

Keys happily accept blockade for 7-mile run

By PATTY SHILLINGTON
Herald Staff Writer

A year after Key Westers revolted against a U.S. Border Patrol roadblock, the Conch Republic voluntarily barricaded its lifeline to the outside world Saturday for the second annual footrace across the Seven Mile Bridge.

But unlike the 1982 roadblock, which backed up traffic for 19 miles while federal agents searched cars for aliens and drugs, Saturday's two-hour, self-imposed cutoff went as smoothly as the concrete curves on the awesome year-old span.

Lining up at 7 a.m. on the Marathon side of the bridge — the largest of its kind in the world — about 1,000 runners prepared to challenge a fierce, gusting wind and a hard, narrow surface.

Runners agreed that this is no ordinary run.

No cars. No trees. No shade.

"Just nice, good, clean, fresh salt air," said two-time bridge runner Warren David of Miami.

Just a slender piece of pavement and an unparalleled panorama of ocean and sky.

"It's just breathtaking," said Hugh McCabe of Boston, who's visiting relatives in the Keys.

"When I got to the top I remembered to look!" said Karen Guardenier, referring to the "hump," which at 65 feet is the bridge's highest point.

While many runners waxed enthusiastic about the view, Keys biologist Art Weiner concentrated on conquering the dehydrating heat and wind.

"All I saw were red dots in front of my eyes," Weiner joked.

Ten-year-old Jessica Mitchell, last year's final finisher, and her 13-year-old sister, Jennifer, were back again Saturday. They, along with other slow but courageous runners, were picked up by a bus at the five-mile mark because it was feared that they wouldn't finish in time for the 6.79-mile bridge to open at 9 a.m.

"It's just too bad," said Jessica, a fourth-grader at Palmetto Elementary. "I wanted to run it by myself."

To beat an obscure world record, Marathon carpenter Mark Miller, 22, raced across the bridge with a duffle bag, filled with 100 pounds

of sand, on his shoulders.

"I did it for my friends and to break a record," Miller said.

The winner of the race was 43-year-old Fort Lauderdale resident William Springer, who finished in 37 minutes, 30 seconds. The first woman finisher was Sharon Beal, a Fort Lauderdale resident and last year's winner. Beal, 36, clocked in at 42:51.

Law enforcement officials had worried that Saturday's roadblock might prompt severe traffic problems and outrage among unsuspecting tourists.

"As far as I know now, we had no problems," said Monroe County Lt. Rick Roth, who coordinated traffic control. "We didn't have any violence at all, any place."

Most of the people in the several hundred cars stuck on each side of the bridge were understanding, said deputies.

"So far we've just had one person who was definitely displeased," Lt. Hank Shaner said during the race. "He just mumbled, turned around and went."

Careful planning was the key to the race's success, said organizer Diane Chaplin. She's president of the Marathon Runners Club, which sponsored the race.

"As smoothly as this went," said Deputy Gordon Towe, "I'd be willing to bet this is going to be an annual event."

Towe handed fliers to motorists on U.S. 1 in Marathon, suggesting alternative activities until the bridge reopened a bit after 9 a.m.

"I didn't have anybody giving me any guff," Towe said.

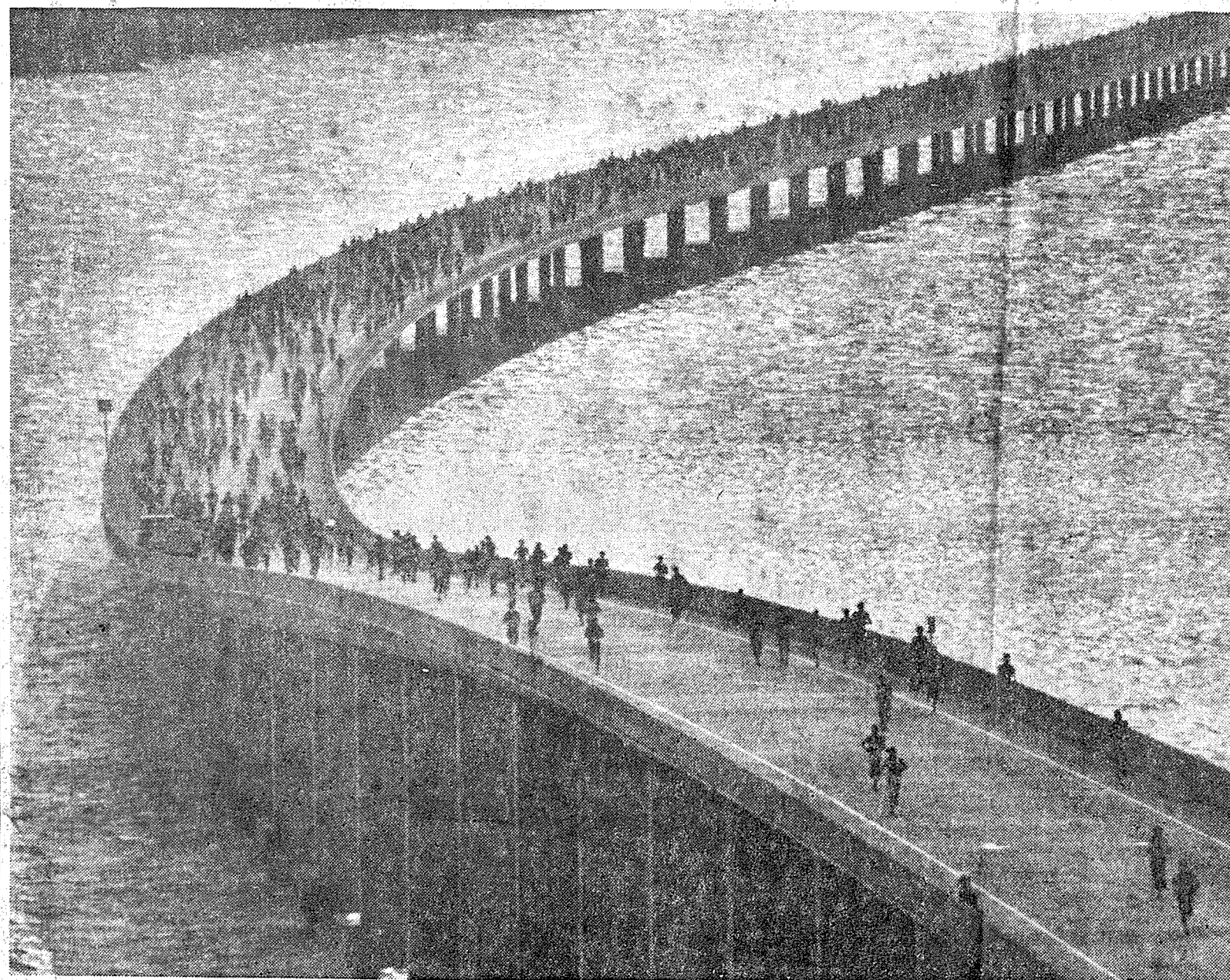
On the south side of the bridge, cars did back up about a half-mile because some motorists decided to wait for the bridge to open rather than drive back to Bahia Honda or Big Pine Key, deputies said.

And some waited in the parking lot of a Kmart in Marathon, eating doughnuts and drinking coffee.

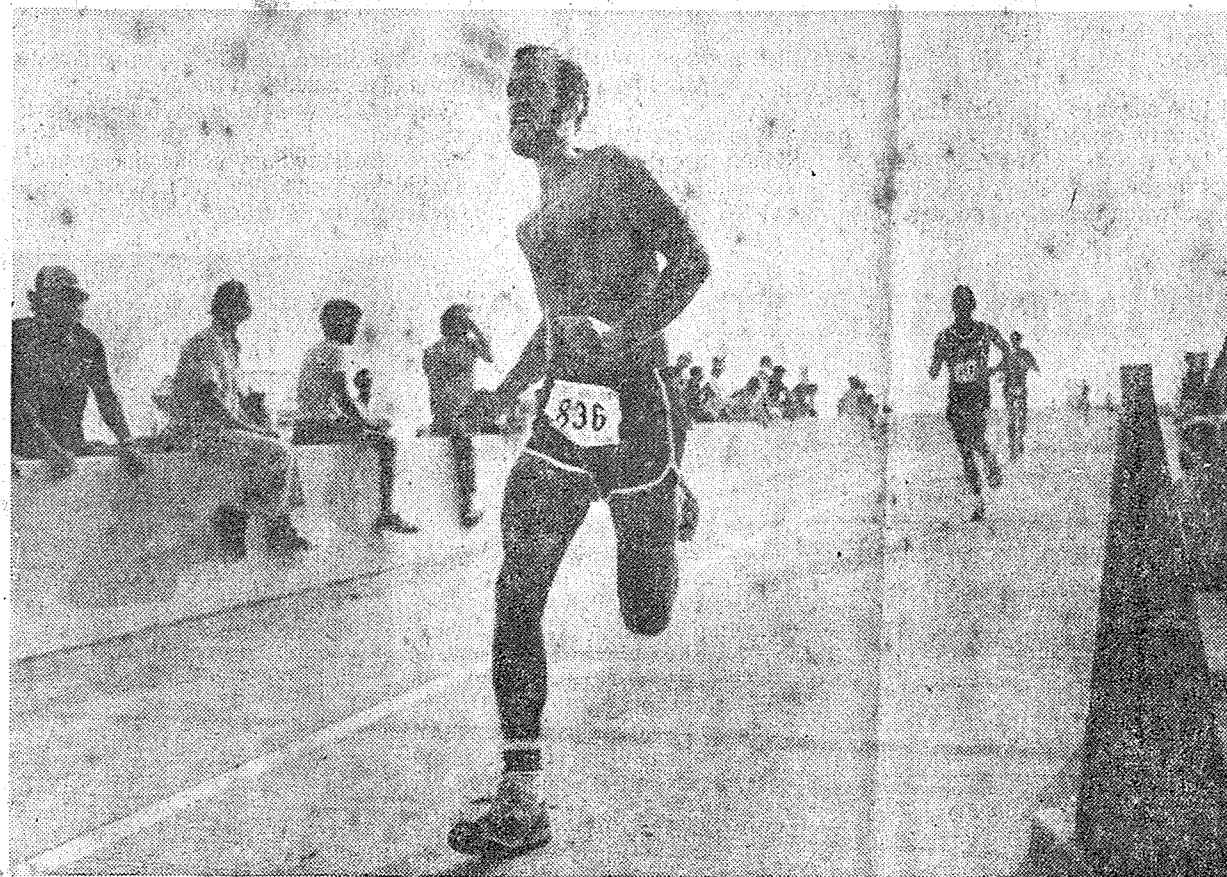
"What can you do?" sighed Larry Warren. "We'll just get to the Keys a little late. I'm sure there are people upset about it, only because they're upset about everything."

Many agreed the laid-back atmosphere of the Keys helped deter problems.

"If they did this in Miami," Warren said, "they'd be burning down the Kmart."



Battling wind and heat, more than 1,000 runners raced across the Seven Mile Bridge Saturday. This man, strain written on his every muscle, stepped up his gait for a dash toward the finish line.



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