

Rob Rose - 5/31/07

Does anyone remember Ro-Jack's? I find it difficult to comprehend that four years have passed since the Ro-Jack's races were held at Attleboro High School. In it's halcyon years it drew a thousand runners in the five mile race and a couple hundred in the two mile. The first Sunday in October was always the epicenter for New England running as world class runners and the best of New England came here to compete. That event lasted 13 years and it reigned supreme amongst all the local races. So .. who reigns supreme now?

The Old Fashioned 10 Miler in February draws very good fields, approximately 400 for the 10 mile and 100 for their 5K. The November Billy Kelly races in Mansfield had a great year in 2006, pulling in 352 runners for their 5K and 185 for the five mile. But quietly, with very little notice, one race has become the Ro-Jack's heir, drawing the most runners for a single race for the past four years. That race, which will be held for the seventh time this Saturday, is the Foxboro Against Diabetes 5K.

You could have lost a lot of money betting that the Foxboro Diabetes 5K would never have made it to its current position based on the morning of their first race. June 2, 2001 came in with torrential rains and as I drove over to Foxboro that morning, I expected that there would be a lot of T-shirts left over that day. But the skies cleared, Foxboro's Bill Spierdowis won the race and 369 people eventually crossed the finish line. Every year since then, the numbers have been big with last year's field reaching 582.

Foxboro undoubtedly musters support for this race from all segments of their community but one surprising demographic of support comes from their elementary school population. According to Foxboro's Julie Foley, there will be 40 third and fourth graders representing the three elementary schools (Burrell, Igo and Taylor) on Saturday. Foley, with Gail Smiley and physical education teacher Greg McManus, started the Burrell Running Club in 2000 in order to prepare the youngsters for the race. "Betsy Auchoin, the physical education teacher at the Taylor School, already had a running group in place and was training her students to run the race," said Foley, a 2006 Boston Marathon finisher. "We all felt this race would be a wonderful community service event to get the kids involved but felt they would be more successful with some type of training."

For the six weeks prior to the race, the Burrell Running Club meets on Tuesday and Thursday mornings to steel their bodies for their big day. "We begin with some warm-ups, do some distance running and end with some sprints," Foley said of the students' program. "We have kids of all different abilities and encourage them to set their own goals and improve their fitness level over the course of six weeks."

The 5K would seem to be a daunting distance for those so young but Foley says that they handle it with aplomb. "Most of the kids have no clue how far three miles is to run," she said. "Despite our advice on pacing, many still employ the sprint-walk strategy throughout the race and still do quite well. Over the past seven years, there have been numerous elementary school kids who place in the top three, 18 and under group."

With so many kids participating, inevitably parents and grandparents follow. "Many families join their children in the race and they do comprise some of those walkers at the end of the race," said Foley. "I think the elementary schools' presence at the race brings a sense of community pride with it but more importantly conveys the message that the kids want to help fight a disease they are all familiar with."

The Foxboro running clubs get copious encouragement from the schools and the race directors. The students will all be wearing T-shirts that proclaim allegiance to their particular schools, the cost of which the Foxboro PTOs incur. Race directors John Hurley and Rich Noonan discount the entry fee for the students.

Hopefully, the Foxboro experience can be an incubator that will provide kids with a fulfilling activity that they can carry into adulthood. Foley believes that is already happening. "I feel exposing the kids to running has helped some of them come to love the sport," she said. Now she is working with middle school students and will have 15 of those students at Saturday's race. "Many of them have run it before," she said. "Last week we joined the high school track practice for a half hour and it was fun to see a few of the kids who had actually started at the Burrell!"

Remember Ro-Jack's? That was the past. In Foxboro, the future of running may be on the roads on Saturday.

Footnotes - Seekonk's Mike Dutra, a veteran of many Boston Marathons, will be performing his 'Strictly Sinatra' act at Luciano's in Wrentham on July 13 and 27; the word is that he is very good ... after 17 years, the Marathon Sports 5 Miler has moved from Wellesley to Weston; this year's race is on July 12 ... for those who need a fall marathon tune-up race, there's a new half marathon in Salem on Sept. 29; details on the 'Wicked' Half Marathon are at www.BnSfitness.com ... for those looking for a New England November marathon, one has arrived; the Manchester (NH) City Marathon will be held on Sunday, Nov. 4; check out www.cityofmanchestermarathon.com for more info ...