

Rob Rose Column - 9/6/2007

Whenever I need some insight into running trends, I always turn to the 'Oracle'. With years of experience and a wealth of sources, the 'Oracle' can always discern what's happening in the running world and why. The best part about visiting the 'Oracle' is that I don't need to travel vast distances, conquer Tibetan peaks or employ the services of a Sherpa guide to get there. All it takes is a trip to North Attleboro and DB Sports to see the 'Oracle of Kelley Boulevard', Kevin Downey. As the proprietor of the long established running store, he lives local running and he knows. What's the latest pronouncement from the 'Oracle'? "The half marathon is the new marathon".

Undoubtedly he's on to something. There are so many half marathons this fall that one can run one every weekend from Sept. 23 to Nov. 11. All within a couple hours driving distance from the Attleboro area. So where did all these races come from?

Ten years ago, few of them existed. Bay State, which will be held on Oct. 14 in Lowell, has been around for many years. If you like flat, this one's for you. Monson started in 1996 and is my personal favorite. The race's rigorous hills, majestic scenery and rural setting give it an identity that few can match. Monson goes off Nov. 11. The B.A.A. Half, which will be held on Oct. 7, has been around for only seven years and is the most popular. It filled up it's 4500 field in only four weeks. The same day as the B.A.A. Half is the Newport Half, which is antediluvian in comparison. This is their 16th year. All the others showed up within the last three years and there are a lot of others.

Salem's 'Wicked' Half Marathon will debut on Sept. 29 and the following day, the Wilmington Half will have their third edition. The closest half marathon to our area, the City Kids VIP in Providence, will have only their second race on Oct. 21. The opening curtain for the Maine Half Coast (York) will be Sept. 23, the Manchester (NH) Half opens the doors for the first time on Nov. 4 and the Niantic Half Marathon in East Lyme has their first running on Sept. 30.

We turn to the 'Oracle' to learn why the fall calendar is blotted with half marathons. "I think a lot of people are entering the sport of running these days and realizing that trying to start out with the marathon is a little too much of a burden as far as training and commitment," the 'Oracle' sagely observed. "So they're realizing that a good way to enter is with the half marathon. Less time, less commitment, less training. The goal is a little more reachable. Too many people have tried to start with a marathon ... all of a sudden a friend says to them, 'Let's try for a marathon' and they get into it not realizing how much work it's going to be and then fall short of

their goal, get injured and never actually get to the marathon. With the half marathon, a lot less training, you get to that goal, you finish and it's a stepping stone to the marathon. Half marathon still has a nice ring to it. It's not as prestigious as saying, 'I've done a marathon' but still a good goal."

Another angle that can't be dismissed is that half marathons are going to draw more runners than marathons. "(There are) a lot of new half marathons and the ones that are there are getting more people than ever," said the 'Oracle'. The primary example is the Mystic Marathon. Or should I say, 'was' the Mystic Marathon. Although the East Lyme marathon had very good numbers over the past few years, it was dumped to make way for the Niantic Bay Half Marathon. "Mystic Places Marathon did do fairly well with 550 - 900 finishers annually," said Event Director John Bysiewicz. "With relay and other races (we) usually had 1600- 1900 entrants. People run one or two marathons a year. They can run three or four half marathons a year. In the long run I believe we will get more participants in the half marathon than we get in the marathon." Salem's race director Brandi Dion reinforces that strategy. "I also think people want more options," she said. "Runners will travel for this size race and yes, you draw more people that don't want to do fulls. So they are a great distance where your body doesn't get as beat up but is still a great challenge."

The marathon/half marathon scenario is not unlike what we saw decades ago when 10K races were displaced by 5K's. People were looking for less. Call it Marathon Lite.

As usual the 'Oracle' is always the first to spot a trend but wait, he's not finished. "...there are more women than ever entering the sport of running." Well ... let's leave that one for another time.

^Footnotes - Race director Rich Katno wants to remind everyone that the Crackerbarrel 5K is a week from Saturday, Sept. 15 at 9 a.m.; this will be Katno's 26th year directing the race ...What's the most popular race in North Attleboro? It's not Kid's Day nor the Runaways Five Miler but the new Butterfly 5K; held last month for the first time it had 264 finishers; it was especially popular with the Rhode Island fleet of feet; North Kingston's Eric Longeran won in 16:05; Heather Crosby, a Providence resident who recently moved there from Connecticut, took the women's race in 18:30 ... Congratulations to Milford's Larry Olsen, who will be inducted into the King Philip Athletics Hall of Fame in November; the Norfolk native and Class of '64 is still out there winning his sixty year old age group category ...