

THE HISTORY OF ORGANIZED RUNNING IN OMAHA – PART IV

The first marathon in Omaha was held in 1974 and it was the brainchild of Herb Rhoades. A former star middle distance runner at Omaha University, Herb organized the first marathon as a project for the Omaha Jaycees. His motivation was unique – he wanted to provide an opportunity to send a top Midwest runner to the Boston Marathon. With the growing popularity of jogging, Boston was viewed as the “ultimate running experience”. But for most local runners, the cost put the trip out of reach. So with a core group that included Ray Smith, John Hawkins and Elliott Evans – the Omaha Marathon was created as a way to get the winner an expense paid trip to compete at Boston.

The original course started in downtown Omaha and made its way north – through the Ponca Hills area. The intent was to have a fast, flat course for the runners. The first race drew 80 runners with Cliff Karthausser winning the event in 2 hours and 31 minutes.

Although the course was runner friendly, the weather was another story. Until the early 1980’s, the marathon was held in August or early September. Dick Burrows, who completed the first 22 Omaha marathons, said weather was usually a factor. With the August dates, heat and humidity was a problem. In fact, at the starting line in 1979, the temperature was 77 degrees and the humidity was 77% -- and this was at 6:00 AM. Later, when the race was moved to November – ice storms, wind and rain could make things difficult.

The name of the marathon would change over the years – typically when a new race director would take over. Originally dubbed the Omaha Jaycees Marathon, the name was shortened to the Omaha Marathon in 1975.

Herb Rhoades remained the chairman and the Jaycees were the chief sponsor as the event continued to grow in popularity. There were 129 finishers in 1975, 150 in 1976, and in 1978 – 559 finished the event.

The Plains Track Club became more involved in the marathon in 1978 – and by 1981, the Jaycees were pretty much out of the picture. With Kathy Loper as the new race director, the event became the Omaha Riverfront Marathon. The year 1981 was also significant because the race date was moved from September to November. In 1983, John Thomas would become the race co-director with Kathy. John then had full responsibility for the Riverfront Marathon from 1984 until 1991.

During the 70’s and 80’s, the course evolved as well. In 1980, road construction caused the marathon to be moved to the Westroads – but other than that, downtown and the area north remained the heart of the course. The starting line originally was at the Civic Auditorium – but would move for a few years to 13th and Capital to promote one of the sponsors – Hauffs Sporting Goods.

The residents of Ponca Hills were originally supportive of having the marathon wind through their neighborhood – and would often be out on the course with water and hoses to cool the runners. But later, complaints from residents about traffic restrictions would force organizers to shorten the Ponca Hills portion – and instead wind the course around the backside of the airport. These changes also required the runners to navigate a steep hill on Capital Avenue shortly before the finish.

The finish line would also change throughout the years. From downtown Omaha, to the front of the Civic Auditorium, to actually finishing inside the Civic Auditorium.

Another major change for the Omaha Riverfront Marathon was in 1986. The 1985 event had a record 826 finishers – and marathon participation nationwide was continuing to grow. But in 1986, the number of finishers dropped almost 50% to 427. Race director John Thomas blamed the growing interest in major marathons in big cities. Running Chicago or New York was in vogue – and Omaha was becoming more of a regional event with limited local appeal. So a 10K was added to the event lineup. This not only attracted those who were not interested in running a full marathon – but also those families where one person might be interested in a marathon and another in a shorter event.

No other road race in Omaha has attracted as much publicity as the marathon. If you search through the archives, you will find many Omaha World Herald stories both leading up to the marathon – and recapping the results. Typical coverage would include an interview with the race director (discussing the event and the top competitors), a map of the course, and generally a human-interest story about one or more of the competitors. Following the race, the results of the top finishers and an interview with the winners were common. But in the early years, coverage was much more extensive. Articles would include short BIOS's and pictures of the top local competitors in the race. In 1983, a year when there were 787 finishers, an entire page was devoted to a listing of everyone who completed the race – their name, time, and hometown.

In 1991, John Thomas turned over race director responsibilities to Gary Meyer. Gary added team competition to help fuel interest in the event – and the marathon continued to be a regional favorite. But in 1997, a brutal ice storm caused the race to change to a half-marathon. And for the second time in five years, November weather was a major disruption. Big city marathons were growing, small regional marathons were struggling – and unpredictable weather was flagging interest in Omaha. Sponsorship became an issue and in 1998 – there was no marathon.

Peak Performance was able to land a major sponsor in 1999 by combining the marathon with Joslyn Art Museums Summer festival. Dubbed the Arts on the Green Marathon, the marathon was back in business. The course, though, took on major changes, and actually included a trip across the Missouri River and a visit to Lake Manawa. To coincide with the Arts Festival, the event was again moved back to August. A half-marathon was added to the mix to increase participation – but Joslyn's support ended and the Arts on the Green Marathon was history.

Susie Smisek rekindled the marathon in 2003 – and has done an excellent job. She has gathered the sponsors and community support to continue an Omaha tradition. The event now includes the marathon, a half marathon, and a 10K. A glance at the Omaha Marathon website reveals a lot of work and organization.

The Omaha Running Club has long been a sponsor of the marathon and provided technical support – but it is basically an entrepreneurial project taken on by a dedicated race director (you could call him/her an owner/risk taker) and a committee of volunteers. It takes a tremendous amount of work and coordination to pull off a 26.2 mile event. John Thomas estimated that when he directed the event – he put in 20 hours per week – year around – to make things happen on race day.

Omaha is lucky that we have had individuals who took the time and effort to put together an event that 1) drew people to our city – and 2) offered local runners a chance to try their luck at a marathon.

Lou Soukup