

Rob Rose - 5/17/07

I was awake late one night recently, thumbing through a copy of New England Runner, inexplicably restless, waiting for sleep. At that hour, concentration is at a premium, so I spent the time focusing on the pictures, waiting to alight on something interesting. What first caught my eye was a full page ad for the Cape Cod Marathon on the inside front cover. Amongst the usual information was the proclamation that this year would be their 30th anniversary. A couple of pages later was an ad for the 30th anniversary Philadelphia Distance Run. Another few pages and there was the New Bedford Half Marathon 30th anniversary race listing. Pattern?

Races that have hit thirty years have been cropping up this year. Last month I ran the Seagull Six in Woods Hole on their 30th anniversary. Next month, the Milton 10K makes the grade. In July, the Paul White Road Race and the Harvard July 4th race will join. Others have already landed. Two weeks ago, the Attleboro Y races had their 31st rendition and in February, the Amherst ten did 33. As I continued to flip pages during my restive period that night, I saw ads for the July 4 Mattapoissett 5 Mile (37 years), Run Around the Block (32 years), Bedford (NH) Rotary 12K (33 years), Bunker Hill 8K (39 years) and Fairhaven 10K (33 years).

All these races are a legacy of the running phenomenon and the baby boomer generation that ignited it. They all had their genesis in the mid to late 1970's not long after Frank Shorter won the '72 Olympic Marathon. That resonated with a very large population of people in their 20's, who for various reasons, became fitness disciples through running. Even as their numbers have declined over the decades, they still provide a significant portion of the race attendance for these events.

Ten years ago, I wrote a column extolling the fact that a number of races had made it to the twenty year milestone. 'The significance is that road racing has come of age', I wrote on June 17, 1997. 'It has begun to pass from a trend, a fad, a short lived anomaly to something that has longevity and a burgeoning traditionRoad racing has arrived and is stable, but the future? ' As I look back on that column, the most encouraging sign is that all the races that I cited, New Bedford, Gaspee Days, Attleboro Y, Cape Cod, Bristol 10 are still vibrant and going strong. Even the Sharon Road Race has carried on; this year will be their 42nd running. Sharon is a one-man show, directed by Mike Sherman, who has been seeking his replacement for almost a decade.

I can't help contrast these events of enduring stature with some of the races that occupy the mid-May calendar. Let me clarify that used to occupy the mid-May calendar. This coming weekend has, in the past, been the most congested one of the year. There were 16 in close proximity to the Attleboro area

last year. With so much competition, there have been casualties, thus the Dead Race Society has enrolled many new members. The Chef's Classic 10K in Sharon, the Dover Police Chase 5 Mile, the American Red Cross Donor Dash, the Kyle Conlon Memorial 5K, the St. Judes Children's Research Hospital 5K and the Doug Flutie 5K were all held a year ago this weekend and will not be back in 2007. The Flutie 5K had fields of over a 1000 runners in prior years.

Why do some survive and others don't? Just about every 5K that surfaces these days is a fund-raiser and many times the organizing force is a single individual. It may last a few years but over time, the emotions subside and so does the zeal to keep it going.

What is gradually occurring is that these thirty year races have become an integral part of a town's lifestyle. All of them have achieved a stature where people look forward to their occurrence every year in addition to instilling hometown pride. Think of Arnold Mills (39 years) on the Fourth of July. Races with four digit fields, such as the Cape Cod Marathon and the New Bedford Half may even reap financial benefits for their respective towns. If these races survive another generation or two, will town Historical Commissions mandate that they are irreplaceable historic and cultural events that need to be preserved? Something to cogitate on.

As I flip through the magazine, thinking about all this, I find it comforting to know that these races will probably still be around in another ten years and longer. That's gotta help one sleep.