

Rob Rose - 6/14/07

WARNING! DANGER! ATTEMPT AT YOUR OWN RISK! EXERCISE EXTREME CAUTION! SERIOUS INJURY COULD RESULT! Perhaps that's an overly dramatic opening to the column but that was my initial impression to something that occurred last week.

For a number of years I have listed the Blue Hills Skyline trail race in the Chronicle's road race schedule and a couple of weeks ago, I contacted the race director via e-mail about this year's race. The 7.2 mile race, which will be held on July 8, in Milton is low key. How low key? The field is restricted to 100 runners, they don't hand out T-shirts and you won't find the results on www.coolrunning.com.

Race director Jeff Saeger responded by attaching a race application with the following caveat. "We usually do not advertise especially in road race schedules," he responded. "In the past we have had entrants who have expected a race on nice trails or some cross country race. They have been very disappointed! The best surface in the race is a rocky jeep road, the rest is steep climbs and descents with loose rock and cliff like climbs. I just want that to be clear to anyone entering and I don't want anyone to get injured!"

I was surprised at his reply. I'm either too naive or too obtuse but I expect that runners who undertake a trail race understand that there are inherent risks involved when you go off road. There are wide variations in courses due to terrain and elevation. Anyone who signs up needs to expect the worst. Saeger's race application does state that it is "extremely rocky and demands balance and agility with staircase steep climbs and tumbling rock down hills. Minimal course marking." Those sentences, however, are in a normal font size. Perhaps something more eye catching is needed such as WARNING! DANGER! ATTEMPT AT YOUR OWN RISK! SERIOUS INJURY COULD RESULT!

Trail races have become more popular recently with several local ones debuting in the last year. The Colonial Road Runners unveiled their own Blue Hills trail races, ten and three miles this past May. In addition they host the Houghton Pond six mile trail race in October. Wrenthams's Pete Dubendris started the Wrentham Forest Trail 20K last September to coincide with Wrentham Day. He also directs the Diamond Hill-Birchwold 22.5K trail race in October. Last weekend, the Great Lincoln Steeplechase and the Northfield Mountain 10.3K were contested. Numerous races now contain verbiage that is intended to ward off the casual participant.

Circumstances were quite different many years ago. In 1982, I ran my first trail race, the Eastern Masters Athletic Congress 5K Cross Country Championship. The application made no mention of any risk involved in undertaking the race (yes, I still have the application). The course description was terse and muted,

stating 'Dirt roads, Paths, Hills (Scenic)'.

However, runners do get hurt during these races and they do encounter perilous conditions. Three years ago, Sharon's Gail Martin broke her ankle at Northfield. Two years ago, runners at the Diamond-Hill Birchwold had to contend with torrential rain and swollen bodies of water. Rehoboth's Pete Withers and Rumford's Judy Thompson were almost swept away by raging cataracts at D-H Birchwold.

Another aspect about trail races is that public safety, for the most part, is not present at these events as they are held in remote locations. Road races, in contrast, are always under the aegis of a particular town's public safety officials. If there is snow, rain or other conditions that they deem hazardous, there's no race.

Our nation has become such a litigious one that race directors need to be extremely cautious about their liability. As many try to make our society risk free, one has to wonder if some day they may be banned because they are too dangerous. Then trail racing will become a surreptitious activity, conducted far from civilized locales. Too Orwellian?

I promised Saeger that I would make full disclosure about his race. So to everyone out there who intends to run the Blue Hills Skyline Trail race, WARNING! DANGER! ATTEMPT AT YOUR OWN RISK! EXERCISE EXTREME CAUTION! SERIOUS INJURY COULD RESULT!

Footnotes - the Tom's Tavern 5K summer series, a Wampanoag Road Runners production, continues next Thursday, June 21 at 7 p.m. at the Wrentham establishment; runners can use the event for either racing or training; contact Roland Desrochers (781-307-6542 or ronan262@yahoo.com) for more info ... In keeping with our trail theme, Plainville's Ron Farkash is running the Vermont 100 Mile on the weekend of July 21 and is looking for several people to serve as a support crew and to pace him for the last 20 -30 miles; anyone interested should contact Farkash at rfarkash@yahoo.com ...