

Rob Rose Column - 9/20/2007

A recent news feature on the radio, got me thinking about Jack Kerouac, the iconoclastic writer of the 1950's Beat Generation. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of Kerouac's 'On the Road'. Despite the title, it's not about running. The seminal novel depicted a counter culture movement that embraced a non-materialistic, nomadic lifestyle that rejected the norms and values of the era.

So what does Kerouac have to do with running? For the past three years, there has been a Kerouac 5K held in his home town of Lowell and a week from Sunday, they're going to hold it again..

I find it an interesting dichotomy that the anti-establishment author, who abused his body and died prematurely at the age of 47, would be honored with a physical fitness event. But the aspect of the Kerouac race that I find the most baffling is that it is a 5K. Is there anything more conventional than a 5K? I can't visualize Kerouac, if he were a runner, choosing a 5K. I suspect that he would go against the grain and avoid races that have mass appeal. There are a lot of high profile, popular races out there and I tried to picture what would one do if one adopted a Kerouac viewpoint in regard to these very prestigious events. What are the races and What Would Jack Kerouac Do? (WWJKD?)

Boston Marathon (April) - The Boston Marathon is a culture unto itself and for many, no other marathon exists. In New England, if you're going to do only one marathon, it isn't going to be Hartford. WWJKD? Probably would jump into the race as a bandit. B.A.A. officials really don't like bandits.

Falmouth Road Race (Aug.) - This summer classic has 9,500 entrants and about twice as many who would want to get in. It is so popular that non-runners slog through it because it is such a big Cape event. WWJKD? He would probably go west the day before and run the Bridge of Flowers 10K in rustic Shelburn Falls. This race has a horrific hill early in the race and hills have become passe to most race directors. Hills would make runners suffer and might make people stay away. Hills are anti-establishment.

CVS Downtown 5K (Sept.) - A flat, fast 5K in Providence with 4,000 runners, world class athletes and downtown parking? I don't think so. WWJKD? Perhaps he would go north to run the Nahant 30K, a low budget marathon prep race. Or maybe he would go to Dighton the day before to run the D-R Olympian 10K. Of course, the D-R race has been defunct for a couple of years but that wouldn't deter him from running the course in solitude.

B.A.A. Half Marathon (Oct.) - This is another of those races

where demand exceeds supply. It opens registration in July and within a month, the 4500 runner field is filled. In its early years, the course went through Fenway Park so it now has cachet. WWJKD? Perhaps he would go to Plainville and tackle the Fuller St. hill or head to Rhode Island for the Newport Half Marathon. Any place that doesn't have cachet.

Covered Bridges Half Marathon (June) - This is the race where runners get on the internet six months before the race to register. Internet? Kerouac eschewed a typewriter and wrote 'On the Road' by hand on a long scroll of paper. Don't think the internet fits the mold here. Any Turkey Trot (Thanksgiving) - There's probably some Thanksgiving race within a ten mile radius of where you live. WWJKD? The Pine Bough Turkey Trot in North Attleboro is low key with about thirty runners operating out of a garage for the seven mile course. Kerouac would certainly try to win the blueberry ale raffle prize.

James Joyce Ramble 10K (April) - A race for a fellow renowned writer? Probably not. This race is a spectacle with people reading passages from Joyce along the course. WWJKD? He wouldn't be here. He probably couldn't decipher 'Ulysses' either.

These races carry an aura of exclusivity and often privilege and a Kerouac attitude is sometimes necessary to put things into perspective. It's not the end of the world if you can't get into the Marine Corps Marathon. Just think WWJKD?

Footnotes - Last Saturday's Crackerbarrel 5K, with 154 finishers, had its lowest race attendance in probably a decade; the race used to draw 300 runners as recently as five years ago; the race day rainy weather probably contributed to the diminished turnout but one has to wonder whether the crowded mid September race calendar is pulling away old customers ... the Jenny Run for RadKids 5K, which was held in Norfolk last October, won't happen this year; per race director Karen Nardone, the race will relocate to the spring ... the Wrentham Wroad Wrace, held earlier this month, had the fastest performance for a local 5K this year. Dylan Wykes of Providence, RI, smoked the Taunton St. out and back course in 15:24; Taryn Sieger of Lunenburg won the women's race in 18:07; On the same day, 23 runners assembled for the Wrentham Forest 20K trail race, Chad Carr of Cambridge took the race in 1:38:33 and North Attleboro's Anne Marie McGrail was the women's winner in 2:16:13 ...