

Not just a race, it's a 'Big Smile' day

By **JESSE NOYES**

Why cheer when you can sing? This year as runners of the Boston Marathon reach the grueling point of Heartbreak Hill, they'll be serenaded by a choir wearing WBZ shirts and belting out never-say-die tunes like "I Will Survive" and "Eye of the Tiger."

Local television station WBZ-TV (Ch.4) is hiring the 25-person Big Smile Entertainment choir to perform six songs over four hours of the race.

It's one unusual step WBZ is taking in a major street marketing initiative it is planning for the event, as it prepares to go solo for the first time in covering the marathon from start to finish.

"It's our way of bringing WBZ out there," said Wendy McMahon, the station's Creative Services Director. "Do I expect our news numbers are going to get a lift because of the inspirational choir? No. But if you do this right, I think people will be open to our message, they will be open to our newscasts."

The station also plans to distribute 65,000 coasters to bars and restaurants carrying the line "Just watching people run makes me thirsty" and the WBZ logo. Ten street teams have been hired to cheer on run-

ners.

WBZ wants to have numerous signs up from Boston College to the finish line. And all of WBZ's news trucks will sport new paint jobs that day.

The marketing blitz comes as WBZ becomes the only local TV station to cover the entire race. WCVB-TV (Ch.5) has bowed out of marathon live coverage, citing the high cost of airing the annual event. When WCVB dropped the race, it was a sign that the marathon is not the ratings winner it once was.

But WBZ, which has seen its newscast ratings struggle in recent years, is now using its exclusive marathon role to push its brand.

"Based upon the size of the event, we've taken it and blown it up proportionally," said Ed Piette, general manager at WBZ.

In addition, marathon coverage is starting two hours earlier, at 10 a.m. this year.

But Piette said that does come with some risk, since more marketing dollars will likely be

spent this year.

It's an effort to make WBZ's brand more contemporary, said Steve Connelly, chief creative officer at local ad

shop Connelly Partners.

"They probably feel they have an image that's old and dusty," he said. "What they're at least saying to themselves is, 'This is a great way to revitalize our image.'"

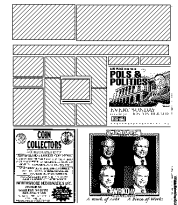
And WBZ may be doing a favor for the marathon as well.


"The same stories get told every year at the marathon, and few local (runners) are really competitive," said Paul Niwa, a broadcast journalism professor at Emerson College. "Just take last year's script and put 2007 on it," he said.

What WBZ is doing will make the race more memorable, Niwa added.

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**ED PIETTE,
WBZ general manager
■ FANS MONITOR MARATHONERS VIA WEB SITE, E-MAIL, CELL PHONE, TEXT MESSAGING, PAGE 26**






MILE 10

Don't look now but I think you're being followed.



MARATHON CHEERLEADING: WBZ-TV (Ch.4) has some new ideas for its Boston Marathon broadcast this year, including having the 25-person Big Smile Entertainment choir perform inspirational songs over four hours of the race. The station will post tongue-in-cheek signs such as these along the route.



MILE 12

You can do it!
Thousands of screaming co-eds can't be wrong.

