

THE HISTORY OF ORGANIZED RUNNING IN OMAHA – PART III

The first organized road race in the Omaha area was actually held at Lake Manawa in Iowa. A Lewis Central High School coach by the name of Craig Neill came up with the idea of having something for his track and cross-country runners to do in the off season. He asked Council Bluffs Abraham Lincoln coach, Mick Freeman, if he would be interested in helping. As things turned out, Coach Neill had a class at UNO on Saturdays, and Mick ended up carrying the load for that inaugural event – and he is still directing the CB 13 and other Manawa events today. The interesting twist to this story – it wasn't just high school runners that showed up to run that initial event – or the bi-weekly series Mick later set up for winter months. The Manawa races turned out to be very popular with the older set. Of course, in those days, the older set was much younger. One of his age group brackets was “35 and older” – which was really considered “old” in those days.

The first CB13 was held in 1973 and included 28 participants. The race pretty much doubled in size each year for the next three years. In 1977, the CB13 peaked at 270 runners. The course went around the lake twice. Some things have changed – like the actual roads. But others haven't. Some of the original runners like Dick Burrows and Richard Orr are still regulars 31 years later.

Although the initial road races had a surprising number of older participants – high school runners were still better represented in both sheer numbers and competitive force than they are today. One of the more popular events was held by United Sporting Goods. The 10K course would make its way around the Westroads and through Regency. The race was held the day after the state track meet at Burke High – and many of the high school runners would stay over Saturday night and compete in the 10K on Sunday. Because high school track was (and is still) organized by class (class A, class B, etc.), many of the top runners never really got to compete with one another. Comparisons could only be based on times. The open road race format on Sunday allowed runners across classes to go head-to-head to see who was really the best. This was also the first time many of the high school competitors would run a 10 Kilometer event.

A few weeks later, the Amoco River Run would be held. This event was run on the Pershing Drive/NP Dodge Park course that was popular in the early days of the Plains Track Club. Both of these events drew large numbers and were a “must do” on everyone's calendars.

One other interesting note about those early races is that there were not many women participants. The first competitive events were predominately men. Frank Perrone, whom we'll discuss shortly, was the person most responsible for opening up the road-racing scene to women. In 1979, he held a 5K event at Westside High School called the Lady Runner – and it was open to women only. The Lady Runner became very popular – and allowed women to try out road racing without being intimidated by the male runners. With this initiation into competitive running – women started entering the weekend races to compete alongside the men. This also fueled the growth rate in road race participation.

Although there were not a lot of women running in the early road races – the ones that did were very fast. The late Jill Garlock was a tough competitor and a staple at local road races. Jill would go on to compete in the one of the first Iron Man Triathlons in Hawaii. Aside from the fact she was a top-notch competitor, many fondly remember the surprise

from the world class athletes in Hawaii when Jill showed up with her non-descript Huffly bicycle. Ann Schatz, a popular Omaha TV Sportscaster was also a regular who battled near the front of the pack – right along with the guys. The early Lady Runner events also attracted a group of high school girls that would later go on to the University of Nebraska and win national cross-country honors. One of them, Karlene Erickson was arguably the best female runner to ever come out of the Omaha/Lincoln area. Karlene was a top finisher at the 1984 Olympic Marathon Trials. That, incidentally, was the first year the women’s marathon event was held at the Summer Olympics. Karlene was winning major events such as the Amoco River Run at the ripe old age of 13.

Although there were many individuals who were instrumental in the evolution of competitive running in Omaha – perhaps no one had more influence than Frank Perrone. Although Frank was a regular competitor in the earliest of Omaha road races, he was also the person responsible for selling the other competitors their running shoes. Starting in 1976, Frank sold New Balance shoes out of the trunk of his car. He would go to the weekly workouts in Elmwood Park – and not only run – but also sell the other guys their shoes. He also sold shoes out of his basement where he maintained his inventory. Later Frank would become a partner in a chain of Sports Tred retail stores. The first specialty running stores in the Metro area.

Frank and his wife Trudi were also active in directing races. They were the co-founders of many of the traditional races in Omaha: They started the Boystown Run, the Zoo Run, the Cosmos Run, and they organized a number of holiday runs right out of their Sports Tred store on 132nd Street. Together with Mark Adamson they started the Corporate Cup Run. Frank was also the Assistant Director of the first Omaha Marathon. The Perrones were also the first race directors in the area to offer two race distances at the same event. So runners had an option to run a 2-mile or a 10K. This also helped fuel the running boom because now you could attract beginners – and others who lacked the training base or confidence to run 6.2 miles.

Meanwhile the Lincoln Track Club (LTC) was experiencing the same kind of growth in road race participation and interest. According to John Hawkins, the Lincoln running club was more organized than its Omaha counterpart. As we discussed in History part 2, the leaders of the Plains Track Club were mostly young runners who were just looking for others to challenge them in training runs and help them prepare for major national and international events. The Lincoln Track Club, however, was organized largely by a group of UNL Professors, such as Jim Lewis – a mathematics PHD. The leadership on the LTC was older and more experienced – and with that, a little more organized. But a look at the early newsletters shows that nearly every weekend – one of the two clubs (or both) was hosting an event.

It was definitely easy to find a road race in the late 70’s and early 80’s. Runners who showed up for a race would go home with a handful of brochures for upcoming events. Virtually every weekend there were multiple options for someone looking for a race. It seemed everyone was interested in either sponsoring or running in a road race. But by far, the most publicity for the running and racing boom came from the Omaha Marathon. In History part 4, we’ll talk about the evolution of the Omaha Marathon.