

The History of Organized Running in Omaha – Part II

It all started with the Elmwood Park Track Club. “Meet at the big tree”. That was what the ad Ken Gould placed in the *Omaha World Herald* said. Anyone who liked to run and wanted to join a track club was welcome. Today’s running club with the Holiday Lights Fun Run and the Couples Relay is the antithesis of what was started back in 1963.

The early pioneers of organized running in Omaha were fast. And they were serious competitors. They had big goals. The initial group, which included track stars such as Tim Hendricks, Greg Carlberg and Elliot Evans, were training for events like the Pan Am Games, World Cross Country Championships, and the Olympic Trials. They needed fast guys to push them harder – and they recruited local college and high school distance runners to join them for their nightly training runs – typically 10 miles. Word spread. And the training sessions ended up being a “Who’s Who” of local runners. Even former NU/NFL football star Joe Orduna would show up occasionally to work out with the best.

Later, the group would call themselves the UNO Track Club. Jim McMahon, a key figure in the early 70’s, was the UNO track coach. And he would get the club into the UNO field house so they could train and compete indoors during the winter. The club would work UNO track and field meets, and in return get to use the track to host their own all-comers meets.

But there were also non-UNO runners. The impetus for a name change came in 1973 when the club decided to enter a team in the national AAU cross country meet. The team included runners not only from Omaha but places like Lincoln, Columbus, and Peru State. So the new name -- Plains Track Club, would better describe the actual membership base. Elliot Evans would design the logo based on Chimney Rock in western Nebraska. New singlets were ordered. Yellow and blue became the new club colors – and the original green/yellow design became history. Dick Orr wrote the first newsletter. And the club started charging dues.

Marathons were in vogue – and the Plains Track Club was well represented in events like the Tri States Marathon and the Heartland of America Marathon. Lou Fritz, a key figure in the club’s early days hosted the Tri States Marathon in Falls City, Nebraska. The course was notorious -- not only for being 26.2 miles long – but also for its layout. Sweeping through three states, the course was made up of continuous steep hills.

But the Plains Track Club (PTC) finest moment came in 1975 when it broke the USA record for a 24-hour relay. The club hosted the event at the UNO track. There were several 10-person teams entered – but the PTC team stole the show. Each person would run one mile – and then pass the baton to a teammate. Over the course of 24 hours, the PTC team averaged 4:46 per mile. There was a large crowd that turned out to watch the finish of the event and the bleachers were three-quarters full. There was one humorous footnote to this event that everyone who participated will likely never forget. Although PTC had reserved the track from UNO well in advance, the 24-hour nature of the event created an unforeseen oversight. The event started on one day – but it actually finished

on the next -- something the UNO administration had not considered when they filled in their calendar. Thus, the relay was about to conclude at roughly the same time the Omaha Mustangs professional football team was starting a game. A heated exchange ensued between the Mustangs owner and the relay meet director -- John Hawkins. The Mustangs said they would let the relay finish if all the participants and spectators bought a ticket to the football game. Naturally, that didn't sit well with the runners. Finally, UNO athletic director, Don Leahy, was brought in to mediate a peaceful resolution -- and the relay meet was concluded as planned.

The Plains Track Club also started to branch off into road races. Road racing was becoming popular and they were easier to put together than track meets. You didn't need a lot of volunteers in the early days. The clubs first events were called river runs. The ten-mile out-and-back course would start at the monument on Pershing Drive and proceed through Ponca Hills. Initially, there were only 10 to 15 runners. But the numbers would grow.

As road races became more popular and the number of participants grew, calling out times from a stopwatch was no longer practical. Overhead clocks were becoming popular in other cities. The first PTC clock was designed and built by some club members who were engineers for Northern Natural Gas. Utilizing actual light bulbs, the clock was so big and cumbersome that it required two people to carry it to and from the truck to the finish line. But it worked.

T-shirts were becoming a staple, so club president John Hawkins bought a silk screen/press and put it in his garage.. John says that nights before a race were hectic as he and other volunteers prepared the custom shirts for the next days event.

When talking to the pioneers of running in Omaha, one key difference from today stands out. In the early days, if you liked to compete -- you were inevitably involved in putting on the events. Runners planned the race -- and either they physically did the actual work on race day -- or their families did. Everyone was involved in one way another. The actual competitors took care of all the details -- from planning the event, calling out the times to finishers, and even putting out their own water bottles along the course. Today, most runners simply fill out an entry form, pay a fee, and show up on race day. It was that concept that brought about the next phase in organized running evolution.

The road race became a fundraiser. Different groups started organizing running events to make money. The group did the work, and the runner paid a fee. The group kept any profits, and sometimes, the race director collected a fee. With demand for events growing, money could be made promoting and organizing road races. Some of the early runners/volunteers were offended by this. Putting on races was a labor of love. You did the work because you loved running. You didn't worry about getting paid. But running was turning into a business. Road racing was becoming incredibly popular. And the simple days of running were gone. Putting on a race was more complex. Events started drawing hundreds and even thousands of participants.