



Patricia Nell Warren (foreground) with four members of the New Orleans Frontrunners. Courtesy Ted-Larry Pebworth.

## Frontrunners

by George Koschel

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Frontrunners is an international confederation of gay, lesbian, transgendered, and gay-friendly runners, joggers, power walkers, strollers, rollerbladers, and sometimes bicyclists of all abilities.

Frontrunners had its origins in San Francisco when Jack Baker and Gardner Pond advertised a course on learning how to jog in a free gay newspaper, *The Lavender U*. They had their first run in January 1974. Under the name, The Lavender U Joggers, their membership increased with time.

*The Lavender U* went out of business, and in the fall of 1978, the Lavender U Joggers restructured themselves, hoping to appeal to runners of all abilities. They also gave themselves a new name, Frontrunners.

Patricia Nell Warren's novel, *The Front Runner*, had recently become a hit among gay readers and, to a much lesser extent, among straight ones as well. No one person is credited with the decision to adopt the name Frontrunners. Apparently it came out of a collaborative effort by the Lavender U Joggers when they were in the midst of re-organizing themselves.

The joggers did not think to ask Warren if they could appropriate the name for their club when it began meeting in San Francisco in the latter part of 1978. Fortunately, Warren did not object.

In 1980, Malcolm Benjamin, a member of the New York Roadrunners, contacted San Francisco Frontrunners about establishing a New York gay running club. He wanted permission to use the term, Frontrunners. The San Francisco club told him they had no legal hold on the name. Thus began the second Frontrunners organization.

### The Novel

*The Front Runner* (1974) tells the story of a twenty-one year old gay runner, Billy Sive. Allied more with the romantic fiction of Gordon Merrick than, say, that of James Baldwin or Edmund White, the novel nevertheless vividly recreates the world of amateur athletics.

Warren's protagonist, an uncloseted gay man who wants to compete in the 1976 Olympics, became an icon for many gay men. Sive, who does not cruise other gay men, nonetheless manages to fall in love with his coach, Harlan Brown. The story ends tragically when an assassin kills Billy at the 1976 Montreal Olympics, a martyr to gay liberation.

In the heady post-Stonewall days of gay liberation, Sive was a very appealing character. Here is a gay man comfortable with his sexual orientation who also had a profound passion for something else--running. Sive and his passions struck a chord with many gay athletes, weekend athletes, and would-be athletes.

Frontrunners, like the novel's protagonist, declares, "We are not ashamed of our sexual orientation. But we

are runners, joggers, walkers, rollerbladers, and bicyclists *too*."

### **Frontrunners Today**

Frontrunners has grown to include clubs not only in American cities with large gay populations and cultures, such as San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, and New Orleans, but also in cities as diverse as San Diego, Chicago, Boston, Grand Rapids, Milwaukee, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Seattle, Baton Rouge, Gainesville, and Tampa Bay, among others.

The organization has also gone international with clubs throughout Canada, Europe (five in Germany alone), Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa .

Typically, clubs have two or three walk/runs per week: the major one takes place on Saturday morning and others occur during weekday evenings. Times and locations are often posted on the internet. If the club does not have a web page, a contact person's phone number is usually available through either the local gay newspaper or community center.

Since 1987 International Frontrunners Conferences (IFR) have been held in Europe, Canada, and the United States. International gatherings were also held at the Gay Games in Vancouver, New York, and Amsterdam. Conferences include workshops, run/walk events, and dinners. San Diego hosted the IFR conference in October 2001.

Since its beginnings in San Francisco in 1978, Frontrunners has spread across the Pacific and the Atlantic to southern Africa. This amazing growth has happened despite the AIDS pandemic and the ugly bigotry that often results whenever gay men and lesbians assert their political rights. Indeed, perhaps these very factors, which make the need for the organization so obvious, have actually contributed to the phenomenal growth of Frontrunners.

Can Frontrunners Beijing be far behind?

### **Bibliography**

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### **About the Author**

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