

## History of Running in Omaha – Part XI

For part eleven, I am going to share my own thoughts on the running scene in Omaha – and how it has changed over the years. I started running in 1983 under the assumption it would help me quit smoking. It did. If you asked some of my non-running friends, they would say that I gave up one addiction and traded it for another. There may be some truth to that. As of this date, I have completed 1,196 road races. The last year that I competed in less than 50 road races was 1989. That year I completed 49. The preceding two years, I completed 48. To prove that I have actually done something like that, my office is cluttered with 889 medals and trophies that I accumulated over that stretch. I guess there is some truth to Woody Allen’s classic line that “90 percent of success is just showing up”. Anyway, here is what I have observed over the last 23 years..

### The State of Running in Omaha

**1980’s:** The jogging fad was just taking off about the time I started running. Jim Fix’s book had been on the best seller list for a couple of years – and running was the “in” thing to do. Because of that, road races attracted a lot of runners. I don’t like to stereotype people who were running in those days, but I know that many of my coworkers who started jogging were doing it mainly because it was the cool thing to do. But let’s face it, although many of us have made running a part of our life – running is not really a fun thing to do for most people. Most of the time, it is either hot, or cold. It is either raining, icy, or the wind is blowing. There are always aches and pains. And many of the joggers of the 80’s discovered that fairly quickly. Getting up early on a Sunday morning and paying an entry fee to go outside and run didn’t seem like that great of an idea – particularly after you already had a collection of t-shirts.

**NOW:** I get the sense from most of the people that I see at races that they are running because they simply enjoy it. This is particularly true of the ladies. In the 80’s, many of the women who started jogging had never really run before. Women’s sports didn’t really take off until the 80’s. Most baby boomer women (and older) did not have the opportunity to run cross-country or track. Today, most of the young female runners actually ran in high school. They had fun running cross-country. They know how good it feels to be in shape. And they may even enjoy the competitive and social aspects of running as well.

### Competition

For whatever reason, men were a lot faster in the 1980’s and even 1990’s than they are today – and I think this is true for all age groups. In 1987, I ran a 37:42 at Lake Manawa and finished 23<sup>rd</sup> overall – and 11th in my age group. The last few years, that kind of time might win the race on some weekends. How about women – are they getting faster? Based on my research, I would say yes. One race that can be used for comparison purposes is the Boystown Memorial Day Run. In 1988, the fastest women ran a 34:15. There were only two women under 35:00. In 2005, however, the fastest female was 30:56 -- and there were 12 female finishers under 35:00.

## **ORC Leadership**

As I've recounted in other ORC History articles – the running club was founded by a group of very competitive runners. The only way they could find a race – was to put it on themselves. When I first joined the ORC Board, the leaders were pretty burned out. All the club really did in the early days was put on races – and they were big events with lots of people. That took a lot of time and energy. Many of those early leaders worried that if they quit, nobody would pick up the slack. I remember one of those early meetings where the President was lamenting about what would we do with clock if he quit. And quite frankly, that was really the only asset we had at that time. But others have stepped in over the years – and the priorities have changed. Today, the ORC is committed to reaching out to the running community. The club doesn't put on a lot of races – but they are willing to help anyone who wants to put on an event. The club does sponsor a lot of fun runs. These are themed events, non-competitive – with no entry fee. And the club meetings are different. In the early days, we debated awards for the top finishers – today the discussion focuses on how to reach new runners and tell them about the club.

## **Other Observations**

Entry Fees are a lot higher than they used to be. You could argue that inflation would predict that – but in the 1980's you could enter most races for five to eight dollars. Ten dollars was an extremely high entry fee. In that regard, entry fees appear to have outpaced inflation. Oddly enough, even with the low entry fees, runners expected more for their money in the old days. Most race directors mailed out the results of the race. There was no internet or websites to post results. Entry forms were mailed out, for the most part. T-shirts were mandatory. Most people wouldn't enter a race if they didn't get a shirt. Not that I want them, but today less than half of the races I enter have T-shirts. And in the old days, most races had fruit and some type of soda for an after race snack. One positive difference, in the old days you never found free beer at an awards ceremony like you sometimes do today.

Even though the races were bigger during the running boom – there are more races today. And the expectations are different. Race directors put on a race to draw attention to their cause, and they don't really do it to make money. It used to be hard to find 50 races a year. Now it is easy.

The race scene in Omaha is still fun. But what I miss the most is the lack of any true characters. I won't name them all, but Crazy Leonard is a great example. For years, anyone who ran a race in the Omaha area knew who Leonard Vavra was. Maybe they didn't know his name, but they could describe him. He never hid his enthusiasm and he was a treat to be around. Long distance runners usually march to their own beat – especially the fast ones. And if you talk to any of the old timers, they can tell you some stories about interesting characters who dominated the running scene at one time or another. Today, everyone pretty much blends in.

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