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Josh Billings RunAground

Do you miss the Josh Billings RunAground afterparty at Tanglewood? It's coming back after a six-year hiatus

By Clarence Fanto, The Berkshire Eagle
Mar 15, 2025



Paddlers rush to the water with their kayaks, canoes and paddle boards during the second leg of the 2022 Josh Billings RunAground Triathlon at the Stockbridge Bowl. Race organizers and Boston Symphony Orchestra management have resolved a dispute, so this September's finish line and afterparty will return to the Tanglewood main parking lot.

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN -- THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

LENOX — For the first time since 2019, the annual Josh Billings RunAground will not only finish at Tanglewood but also will hold its traditional afterparty outside the Main Gate on West Street.

Race organizers reported that a breakthrough with the Boston Symphony Orchestra will allow the resumption of the longtime post-race celebration, featuring food, music and an awards ceremony.

"We're grateful that Tanglewood is happy to have us," recently appointed Race Director Brian Berkel told The Eagle on Friday afternoon. "It wasn't much of a negotiation, it was pretty much a welcoming, so we appreciate that wholeheartedly."

He emphasized that the triathlon leadership will work with Tanglewood and race participants "to make sure we can preserve this tradition going forward."

The 48th triathlon — whose motto is “to finish is to win” — is slated for Sept. 14 on its traditional route. Bicyclists will begin at the Barrington Plaza parking lot off Stockbridge Road in Great Barrington, handing off to paddlers at the Stockbridge Bowl boat ramp, followed by runners picking up the baton on the shores of Camp Mah-Kee-Nac for the 6.4-mile route ending at the Tanglewood finish.

"It's six months away, but it goes fast," Berkel observed.

The afterparty has been held at Camp Mah-kee-Nac overlooking the lake since 2022 amid an unspecified post-pandemic contract dispute with race organizers over the use of Tanglewood's overflow parking lots and use of the Main Gate parking lot.

But limited space at the camp caused traffic and parking safety challenges.

The breakthrough with Tanglewood leadership can be credited to "a real appetite to returning to the traditions," Berkel said.



First place finisher Steve Monsulick approaches the finish line with a healthy lead in the 2022 Josh Billings RunAground Triathlon ending at Camp Mah-Kee-Nac in Stockbridge. The race ended there after Tanglewood management decided not to host the finish line and afterparty, but finish and celebration will return to Tanglewood this September.

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN -- THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

BSO President and CEO Chad Smith and Director of Tanglewood Facilities Bobby Lahart were "very welcoming, open and good to work with," he said. "We really appreciate their consideration."

Prior to the agreement with Tanglewood, the the Josh Billings Race Committee had asked the Richmond Select Board to consider the use of the town's lake and access roads for this fall's triathlon.

But last Wednesday, the board and the Richmond Shores Civic Association received a letter from Berkel stating that the race would not involve Richmond Pond and town roads as an alternative route for this year.

Stockbridge Select Board member Patrick White helped facilitate the discussion that led to the return to Tanglewood.

White said he encouraged Smith to allow the event to return to its roots at the orchestra's summer home as an example of positive community relations with both Stockbridge, where most of Tanglewood lies, and Lenox, where the Main Gate and nearby parking lots are situated.

"There were people involved behind the scenes, very passionate about what the Josh brings to the county," Berkel said. "It's all positive, everything's good. Everybody had similar goals and wanted the same thing — the BSO, Tanglewood, Josh Billings, the Stockbridge Select Board — so it was easy."

The Josh, first held in 1976, was held virtually in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and had its first outright cancellation in 2023, when a forecast of threatening weather prompted a short-notice scrubbing of the event.

Timeline ...

1976: First Josh Billings Runaground is held, with runners leaving Mount Greylock Regional High School, handing off to bicyclists at the Brodie Mountain Ski Resort, who rode through Pittsfield to canoeists at the Stockbridge Bowl. Alice's Restaurant, then overlooking Tanglewood at the former Avaloch Inn (now the Apple Tree Inn), hosted the original celebration.

2018: An algae bloom on Stockbridge Bowl forced a relocation to Richmond Pond.

2020: COVID-19 required cancellation of the triathlon, the first in its history.

2021: The race is held without the Tanglewood "Bash" because of lingering pandemic concerns.

2022: Tanglewood declines to host the finish line and after-party, which are relocated to Camp Mah-Kee-Nac on the Stockbridge Bowl shores.

2023: A prediction of stormy weather led to an 11th hour cancellation of the event, much to the dismay of registrants, especially when the forecast turned out to be wrong.

2024: The triathlon returns, again concluding at Camp Mah-Kee-Nac.

2025: The 48th Josh is scheduled for Sept, 14, with a return to Tanglewood for the finish line and post-race celebratory party.

An algae bloom on Stockbridge Bowl had required a rerouting to Richmond Pond in 2018.

The party, held on the Bowl's shores at Camp Mah-Kee-Nac in 2022 and 2024 posed logistical challenges involving traffic and parking.

Race Committee member Gary Miller of Stockbridge had credited the camp as “a wonderful host” but he cited concerns by town police because cars and runners were jostling for space along the narrow entrance to the camp.

“I’m delighted to see the return to Tanglewood,” said former Race Director Patty Spector, whose tenure extended from 2002 through 2022. “It will encourage people to return for the celebration, and I’m thrilled.”

She also offered high praise for Camp Mah-Kee-Nac. “They were wonderful to us,” Spector said.

The nonprofit Josh Billings Triathlon donates proceeds to the Berkshire United Way to serve needs within the Berkshire community. The event, starting at 8:30 a.m. in Great Barrington, includes a 27-mile course for bicyclists, 5 miles on Stockbridge Bowl for canoes, kayaks and standup paddlers, and 6.4 miles for runners.

Registration begins on April 1 at joshbillings.com, where more information is available. Berkel asked that any businesses or organizations interested in helping sponsor the 2025 race to contact him at brian@joshbillings.com to discuss options.

Who was Josh Billings?

Josh Billings is the pen name of Henry Wheeler Shaw who was born in Lanesborough on April 12, 1818. His father, Henry Shaw, served in the Massachusetts Senate for 25 years. Billings was a renowned humorist in his day, and better known and appreciated than his contemporary, Mark Twain.

Commanding capacity crowds wherever he performed, he became widely known for his down-home philosophies, Yankee “one-liners” and peculiar, phonetic spelling.

One of his wise sayings, “To finish is to win” is the motto of the Runaground and one of the reasons the event was named for Josh Billings. Another appropriate Billings quote: “The rarest thing a man ever duz iz the best he can.”

True to its namesake and traditions, the triathlon attracts elite and amateur participants of all ages and abilities, and is cheered on by spectators along the route and at the finish line and celebration, now slated to return to Tanglewood.

Source: joshbillings.com/about/

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