

Marja Bakker, 59, of Medford, Massachusetts
April 20, 1947 – October 14, 2006

**FORMER B.A.A. RUNNING CLUB PRESIDENT
AND
MEMBER OF THE B.A.A. BOARD OF GOVERNORS**

FORMER PRESIDENT OF USA TRACK & FIELD - NEW ENGLAND

Daughter of Hillegonda and the late Egbertus Bakker of the Netherlands. Sister of Bertina (Tineke) and Tom van Tienen; Hilda and Hans vander Kuil; and Dr. Bert and Mieke Bakker, also of The Netherlands. She also leaves three nephews and three nieces. A resident of Medford, Mass., Ms. Marianna Hillegonda Bakker was known as Marja and was employed by the Boston Athletic Association as Director of Administration. She also served as Secretary of USA Track & Field – New England from 1996 to 1998; Vice President from 1998 to 2000; and two terms as President during the years 1990-1994 and 2000-2002; and, most recently, served on the Board as Past President. Born in Vlaardingen, The Netherlands, on April 20, 1947, she was a Dutch citizen. Ms. Bakker passed away at night on October 14, 2006, at age 59, in Medford, Mass.

Ms. Bakker's family was with her and said: "Marja loved her life, her family and her friends. For the past three and one half years, she fought with grace and determination, enjoying all that was left for her."

Ms. Bakker was a member of the Boston Athletic Association since 1983 and was a past member of the organization's Board of Governors. Ms. Bakker acquired permanent residence in the Boston area in 1978 after moving to Canada in 1972 from The Netherlands. Ms. Bakker started running in 1973, participated in more than 600 road races, and ran 3 hours, 00 minutes, 28 seconds for 30th place at the 1978 Boston Marathon. She recorded her personal best time of 2 hours, 57 minutes, 15 seconds at the 1979 Boston Marathon (29th place). Her performances fueled further interest in the sport.

After gaining an appreciation for the sport as a participant, she began to make her mark within the sport as an organizer and event manager, placing an emphasis on the participation of every runner. She performed exemplary work within the sport of running, but it was her volunteer efforts that she loved. When it came to athletics, it was the overall presentation – and the details – that mattered most to Ms. Bakker.

Many times, Ms. Bakker explained her job as she did to the *Boston Globe* in an article published in 1990: "I have to be aware of everything that goes on in the office. From making sure there are pens and paper to certificates of insurance, to making sure there is food for the pre and post-race parties."

Ms. Bakker joined the B.A.A. Running Club in 1978 and became President of the Running Club in 1982. She was the only female President of the Running Club in the organization's 119-year history. In 1984, she was elected a member of the B.A.A. Board of Governors – again, becoming the first female to serve – and held the post through 1987 when she became Staff Administrator of the Boston Marathon. She held her responsibilities through this fall.

"Marja Bakker always gave the gift of making everything and everyone around her a little better than they thought they could be," said Thomas S. Grilk, B.A.A. President. "Tens of thousands of runners in the Boston Marathon and B.A.A. Half Marathon have been the beneficiaries of that quality, perhaps without knowing it. For those of us privileged to work with her, we have always known that Marja's relentless dedication to excellence would allow us to display no less. She elevated everything we did. But more than all of this she was our friend, in good moments and bad, and we are all the better for it."

"Those who were fortunate to work and spend time with Marja knew that she was compassionate and fiercely committed to her beliefs," said Guy Morse, Executive Director of the B.A.A., who worked with Ms. Bakker for more than 20 years. "She was not easily convinced, and any attempt to change her view had better be backed by a strong argument, which is to say that Marja made those around her do a better job because of her presence and convictions. Marja did not demand respect, she earned it from those who worked with her. She believed that there was always more that we could be doing, and she was supportive of any effort that was consistent with what the

team wanted and thought best. Her support often turned out to be the most important aspect of an initiative's success.

"She possessed the utmost integrity and was incessantly loyal to those who she believed in and to her ideals, and she was unafraid of defending them, even when that meant risking her own standing. Her own standing was never one of Marja's concerns; only the 'greater good' was important to her. Of course, if Marja defended you or your position, it was an immediate statement to all that – more times than not – she was probably correct. For two decades, Marja poured her heart and soul into the B.A.A., its non-profit mission, and changed it forever. And while work was not her life, it was an important part of her life that she relished. For Marja, her work at the B.A.A. and in athletics was a genuine vocation."

Ms. Bakker also served on the Board of Governors for USA Track & Field – New England Association, which is the regional governing body for the sport of road running and track and field, since 1987. She was named a member of the Executive Committee of Women's Long Distance Running of USA Track & Field, the national athletics federation, and she served on that same organization's championship site selection sub-committee.

"First and foremost, she never treated any job with a title as an executive position, nor a volunteer position as a task with limited responsibilities," said Steve Vaitones, Managing Director of USA Track & Field – New England. "Whether as president, secretary, or volunteer, she was generally the last person to leave an event or facility after working at events the association had responsibility for. She viewed all tasks as equally as important for the success of an activity – whether they be moving boxes or taking registrations – and she would do any of these jobs whether it was in her job description or not. For those reasons, I think a lot of people gave USATF-NE respect because it was working and not administrative. And still, people on the USATF-NE level are willing to give support because she built good relations over so many years."

Ms. Bakker was a road race official at New England running events for more than two decades, and she made presentations at several major road race conferences and the USATF Annual Convention. She was the recipient of many awards for her dedication to athletics, including USA Track & Field's "2005 Contributor of the Year" award for Women's Long Distance Running. On October 9, 2006, Ms. Bakker was informed by representatives of USATF and USATF-NE that the award will now be named in her honor.

"Marja, more than anyone in recent memory, changed the face of USA Track & Field – New England," said friend and colleague Gloria Ratti, who succeeded Ms. Bakker on the B.A.A. Board of Governors and who served with Ms. Bakker on the USA Track & Field – New England Board of Governors. "Membership, under her Presidency, increased dramatically. She was tireless and dedicated to the administration of the sport of running. She was my friend and colleague, and she helped guide the Boston Marathon into the world class event that it is today. Her expertise and knowledge will be sorely missed. The sport, as well as myself, has lost a dear friend."

Ms. Bakker had a thoughtful perspective on the sport of running, having grown up in The Netherlands, living in the United Kingdom and then Canada for a time, and eventually finding permanent residence in the Boston area. She took up running herself one year after women were officially permitted to run in the Boston Marathon, and she excelled as an athlete. However, it was when the sport began to move from amateur to professional status that Ms. Bakker began to make her mark in the sport. First she volunteered, then she helped to transition the B.A.A. Boston Marathon from a race of 6,399 entrants in 1987 to 22,473 entrants this past April. Equally important to Ms. Bakker, she provided day-to-day oversight of the staff: from two employees in 1987 to more than 15 full and part-time employees and dozens of consultants in 2006. As marathoning grew internationally, thanks in large part to Boston's leadership role in popularizing the distance, so did Ms. Bakker's responsibilities. She thrived on working long hours and believed that time devoted to a task resulted in a better outcome.

"Trouble-shooting, putting out fires, taking notes," was how Ms. Bakker described her role in the effort to move projects forward and enabling events to shine.

New England Runner magazine named Ms. Bakker its "Administrator of the Year" for 1990, noting in its 1991 Annual issue: "In an attempt to become more involved in the sport, Bakker started attending meetings of the local TAC [ed. note: now USATFNE] office, the governing body for track, road racing, and racewalking, a few years ago. She rose to the office of president in short order. On top of her official duties, she can be seen assisting at the registration tables at many area races, much to the amazement of those who wonder where she can possibly find the time. Her explanation: 'We are all involved because we love the sport.' No one can doubt that this is true of Bakker."

Current *New England Runner* publishers Michelle LeBrun and Bob Fitzgerald were friends and colleagues of Ms. Bakker. "I know Marja in many different capacities, but the one I will cherish the most is as a friend," said LeBrun. "Her loyalty, compassion, commitment, and nurturing are legendary to those of us who know her. Her ability to look at situations from both sides of the coin forced me on many occasions to look outside the box. I learned to appreciate vegetarian cooking, Belgian beer, Dutch cheese, tulips and lively banter at her many dinner gatherings. Her generosity to her family and friends is limitless."

Co-publisher Bob Fitzgerald added: "Always one to skirt the limelight, to tackle the essential work that takes place backstage, it will be left for others to say 'no,' which she had to do often and respectfully, but firmly. Marja had a great life, a stupendous, passionate life that enriched more people on more levels than anyone will ever know. I will miss hearing the joy in Marja's lilting Dutch accent while at disparate locales covering events, but mostly I will miss it at Boston on Patriots' Day. Marja was such an instrumental part of the Marathon, she seemed happiest there, surrounded by thousands, a superb actress without understudy in this great passion play. It truly was an extraordinary life. 'Shape up,' Marja would say, 'It's been a good life.'"

She understood that some people lead and necessarily must be in front of their audience, while most others need to work the less glamorous jobs. Her job was to make sure those working the less glamorous jobs did not feel unappreciated or under-appreciated and one of the ways in which she accomplished that was by shying away from any potential limelight that might be cast in her direction. As examples, at the popular mayor's reception or the champions' press conference prior to each year's Boston Marathon, Ms. Bakker would often attend to a question in the hallway, exiting just before she was introduced, only re-entering when she was confident the acknowledgements were completed.

On multiple occasions over the last twenty years, she lobbied strongly that the B.A.A. place more emphasis on the volunteer activities and the volunteers themselves, even suggesting a "year of the volunteer," as she termed it. She was thankful and appreciated those who gave of their time, going so far as to coordinate volunteer "thank you" parties, letters and tokens of appreciation. She believed that volunteers were essential and sometimes undervalued components of any athletics competition, and she supported programs and methods of valuing their responsibilities, even going out of her way to show her appreciation.

As she believed recognition should be given to the volunteers, Ms. Bakker felt the attention should always be on the participants. It was her philosophy that every participant – from elite to not-so-elite or the so-called "back of the pack" – should share in the same experience. If you qualified for the Boston Marathon or were an official registrant in any track meet or race, then you should receive what your entry entitled you to receive.

Ms. Bakker recognized the need to present the sport of running – including road races, masters division competitions, youth meets, and open track and field meets – in an organized and personable manner. She wanted runners to have a smooth experience, from registration to receiving either their award for participation or for placing. Ms. Bakker made it her mission to attend to the details of putting on athletics events. In fact, the details were most important to Marja, and that was how she measured the events where she worked and volunteered: from having enough safety pins to properly attach a bib number worn on the front of a runner's shirt, to making sure there was enough change in the petty-cash box in order to expedite the registration process, to bundling medals for distribution efficiently at a race's conclusion.

Ms. Bakker was rules-oriented and a stickler for following the rules of competition. She was a throw-back to legendary Boston Marathon and B.A.A. administrator Jock Semple, who Ms. Bakker thought of fondly. Semple was a rough and direct Scotsman who later became an American resident, like Ms. Bakker. Neither minced words, and Ms. Bakker admired the unassuming work that Semple did for the B.A.A.

She enjoyed working with the Massachusetts Track & Field Officials Association to review, outline and enforce competition rules. She led the B.A.A.'s adjudication committee, and spearheaded the committee's effort to remove and disqualify cheaters from its races, especially the Boston Marathon.

Over the years, in the days following each Boston Marathon, Ms. Bakker would scour through stacks of videotapes and checkpoint data, zeroing in on two to three dozen individuals each year who may not have completed the entire Boston Marathon. Bakker would then offer to the alleged cheaters that they come to the B.A.A. office and attempt to find themselves on the videotape. Under Ms. Bakker's watchful eyes, the individuals

would watch – some for 10 minutes and some for several hours – trying to identify themselves on the monitor in Ms. Bakker's office.

No one who arrived in the office in an attempt to validate a performance was ever found, meaning that Ms. Bakker never was in error. As Ms. Bakker was apt to say: "We'd be more than happy to add your name in the results next to those who ran the full race, but you're not there. We can add your name at any time in the future if you help us find you or if you recall a fact which will help to explain why you don't appear at all the checkpoints on the course." She was curt but courteous as the procedure unfolded, allowing the individuals to retain their dignity, but never compromising the integrity of the Boston Marathon.

Her birthday was on April 20, a date on which the Boston Marathon has fallen on 16 occasions. She was born the day after the 1947 Boston Marathon, a race which saw the Boston Marathon's first world record. Earlier this year, the B.A.A. bid successfully – a bid that was largely assembled and presented by Ms. Bakker – to play host to the U.S. Olympic Team Trials – Women's Marathon. The event will occur, appropriately, on April 20, 2008, one day prior to that year's Boston Marathon.

Ms. Bakker visited her home country regularly over the years, and she hosted her family in the United States frequently; she was proud of showing off America. The world of running and those in it became Ms. Bakker's adopted family. She chose the following poem herself:

*je hebt je zoveel mooie dingen voorgenomen
maar dan opeens dan kent 't leven geen pardon
en je ballon blijft ergens hangen in de bomen
terwijl jij denkt dat je op weg bent naar de zon.
(T. Hermans)*

translation:

*You have made so many good intentions
But then suddenly life gives no quarter
And your balloon gets stuck in the trees
While you are thinking that you are on the way to the sun.*

Not surprisingly, Ms. Bakker specified that, in lieu of flowers, donations be made in her name to USA Track Field – New England's Youth Program (P.O. Box 1905; Brookline, MA 02446; Telephone: 617-566-5600; Email: office@usatfne.org).

Services will be private.

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