

## Running toward heritage: High hopes for a center celebrating the Great Law



By [Sean Kirst, The Post-Standard](#)

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Thomas Longboat: In the early 1900s, he may have been the greatest runner in the world.

Courtesy of Canada's Sports Hall of Fame,  
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***You can find information on entering Friday's Onondaga Nation trail run at the end of this column.***

The second annual [Onondaga Nation](#) trail run will be held Friday morning, an event organizers dedicated to Thomas Longboat when they put together the first race, a year ago. If [Longboat's name](#) means nothing to you – especially in this running-happy community — it only underlines why the timing of the race could not be better.

Longboat might be the greatest distance runner to ever spend significant time in Onondaga County. In 1907, he not only won the Boston Marathon, but [obliterated the old record](#) by about five minutes. The Post-Standard described his triumph as “practically a local victory” because Longboat lived for a while at the [Onondaga Nation](#) in his youth. The paper also noted how Longboat, on one visit to Syracuse, “lodged a challenge ... to meet any amateur” in a challenge race.

Local runners, it seemed, knew better than to take him up on it.

Longboat, an Onondaga, was born at the Six Nations territory in Canada. Bruce Kidd — an elite Canadian runner who became a Longboat biographer — said Longboat often visited the Onondaga Nation, even as an adult.

He once came here, Kidd said, to seek treatment in the Onondaga longhouse for an especially troubling injury. When he returned to Canada, he told the press:

"Your medical men couldn't do it, but our medicine man brought me back to full [health](#)."

The Post-Standard called him "the world's greatest runner," and Canada's [Sports Hall of Fame](#) describes him as the greatest distance runner in the [history](#) of Canada. Yet when the Onondagas announced the creation of the trail run a year ago – and noted Longboat's role as inspiration – just about no one knew who they were talking about.

It is one small example of the gap that the Onondagas, and the [Onondaga Historical Association](#), hope to bridge [next year](#), when Onondaga County's Sainte Marie Among the Iroquois site on Onondaga Parkway [is converted into a Great Law of Peace Educational Center](#).

The goal is for visitors to "come to know about the Great Law of Peace, and the living community we have at Onondaga that still practices a ceremonial system," said Phil Arnold, a Syracuse [University associate](#) professor who will serve as founding director.

Many newcomers to Syracuse have a vague awareness of how the region played an integral role in Six Nations history. The shoreline of Onondaga Lake is, in a sense, a native Jerusalem. The Onondagas believe their Peacemaker arrived many centuries ago by crossing the lake in a stone canoe. They believe he brought together warring nations and convinced them to bury their weapons beneath a tree of peace.

The result was the Haudenosaunee, a confederacy that remains bound by the Great Law. While the saga gives Syracuse an extraordinary place in North American history, there has never been an easy way for residents or visitors to fully consider what it means.

Filling that void is "exactly the purpose" of the center, said Gregg Tripoli, executive director of the OHA. Despite the proximity of the two communities, many Central New Yorkers are unaware of the famed visitors and historic events at the Onondaga territory, over the years.

Arnold said he is working with educators from Onondaga to develop exhibits, murals and museum space. One of the most important elements, he said, will be reminding visitors the Great Law is more than history: It is a living system of beliefs still embraced by the Six Nations.

Especially exciting, Arnold said, is the level of interest in the center from local universities — as well as support from city and county leaders.

"People will be able to come to the center, and have a really good meal of Native American food, and they'll be able to learn about (native) creation accounts, as well as ideas of peace that came to Onondaga and had an influence on western civilization," he said.



Onondaga Lake: Within the belief system of the Six Nations, the shoreline is a kind of natural Jerusalem.

Dick Blume/The Post-Standard

As for Longboat? Certainly, sports will have a major place in the new center. Arnold described lacrosse as the great “medicine game” of the Six Nations; according to accounts in the Great Law, he said, lacrosse was played near Onondaga Lake to help Hiawatha heal from grief after the death of his daughters.

It would make sense, then, for our community to know the tale of Longboat. Kidd, the Canadian biographer, said Longboat was also a skilled lacrosse player. He ignored vicious racial taunting to triumph as a world-class runner, Kidd said, then was nearly killed in World War I “when he and a couple of other men were completely buried” in an explosion.

“This could be a movie,” Kidd said. Instead, it’s a story most of us don’t know — a situation that might change in this center by the lake.

[Sean Kirst](#) is a columnist with *The Post-Standard*

***The annual Onondaga Nation trail run is Friday. A 1-mile run - entry fee \$5 - begins at 9:20 a.m. A 5k run - entry fee \$15 - starts at 10 a.m. Race day registration begins at 8 a.m. at the Onondaga Athletic Club ball field and pavilion, on Route 11A on the nation.***

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