

THE HISTORY OF RUNNING IN OMAHA – PART VI

We have running clubs in two metropolitan communities that are roughly forty miles apart. If you are reading this newsletter, you are obviously familiar with the Omaha Running Club. The ORC supports running in a community where there are typically 50 or more road races each year. The Lincoln Track Club supports running in a community where there are typically about 12 races each year.

A closer look at these events shows the different role these two running clubs perform in their community. In Lincoln, the LTC plays a major role in nearly every road race. From the entry forms, to the awards, to course measurement, and the finish line – LTC is involved. Each event has financial support and volunteers from various sponsors – but the actual race itself is clearly the product of the Lincoln Track Club.

In Omaha, the running club plays a different role. There are actually only a few races each year that are clearly ORC events. These would be the **Chiller Challenge**, **Lake Wehrspan Run**, and lately -- some theme oriented fun runs. For some of the other major events in Omaha, ORC is hired to provide course measurement, finish line support and scoring. These would include the **Boystown Run**, **Corporate Cup**, the **Omaha Marathon** and **Race For a Cure**. Other race organizers simply rent the finish line equipment (and someone to man the finish line) from the ORC. The **Judicata Run**, **YMCA Masters Run**, and **Make-A-Wish Run** are examples where we take care of the finish line – but the rest of the work is up to the sponsor. There are also many races in the Omaha area that “go it alone” – and ORC is not involved at all.

Omaha’s decentralized approach goes back to the early days of the jogging boom. The early leaders in the Plains Track Club were serious competitors. They organized events so they could run in them. Between the runners and their families, they pretty much got the work done themselves. But as the events grew larger, the need for more and more volunteers became evident. John Thomas, one of the early runner/volunteers, says it became apparent early on that large races required lots of volunteers – and volunteers burn out fairly quickly. Putting on races was simply not something the club could do week-in and week-out.

But as the events grew larger, more organizations became intrigued at the fund-raising and publicity possibilities a road race would bring. Although the club did not have the resources to put on the many events that organizations were proposing – there were club members who were willing to provide expertise and support. And so the decentralized nature of organized running in Omaha was established. The Plains Track Club would put on several races a year – and the club would also support running in the community by providing expertise to anyone else who wanted to put on an event.

And as the number of events grew, the expectations of the runners grew as well. Runners looked for quality events. They expected an accurate course, they wanted to know their time when they finished, and they wanted race results. So the ORC saw an opportunity – it could rent out the clock. But the early clocks were complex and fragile – so along with

the clock – the organizer would also get someone to set-up the clock, and also enter times on a device called a chronomix. This could be used to help the organizer develop fairly accurate race results.

But some organizations wanted more than advice or a clock – they wanted someone to actually lead the effort and take care of the details. So the professional race director was established. For a fee, a group could hire someone with the expertise to completely organize the race. Course layout, measurement, parade permits, awards, and volunteer assignments would all be handled by someone who knew what they were doing. Meanwhile, the sponsor would provide the volunteers and shirts. Kathy Loper was one of the first professional race directors in the Omaha area. Kathy put on some major events such as the **Creighton Run**. But in 1984, she moved to the west coast where she could organize events full time. Today, race organizing is big business for Kathy. She (www.kathylopererevents.com) organizes dozens of races, mainly in southern California – but also sponsors tours to marathons in exotic places like Cambodia, Beijing (Great Wall Marathon) and Tanzania (Kilaminjaro Marathon).

Probably the most active race directors in the Omaha area were Ron Olson and Chuck Cooper. These guys not only knew how to put on a first-class event – they were also well-connected in the running community and were quintessential promoters. This made them particularly attractive to organizations and sponsors because they were able to draw large numbers to their events -- as well as many high-caliber competitors.

Chuck Cooper is probably best known for the **Festival of Races**. The Festival offered runners a choice of several distances from one-mile to a half-marathon. Chucks vision was to have a major event similar to the **Bix Festival** in Davenport, IA. Besides the road races, Chuck would bring in a guest speaker/runner such as Priscilla Welsch, Frank Shorter, or Bill Rogers. After the race, there was live music. Over its five-year run in downtown Omaha, the Festival was very popular with participation peaking at 1,700 runners. However, most of the runs that Chuck put together were true fundraisers with all proceeds going to a specific cause. Over the years, Chuck raised over \$35,000 which went directly to groups like Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Bethage Foundation, and Mad Dads.

Ron Olson got his start directing races in the late 80's – and over an eight year period, he averaged two-to-three events per month during the busy road race season. Among his more popular races were the **Miracle Hills Run** and the **Literacy Run**. At these events, Ron would have a 1-mile, 2-mile, and 5-mile race. The 1-mile was downhill – and participants could enter it, as well as one of the other races. Ron also introduced the Clydesdale Division to Omaha – which he said attracted many surprisingly fast weightlifters who otherwise wouldn't have entered a competitive running event. Ron's races included unique and elaborate medals or trophies. Although sponsors sometimes balked at his \$600-\$700 award budget, Ron insisted that nice hardware attracted runners. And he was right. His events typically had between 300 to 700 participants and were very profitable. One of his favorite events was a fundraiser 10K for Senator Bob Kerry. Ron

raised over \$3,000 for the Democrats re-election with a heavy contingent of Republican runners.

Omaha has been lucky to have people like Chuck Cooper and Ron Olson to help put together so many excellent events. Other dedicated volunteers such as Mick Freeman and Craig Christians have also put together literally hundreds of events over the years. But in 1994, another key player entered the Omaha running scene. Mike Ewoldt and his brother opened their first Peak Performance Store.

Lou Soukup