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POPEHN JOINS EXCLUSIVE CLUB, MESEL JOINS WINNERS CIRCLE AT 50TH ANNUAL GRANDMA'S MARATHON

Popehn Becomes 3rd Woman to Win 3 Titles at Grandma's Marathon

(DULUTH, MINN.) – Dakotah Popehn didn't have the extra energy needed to display her trademark "heart hands" as she crossed the finish line, but that didn't dampen the celebration Saturday morning as the Minnesota native put her name among the all-time greats in Grandma's Marathon history.

Popehn becomes just the third woman in the event's 50-year history to win three titles, joining Lorraine Moller and Mary Akor. Though runner-up Bashanke Bilo hung with her until the final miles, this always felt like Popehn's race to lose.

"How could I lose?" Popehn asked. "I had the whole city of Duluth behind me. There was no way I wasn't winning this race."

After winning her first two titles in back-to-back years, 2021 and 2022, Popehn had raced the Garry Bjorklund Half Marathon the past two years. With this year being the 50th Grandma's Marathon, she knew she had to return to the full 26.2-mile distance.

"Grandma's will always be a very special place to me," Popehn said. "To hug my dad at the finish line was awesome. I feel like the Mayor of Duluth when I get to race Grandma's Marathon."

Popehn finished in 2:28:51 and 45 seconds ahead than Bilo, who fought valiantly in not only her first Grandma's Marathon, but her first race in North America.

On the men's side, Amanuel Mesel pulled away from six-time winner Elisha Barno as the lead pack reached the Duluth city limits to earn his first career victory at Grandma's Marathon.

"I've run here twice before and finished fourth and third," Mesel said. "To win today, it felt amazing."



Mesel was part of an eight-man lead pack at the halfway point, but from then on started to assert his will en route to a finishing time of 2:11:21 that was nearly 90 seconds clear of Barno.

The two-time Olympian for Eritrea said the course knowledge and experience he'd gained the past two years paid dividends.

"I don't think I did much different in this race than the others," he said. "The course is good, and to finally win here at Grandma's means a lot."

Barno finished as the runner-up with a time of 2:12:50, denied what would have been his seventh victory in Duluth and extended his record as the winningest runner ever at Grandma's Marathon.

Zoey Viavattine won the non-binary division with a time of 2:38:09, breaking their own event record and becoming the first multiple-time non-binary division winner in Grandma's Marathon history.

There were 9,594 finishers in the 50th annual Grandma's Marathon – 5,533 men, 4,031 women, 25 non-binary – making this the largest race in the event's illustrious history. In fact, this iteration broke the previous record, set only last year, by more than 2,000.

Full results of the 2026 Grandma's Marathon can be found [HERE](#).

For any questions or interview requests, please contact Marketing & Public Relations Director Zach Schneider via phone at (218) 343-9874 or via email at zach@grandmasmarathon.com.

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ABOUT GRANDMA'S MARATHON

Started by a local group of runners in 1977, Grandma's Marathon has grown from just 150 participants its first year to now one of the largest and best-known marathons in the United States. Widely regarded as a world class event with small town charm, our race has now added the Garry Bjorklund Half Marathon and William A. Irvin 5K to its weekend offerings.

With all three races combined, our race weekend welcomes more than 20,000 participants – usually from all 50 states and from 70+ different countries – and brings with it close to \$40M of economic impact to the region.

The race got its name from the Duluth-based group of famous Grandma's Restaurants, the first major sponsor of the marathon. As the popularity of Grandma's Marathon weekend has grown, our mission has stayed the same – to organize, promote, and deliver annual events and programs that cultivate running, educational, social, and charitable opportunities to our communities.

Grandma's Marathon-Duluth, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit organization with a 10-person, full-time staff and a 17-member Board of Directors.



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