

The Boston Marathon: Narragansett Tribe member Tarzan Brown inspired Heartbreak Hill name



[Mark Patinkin](#)

The Providence Journal, October 15, 2021

Tarzan Brown — what a name, and man.

Deerfoot, they called him, he of South County's Narragansett Tribe.

Ellison was his given name, but “Tarzan” stuck because he was a nimble climber of trees and ran like the wind through the woods of South County, sometimes shoeless.

That was almost a century ago, but Tarzan lives on, his memory honored at this year's Boston Marathon for a distinction too often overlooked.

Tarzan Brown, of Richmond, was a Native American who won the world's most prestigious marathon twice, first in 1936, again in 1939. He was an Olympian too. His presence in Berlin in 1936, along with the legendary Jesse Owens, showed Hitler that his phony “Master Race” could be eclipsed, and by people of color no less.

Tarzan Brown died too young in 1975, at age 61, but he remains in the hearts of those who loved him.

That includes Mike Monroe, whose tribal name is Wiekie. He's the eldest grandchild, in his teens when Tarzan was killed in a hit-and-run. He nurtures memories of his grandfather like a family treasure.

With the marathon unfolding this year on what's now often called Indigenous People's Day, the race committee brought the Narragansett's Brown family to Boston to honor their famous forebear.

It was the 85th anniversary of Tarzan's first win — which to this day gives the race its most notable feature.

You've probably heard of it — Heartbreak Hill.

That was Tarzan's doing.

The history of the Boston Marathon's Heartbreak Hill

Let's start there.

It's Monday, April 20, 1936, and Ellison “Tarzan” Brown charges so fast out of the starting line that he beats the press vehicles to the first checkpoint.

He's 21, a tribe member so poor that the previous year, his first Boston run, his shoes fell apart and he did the last seven miles barefoot, still managing to finish 13th.

Now in 1936, he's the first to the long hill in Newton at mile 20, where many hit the "wall."

More:[Mission continued: Hoyt family begins new chapter at 2021 Boston Marathon](#)

I used to think that's why they called it Heartbreak Hill. It's not.

That long-ago race day, Tarzan struggles a bit at the hill, allowing the marathon's hero, Johnny Kelley, who won the year before and would finish in the top five in 15 Runnings of the fabled contest, to catch him.

Kelley gives Tarzan a friendly tap, as if to say, "You did good, but step aside, it's time for the champion to come through."

That's when Tarzan does something remarkable. He reaches deep, channeling his pride in both tribe and his home state, knowing he can make both shine as bright as his own dreams if he can do this.

And he does.

He leaves Johnny Kelley behind and wins the legendary marathon. A journalist that day would write that the moment broke the champion's heart. Ever since, because of Tarzan Brown, it's Heartbreak Hill.

Mike Monroe is 61, lives in Narragansett and is still so pained by his grandfather's untimely death 46 years ago he can't talk about it.

He'd rather embrace Tarzan's life, from humble origins to being remembered in Copley Square last Friday for being an Indigenous Boston Marathon legend.

"I'll give you two words," Mike told me of Tarzan. "Unique and mysterious."

The mystery was how he'd disappear into the woods of Charlestown, Richmond and Westerly training for hours.

Tarzan, a muscular 5-foot-7, had grown strong from his work, building fireplaces and rock walls as a stonemason; cutting wood and shellfishing. Mike remembers going with his granddad to South County ponds to harvest blue crabs, oysters and steamers.

I asked where Tarzan's running fortitude came from. In part, said Mike, from overcoming poverty.

"My grandfather didn't have the luxury of running water growing up," he said. "He was poor."

He overcame prejudice too.

“It was tough to be an Indian back in that time,” said Mike, “in the 1930s.”

But Tarzan also had an innate optimism.

“He got along with everybody.”

I asked Mike, a golf course manager for the Pequot Tribe of Foxwoods, what he learned from his grandfather.

“He ran free,” said Mike. “He lived free. He taught — be your own person and have a big heart.”

Tarzan had four kids, now all passed on, and 13 grandchildren, Anna Brown-Jackson among them.

Seeing her granddad honored this year was a dream for Anna. His drive, she told me, came in part from overcoming prejudice against the indigenous. He wanted to show that a native American could win.

And he did.

She hopes the spotlight on his memory this week will inspire indigenous youth everywhere to know they can achieve anything.

During Monday’s race, Mike Monroe made his way to Heartbreak Hill to watch.

He felt the spirit of his grandfather there and could picture that telltale moment, which today rises to metaphor.

Here was the reigning title-holder telling Tarzan Brown to move aside in a friendly rivalry.

But Tarzan did not yield, and he went on to prove himself, in the name of tribe and state, a champion that year, and in legacy, still today. *mpatinki@providencejournal.com*