

Rob Rose - 6/28/07

The bonding moment came as we sat in the Old Tyme Tavern in downtown Clinton, shortly after the mid May Clinton Tribute five miler had concluded. The four of us were sitting in a booth, ready to order lunch, waiting for the awards ceremony to begin. Mansfield's Keith 'Bro' Purrier, without a glance at the menu, ordered a cheeseburger and mashed potatoes. Mansfield's Don Burke and Mike Ferrari quickly followed with the same. I completed the straight and thus the 'Bro' Brotherhood was formed. That's what happens when you compete in the Hockomock Swamp Rat Grand Prix Series. It gives everyone a single minded purpose with perhaps a touch of obsession.

The Hockomock Swamp Rat Grand Prix is a series, contested every three years, that features the purported toughest twenty races in New England during the span of a year. It was devised by Peter Wallan, the publisher of the sponsoring running magazine, the Hockomock Swamp Rat. The races range from four miles to the marathon with a liberal sprinkling of double digit events. Last July, Purrier, Burke, Ferrari and myself embarked on it by running Khoury's Summer Steamer in Somerville. We have traveled together to Gloucester, Norfolk, Ct., Wilton, NH, Monson, Northfield, Amherst and many other locales in our year long journey. The series concluded in Montpelier, Vt. last Saturday.

The Mansfield trio were amongst the Swamp Rat heads of state, ranking amongst the top performers. Burke was sixth, Ferrari eighth and Purrier nineteenth going into the final race. These guys are tough! All three ran Boston, Ferrari ran four marathons during the year and Purrier ran Mt. Washington. If Burke had not missed the Marshfield 20K, he would have won the series.

Although Burke is a veteran of three previous Rat Grand Prix, the others were undertaking their first. Ferrari needed to sample the fare before committing.

"At first glance I was opposed to doing the series," said Ferrari. "Looking at the monster races like Stu's, Cape Ann, Derry and two New Hampshire marathons on six days rest seemed like an invitation to injury. At the last minute I decided to do Somerville and Lowell. After Lowell I was hooked. I liked what I saw in the camaraderie. There were no big egos and everyone was having a good time. There wasn't the standard cliques of runners that show up at the alleged 'showcase' events. I also made a lot of friends in the series which was very easy to do. No club Grand Prix or association Grand Prix compares. Most pale in comparison."

Burke keeps coming back series after series. "You get to run courses that you wouldn't run," he said. "Getting to meet runners from all over New England. These are people I wouldn't have met normally but because of the shared goals they become friends. It's like getting together with your home club but all

over New England."

The gilt that everyone pursues in the series is placing in the top 35. The coveted Swamp Rat embroidered patch goes to those 35 and an invitation to the series-ending gathering. I finished 40th so I won't be in Ashburnham when the supreme Rats collect on July 14. My memories of the series include watching Purrier pull off his running shorts and putting on underwear on a Somerville residential street while shielding himself with a towel. That takes talent! The Monson half marathon in a driving rain, the crunch of snow under my feet running a gravel road in a pine forest at the Amherst 10; winning a flower planter at the Clinton Tribute raffle, the day before Mother's Day; the unearthly climb to the top of Mt Monadnock; having a lens pop out of my eyeglasses on a Haverhill street, picking it up and finishing the Bobby Bell Five in a visual blur; the two horses that escaped from a meadow in Montpelier then gamboled amidst the runners as they made their bid for freedom. Going up a hill and down another; that was the perpetual HSR theme.

By the time June arrived, most of the Rat cognoscenti publicly expressed their relief that the series was coming to its conclusion, including myself. But as I hit the nine mile mark at Montpelier, my thought was one of regret that it was over. I will miss my appointments with the familiar faces and unfamiliar places. I'm sure that everyone feels the same.

The next Rat Series begins in July 2009 and HSR subscribers will once again congregate in Somerville for another round. Old Rats will welcome New Rats. Old Rats will compete with New Rats. Old Rats will save a space for New Rats in the cozy confines of the Old Tyme Tavern in Clinton.

Footnotes - Six local runners summited Mt. Washington at the 7.6 mile mountain climb a week ago Saturday; Wrentham's Kirk Bogardus was the top local, finishing in 1:41:23; Mansfield's Keith Purrier finished in 1:55:10, Plainville's Ron Farkash in 1:44:41 and Seekonk's Scott Harris (1:44:18), Matt Ganz (1:48:19) and Frederick MacDonald (1:53:51) ... the United Challenge, a 5K held for the first time in Franklin last June, has been canceled per race director Shannon Reeve ... the Whirlaway 10K, a late June race held in Methuen for the past few years, has also gone by the wayside; that race had been a USATF-NE championship for a few years ... Raynham's Jim Dupont will be running four races on July 4; the Hingham 4.6 mile (7 a.m.), the Norwell Five (9:30 a.m.), the Norwood 5K (5 p.m.) and the Swamp Rat Summer Series 3.75 Mile (6:45 p.m.); I can assure you that if they could squeeze a couple more races in the middle of the day, Dupont would be there ...