triathletes and decided to offer a self-supported aid station like the special needs bags used in Ironman races,” says Orlando. “It turned out to be a popular option, and enabled runners to get fast times without being encumbered by hydration packs or fuel belts.”

Packet pickup was also affected by COVID protocols, resulting in extra waivers, [proof of vaccination](#), COVID screening and contact tracing requirements. Athletes were patient with the process in exchange for the opportunity to participate in a live race.

Calling on other [race directors](#) for guidance proved how generous and well connected the community of athletes truly is. Their input was helpful for finding vendors and understanding how to manage logistics. Vendors shared their experience and came on

board as supporters to help with keeping costs low. And sponsors came on board, even with the short time for visibility.

Two people starting with a dream, a small budget and only 636 registered runners might not seem like much, but it felt like a great start to what the race directors hope will become a continuing legacy. The running community, friends and family showed up with their network for sponsors, volunteers and crew, and with everyone's hard work, the event was a huge success. The town of Georgina has expressed interest in making the Georgina Marathon and Half Marathon an annual event, which means Lewis-Caballero and Orlando have time on their side for 2022.

“We were lucky, in a sense, that the pandemic created this opportunity for us to enter the world of race directing,” says Lewis-Caballero. “There was an appetite for a live race. We were small enough to take a chance on building something, and brave and crazy enough to do it. The smiles at the finish line made the roller coaster ride of putting this together worth every minute.”