

## PUBLIX GASPARILLA DISTANCE CLASSIC

# A LITTLE EXTRA MOTIVATION



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**Adam McCollor uses the Gasparilla Distance Classic half-marathon as preparation for his next big race. "It was a fun workout to get ready for Boston."**



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**St. Petersburg resident Christina Welsh finds a new gear this year for the Gasparilla Distance Classic half-marathon, winning in her fastest time yet.**

Adam McCollor bides his time before catching the leader right at the finish line for his first victory in a half-marathon.

BY KRISTIE ACKERT  
Times Staff Writer

TAMPA — Adam McCollor was surprised when Matthew Taddeo and another runner took off ahead of him shortly into Sunday morning's Publix Gasparilla Distance Classic half-marathon. The 22-year-old from Minnesota was here to visit family and this was part of the buildup for his Boston Marathon training, so he let Taddeo go, figuring he would work his way up to the front eventually.

"I thought maybe I can start climbing slowly and right at the turning point I was like, 'You know what, they're not that far away. I can get there' and I just said, 'What's the worst that can happen? Just go out there and just try to go all out,'" McCollor said.

Taddeo, a 28-year-old medical researcher from Jacksonville, thought he was all alone in the lead until the course switched back at Gandy Boulevard and he saw McCollor coming up from behind.

"We had the turnaround at about

maybe 8 miles and I thought I was alone up there and I saw him and I'm like, 'He's not that far back behind me. So I've got to get moving,'" Taddeo recalled.

"And I was scared."

The two battled it out for the last miles of the 13.1-mile race. McCollor finally overtook Taddeo in a dramatic finish to win his first half-marathon. McCollor's time: 1 hour, 9 minutes, 48.52 seconds. And Taddeo: 1:09:48.54.

"I thought I had it with about 200 meters to go, I started printing all out and I thought I put him away but then he caught me," Taddeo said. "And it was right at the line. It was crazy."

It was a finish that also had the spectators and officials going crazy.

"It was thrilling," race director Susan Harmeling said. "They battled it out almost all the way. It was exciting to watch."

On a perfect morning for running, McCollor and Taddeo enjoyed the competition.

See MEN, 19G

Christina Welsh uses a runnerup finish in Saturday's 15K as the spark to propel her to a third straight half-marathon title.

BY KRISTIE ACKERT  
Times Staff Writer

TAMPA — Christina Welsh was surprised, maybe a little disappointed and definitely more motivated on Saturday night.

The USF graduate student in marine biology had won the 15K at the Publix Gasparilla Distance Classic the past two years. She was a favorite coming into the race Saturday, but finished a distant second to aspiring Olympian Bethany Sachtleben.

So Sunday morning, as Welsh lined up to start the defense of her half-marathon title, she wasn't taking any chances.

The New Jersey native won her third straight crown here, finishing the 13.1-mile race in 1 hour, 18 minutes, 28 seconds. She finished almost three minutes ahead of Tampa's Paige Howard, 36, who ran it in 1:21:16. It was the same one-two finish as the 2023 half-marathon.

But for Welsh, who now resides in St. Petersburg, this felt like a different race.

"Last year I won the 15K and (Saturday) I came in second. So I ran the half a little harder than I had previously," the 27-year-old said. "I was a little more motivated and I think this is the fastest time I've ever run on this course."

It was indeed; her winning time in 2022 was 1:18:55 and last year was 1:21:17.

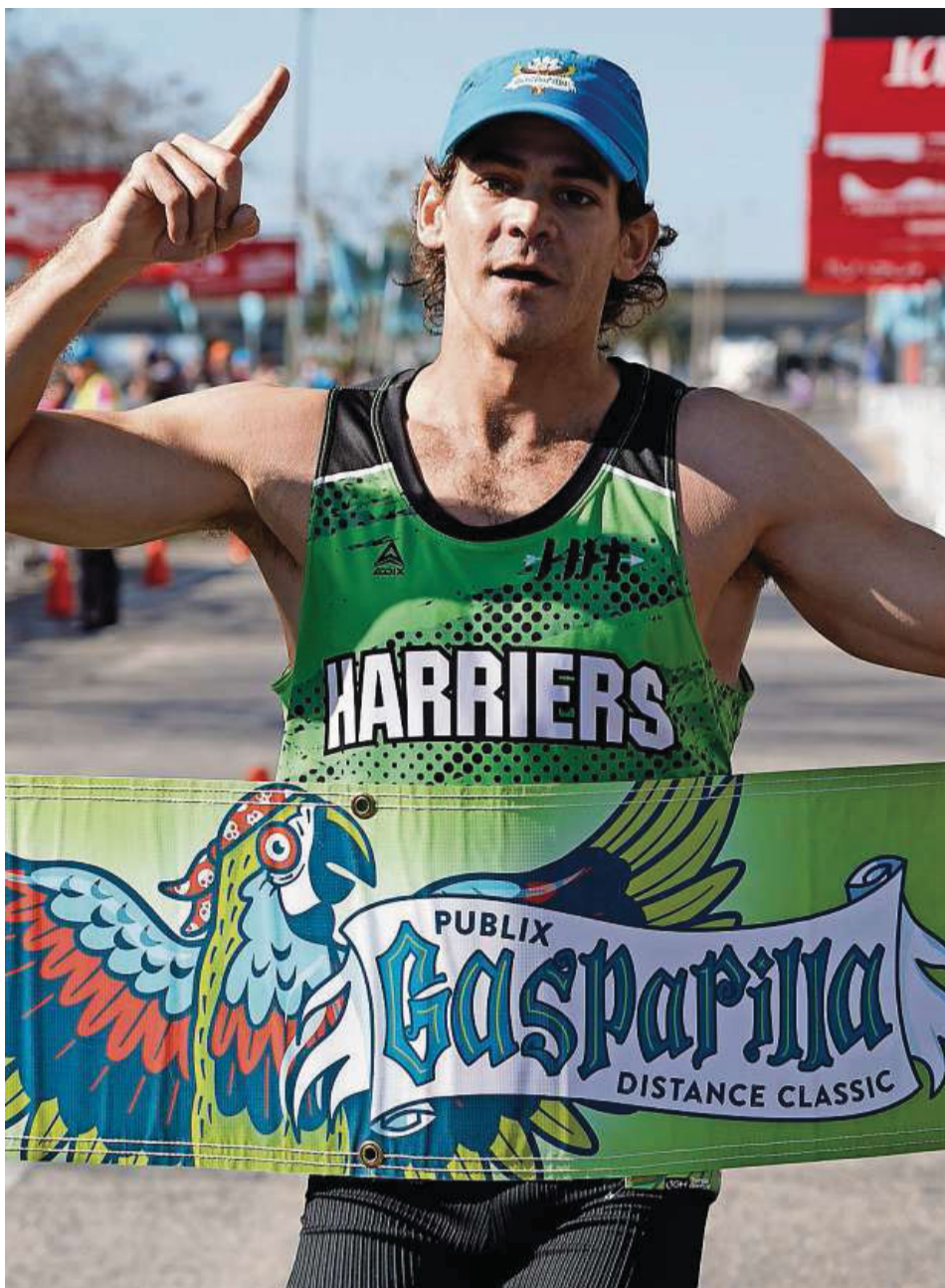
With this being an Olympic year, the Distance Classic 15K and half-marathon appeared to draw a few more elite runners. Sachtleben, a former Pan-Am Games silver medalist, came in from Colorado with training partner Luis Orta, the Gasparilla men's 15K champ, as part of her preparations for the U.S. Olympic Trials. She beat Welsh by more than two minutes.

"This race has been really fast, but in the past couple of years, there hasn't been a ton of, like, outside people coming in for it," said Welsh, "so I didn't totally expect it."

Welsh has included the Gasparilla events in her training schedule the last couple of years because she loves the run-  
See WOMEN, 19G



## Publix Gasparilla Distance Classic



Photos by LUIS SANTANA | Times

Travis Lucas, one of the coaches for the Hillsborough Harriers running group that was out en force Sunday, wins the Publix Gasparilla Distance Classic 8K. Another Harrier, 14-year-old Lainee Mercer, is the first female across the finish line. "It's exciting to encourage all this young talent," Lucas says.

# Hillsborough Harriers conquer Classic's 8K

BY SCOTT PURKS  
Special to the Times

TAMPA — The starting line of Sunday's Publix Gasparilla Distance Classic 8K was clogged with runners in green and black tank tops with "Harriers" written across their chests.

They were the Hillsborough Harriers, a running group north of Tampa that involves dozens of kids from third to eighth grade and several coaches and parents.

Many of the Harriers in the front row weren't much taller than 4 feet. Many had smiles filled with braces. Several couldn't have weighed more than 60 pounds.

When the starting horn blew at 9:15 a.m., one of the Harriers' coaches, Travis Lucas, bolted in front of the thousands of runners packed behind him and took the lead down Bayshore Boulevard.

Lucas, 29, looked completely comfortable, but he was cooking. Two miles into

the 4.97-mile run he was near a 5-minute mile pace.

His lead stretched and stretched until he crossed the finish line in 26 minutes, 35.46 seconds, more than a minute ahead of the runner-up, 20-year-old Cason Meyer of Lutz (27:42.56).

What followed was a consistent stream of Harrier tank tops between every few runners, lots of little guys and girls shooting by older folks.

The first female to finish? That was another Hillsborough Harrier, 14-year-old Lainee Mercer of Brooksville, who won in 30:59.72, more than a minute ahead of the runner-up, 31-year-old Lauren Lumley of Ocala.

"This is the first 8K I've ever run and it's the longest race I've ever run," said Mercer, who ran her first 5K in third grade. "I was really hurting there at the end, but it felt so good to cross the finish and win. It was such a great sense of accomplishment that it made all the



Tampa 10-year-old RJ Destremps, another member of the Hillsborough Harriers, finishes first in his age group and sixth overall.

hard work totally worth it."

Lucas, meantime, said he couldn't have been much more pleased with his day, especially after running a marathon just a few weeks earlier.

"I wasn't even sure how my body was going to respond," said Lucas, a cyber security salesman who qualified for April's Boston Marathon with a time of 2:29. "I must say I felt pretty good

out there."

More than anything, Lucas said it made him happy to see all of the Hillsborough Harriers having so much success in the 8K, the distance the group

chose to focus on during the Distance Classic weekend (5K, 8K, 15K and half-marathon).

Two of the brightest Harriers crossing the finish line in the 8K were two of the youngest from Tampa: 13-year-old Landon Watkins, who finished fifth in 29:01.07, and 10-year-old RJ Destremps, who placed sixth in 29:06.94.

"It's exciting to encourage all this young talent," said Lucas, who ran for Troy University after graduating from Plant High School in 2013. "I think we're going to see some tremendous things from this group in the near future."

Many former Hillsborough Harriers can now be found performing at high levels for local high schools, including Steinbrenner, Sunlake, Sickles and Jesuit.

"For now the priority is for them to enjoy the sport," Lucas said. "There are so many positive life lessons that come out of running."



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Matthew Taddeo, right, embraces Adam McCollor, who just squeaked by him for the win. "It's so much fun," says Taddeo. "I don't think I've run that fast in a long time."

## MEN continued from 1G

"It's so much fun," said Taddeo, who ran collegiately at Bucknell University. "I don't think I've run that fast in a long time. I was at the front but I knew he was coming. It was terrifying."

"And as soon as we were battling it out, neck and neck, it made it so much more exciting and thrilling at the finish."

McCollor is an accountant back in Minnetonka, Minnesota, and he ran competitively for St. Thomas University. He chose the Gasparilla half-marathon as part of his training for

April's Boston Marathon because it was convenient.

When he arrived in Tampa, he drove the course just to see what the run would be like.

"It was exciting. I really liked it," McCollor said. "You've got the beautiful bay-front views and then just kind of the neighborhoods were just nice to get a little bit of everything. It was a fun workout to get ready for Boston."

In the field behind McCollor and Taddeo was Meb Keflezighi (1:29:00), the 2004 Olympic marathon silver medalist who also is training for the Boston Marathon.

Now a resident of Tampa,

Keflezighi, 48, won in Boston 10 years ago.

He is running to raise money for his charity, the Meb Foundation, which awards grants to programs that promote and support youth fitness. It has also provided sneakers for such programs.

"It's part of my effort to get ready for Boston," he said. "Now I know I've got some work to do. At the last minute I wanted to do this and then be able to just get some mileage. I'm here as an ambassador with this race and wanted to put some miles in."

Contact Kristie Ackert at [kackert@tampabay.com](mailto:kackert@tampabay.com).



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Fellow runners bow down to Christina Welsh, who hasn't lost her winning grip on the half-marathon for three straight years during the Distance Classic weekend.

## WOMEN continued from 1G

ning community in Tampa Bay and enjoys the fun and festive atmosphere.

Sunday, however, she was a little more serious about defending her title.

"I think in previous years, the half has been more like 'I won the 15K yesterday, now I'm just going to have a good time,'" she said. "But this year, I lost. So I think I took the half as more of a race than I usually do."

Welsh has entered a new chapter in her running life after having spent three years preparing to compete in the U.S. Olympic team marathon trials.

She ran a personal-best 2:33:08 in the 2022 Houston Marathon, which qualified her for the 2024 trials. Last year, she was using the back-to-back 15K and half-marathon at Gasparilla as part of her buildup.

The marathon trials were earlier this month in Orlando. Welsh ran a 2:39:44, finishing 60th overall in the women's field.

"I did OK; I finished about where I was ranked going in," Welsh said. "I was happy with that."

She did not qualify for the U.S. Olympic marathon team, so now she moves on to other challenges.

"It really doesn't change much for me. I am going to run another marathon, I just haven't picked it out yet," Welsh said. "I am still going to run and there will always be another marathon to train for."

Contact Kristie Ackert at [kackert@tampabay.com](mailto:kackert@tampabay.com).