

Today, running is a mainstream activity. You can hardly read a newspaper or magazine without finding an article discussing obesity in America. The experts tell us exercise and diet are the keys to healthy lives – and very few people would disagree with that advice. Because, running and walking are the recommended forms of exercise, many people are either currently running – have tried running in the past – or are planning to run in the future. But it hasn't always been that way.

There was once a time when running was something kids did in school. Athletes ran to get in shape – mostly on a track. And men's track and cross-country were extracurricular options at most high schools and colleges. But once out of school – running was not something grown adults did. Personally, I competed in high school track and cross-country in the late 60's – and remember being yelled at and harassed regularly when I would go for summer training runs. And it wasn't just me and my awkward style of running. My teammates would often discuss having bottles thrown at them, being "doored", and being heckled by passing motorists. Current ORC membership chairman Dick Burrows started running in 1970 – and agrees "there were not many people running" when he took up the sport. It was not a popular activity at all. In fact, he used to do his running at night so his neighbors wouldn't see him.

The birthplace of organized running in Omaha was Elmwood Park. Many people are aware that the current Omaha Running Club evolved from the Plains Track Club. But prior to that – we were the UNO (or Omaha University) Track Club. And before that – the Elmwood Park Track Club. Elmwood Park offered distance runners a place to meet and test their prowess – particularly during the summer. There wasn't a lot of organization – but there were lots of opportunities for competition and camaraderie.

Initially, Ken Gould laid out several cross country routes around the golf course – everywhere from two miles all the way to eight miles. On the track – there were midweek all-comers meets, and challenging events such as the pentathlon and even the septathlon. The entry fee was 50 cents. No T-shirts, no hardware, no published results and no overhead clocks. At the cross-country runs, the race director would start a stopwatch at the beginning of the race – and toss the watch behind a bush. The first one to finish retrieved the watch and called out times for the rest of the finishers. Being the guy to read times was an honor – of sorts. At the end of the summer – the entry fees paid for watermelons to celebrate the end of a season.

In the late 60's, the group that met was comprised mostly of elite college and high school athletes. The list includes many Big Eight and NAIA gold medal winners. Training runs were held daily – meets were once a week. Cross-country one week – track the next. There were also a few coaches who continued to run after graduation – but it wasn't until the early 70's that "older" runners started to show up. Frank Perrone, one of Omaha's road racing pioneers, said that initially only he and three other guys "over the age of 30" were involved. The young, fast runners didn't seem to mind – and they stayed around and called out times until all the old guys had finished. Later, Air Force runners from Offutt heard about the runs and started to show up. The mass media has always led the public to believe that the running boom started with Jim Fixx and his book *The Complete Book of Running* – which was published in 1977. But those who were running in the seventies – disagree with Fixx's role. According to Jim McMahon – the race director for the first Omaha

- 1973** UNO Track club changes its name to the Plains Track Club
- 1973** First road race held at Lake Manawa, hosted by Mick Freeman
- 1974** First Omaha Marathon takes place under race director Jim McMahon
- 1975** Plains Track Club breaks USA record for 24-hour relay
- 1979** Lady Runner 5K event held for the first time
- 1985** Boy's Town Memorial Day Run held for the first time
- 1994** First Beer & Bagel Run held, sponsored by Peak Performance
- 1997** First Go Girl 5K
- 1998** Omaha Marathon cancelled due to lack of sponsorship
- 2003** Omaha Marathon is reborn under Susie Smisek
- 2015** First year of the Omaha Running Club Heartland Marathon

Marathon in 1974 – running really took off after Frank Shorter won the marathon gold medal at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games.

Suddenly, people became interested in running a marathon. In a period of a couple of years – marathons started showing up in every major city in the country. Runners World magazine really fueled the craze by publishing the fastest marathon, 10K, and 24 relay times in each of the 50 states.

It was a unique time. There was the excitement caused by Frank Shorter winning a gold medal. There were millions of baby boomers becoming concerned about their health – and their aging bodies. Dr. Kenneth Cooper wrote his first book describing the benefits of aerobic activity. And running was “in”.

The Omaha running scene would change dramatically over the next few years. A fence would be erected on the Elmwood Park Golf Course – destroying the cross-country trails. There were older runners showing up for events – and they were more interested in road races than running track meets. The UNO track club would change gears and its name – to the Plains Track Club. The first road race would be held at Lake Manawa in 1973. A track coach at Council Bluffs Abraham Lincoln named Mick Freeman would host the first event (and he is still at it today). Road races were popping up everywhere. Sporting goods stores, realizing the surge in running shoe sales – began sponsoring events. And soon, everyone wanted to get into the act.

I interviewed several people for this article – and there was one common theme with each of them. Everyone really had fun in those early days. Even though the events were simple – they provided a competitive outlet for those that wanted to test their abilities. Not only could you compete – but you could also be around people who shared your interests.

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 club's 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 day's 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 or 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.

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 Huff 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.

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 Karthauser 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 a 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.

When you talk running with the “old timers”, most of them have great stories about the 1980’s. Interest in running, particularly road racing, seems to have peaked around 1987 – give or take a few years. However, a search through the archives, reveals that running probably wasn’t quite as popular as we remember it. Most of the long-time runners that I interviewed, talked about the days when an organization could put together an event – and with a little promotion, expect 1,000 to 1,500 runners to show up. Well, that wasn’t exactly the case – in Omaha anyway.

To be sure, road races were bigger in the 80’s than they are today. But there were really only a few races that topped 1,000 participants. And that was only if you included both the short runs and the premier race like the 10K. However, it certainly wasn’t unusual for an low-key 1980’s event to have 200 participants versus the 50 to 75 that many race directors are happy with today. Still, today’s Corporate Cup and Race For the Cure are more popular than even the biggest events two decades ago.

Some of the more popular events in Omaha running history were:

Mutual of Omaha Health Fair Run. This was a big budget event that included not only a road race – but also a featured celebrity speaker such as Jim Ryan or Marty Liquori. The 10K worked its way around the old neighborhoods south of Mutual, and to everyone’s delight – included a feast of strawberries and whipped cream after the race. In 1989, there were 942 participants in the 10K and 641 in the 2 mile. From the results I was able to collect, that appeared to be the peak – and also the last year of the event. Mutual shifted their sponsorship from running to golf starting in 1990. The real challenge with Mutual was the weather. Because the race was held in early April, there were typically strong winds, cold temperatures, and occasionally even snow to deal with.

Diet Pepsi Challenge – This was a very competitive event that was basically run on today’s corporate cup course. One of the more memorable events was in 1981. Bill Rogers made a guest appearance and broke the 10K record for the state of Nebraska (29:04). However, everyone who was present that day remembers the race for what Boston Billy did after the awards ceremony. The last runner was just finishing the event as everyone was leaving the awards ceremony. Unfortunately, the finish line scaffolding and clock had already been removed as the handicapped runner made his way across the finish line. Rogers presented the guy his gold medal and told him “you’ve worked harder for this than I have”. Participation peaked in 1981 with just over 1,200 runners and the race went away after 1983.

Some popular events are still around – and they give a good indication of how running has changed over the past two decades. Boystown Memorial Day Run – The first Boystown Run was in 1985. Early corporate sponsors such as Applause Video and Godfathers Pizza provided food and live music for a family picnic-type atmosphere. The first year there were 1,331 entrants in both the 5-mile event and the 1-mile event. Participation continued to grow and in 1987 they had total 1,540 participants. Still one of the more popular events in the area, Boystown had 649 finishers in the 5-mile in 2004 – which is down only 17% from the 779 finishers in 1987.

Other races, such as the Corporate Cup, draw more interest today than they did during the running boom. In 1987, there were 8,354 finishers in the Corporate Cup. The American Lung Association says there were 11,835 registered entrants in 2004 – although that may not be an “apples-to-apples” comparison. The Corporate Cup now includes more 2-milers than 10K participants. And registered entrants don’t always equate to finishers. But, none-the-less, there is still a lot of interest in the big events.

In general, though, road run participation is definitely down. There are still lots of events. A review of the ORC calendar shows that most weekends there are still two or three races within an hours drive of Omaha. But again, 75 participants is considered a successful event for most organizers. So what happened to all the runners?

There are many theories. Everyone seems to have an opinion. I remember hearing many people complain about entry fees. While the standard entry fee was \$6.00 in the early 1980's – organizers steadily pushed entry fees up to the \$15.00 range. Add to that the \$20 "day of race" charge – and many people began to balk at paying that much to do something they could do for free – in their own neighborhood.

Something else that made races popular in the 1980's – they often involved interesting or unusual routes. Race directors would try to find unique courses – such as the Easter Seal Classic that involved a 7-mile course that worked its way from the Westroads to Elmwood Park. Or another popular race called the South Omaha Bridge Run – actually ran across the South Omaha bridge and back. The Trick-or-Treat Trot in Elmwood Park was extremely popular and included a one mile event that awarded large cash prizes to the best costumes. The Boystown Moonlight Run started at 10:20 PM and the start was televised. The event offered 3,6,9 or 12 mile distances on a course that looped through Boystown – with lighting provided by paper bag/candle luminaries. The bottom line, these events were unique and/or offered something fun and different.

The City of Omaha no longer provides free police protection. This has forced many organizers to hold their events at local dam sites. Although, scenic and safe – after literally hundreds of events over the years, courses like Lake Zorinsky and Wehrspan Lake no longer have the allure they once did.

There was, however, a downside to the unusual courses and large number of participants. Those big events were a lot of work for race organizers. I remember working on the Septemberfest while serving on the ORC Board in 1986. We had a loop course that started downtown, proceeded through Carter Lake and finished in the old market. The course required new certification, we had to rent several portable toilets, and we needed police protection/parade permits from multiple law enforcement agencies. Having 800 participants also meant ordering lots of shirts, having tons of refreshments at the finishline, and an army of volunteers to put together packets, monitor the course and make things happen on race day. And participants expected race results in the mail. Putting on big events was (and still is) a lot of work that requires many volunteers.

Today, most events are fairly simple. Entry forms are typically not mailed. Interested runners pick them up at Peak Performance or download them from the ORC website. Results are posted at Peak Performance or on the ORC website – if at all. T-shirts are not included at every race. And most courses don't require a lot of volunteers. You simply run out-and-back – or around the dam site or park. Refreshments after the race are simple – bagels and some fruit – at most.

Today most races are low budget and they don't bring in big bucks. But in reality, races never were big fund-raisers. If an organizer could find deep-pocketed sponsors – money could be raised. The Corporate Cup has raised more than \$5 million over the years – but that is the exception. Most organizers found themselves basically breaking even.

As the number of participants started to decline, events became less formal. And nobody is really complaining.

What is most surprising when you study the old race results – people, in general, ran much faster in 80's than they do today. In the next installment, I will examine how today's times compare to those of the glory days. And we'll look closer at the demographics of racing.

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 (Kilimanjaro 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. The Mike Ewoldt and his brother opened their first Peak Performance Store. Next month, we'll talk about Peak and its influence on the local running community.

Organized running in Omaha changed dramatically in 1994. That was the year the Ewoldt brothers opened Walk and Run Fitness on 77th and Cass. When I first heard about the new store, my thoughts were that these guys would never make it. After all, at that point in time, most serious runners were buying their shoes through mail-order outlets. By ordering a new pair of shoes out of a catalogue or a Runners World ad, a person could save up to 50%. Because of that, there had been other local specialty running shoe stores that had

already failed. It was disappointing to entrepreneurs who put together these ventures to see local runners stop by their store, pick up a race ap, and leave – without spending a dime. Also, bolstering my skepticism was the fact that the two Ewoldts, plus a third key employee, Jerry Guinan – all had to eke a living out of that small store. But Mike and Jim were convinced there was an opportunity for a store that would cater to the running community. Mike Ewoldt was looking for a lifestyle change. As a corporate auditor for 15 years, the stress and travel was starting to get to him. His weight was becoming a problem and a family history of hypertension and heart disease had Mike rethinking what he wanted to do with his life. Brother Jim was store manager for Body Basics. He had opened two new stores for the fitness company – and had a good understanding of the Omaha market. So with Mike's business and finance background – and Jim's experience in the retail fitness market – the brothers decided to run their own show. And they had some good ideas. First off, Walk and Run was located near the new Keystone Trail, a hot spot for fitness enthusiasts. Second, the store would have shower facilities and free refreshments for runners. Third, the salespeople would be knowledgeable and offer true shoe expertise to customers. For instance, one unique feature was a treadmill/video camera setup that provided a free gait analysis to runners – something never before offered in our community. This allowed the store to make a more scientific decision about what type of shoe a runner or walker needed. Finally, Walk and Run was going to put on lots of fun events. The business plan worked. Things were not easy at first. Jim Ewoldt took another job to support his family. Money was tight. But the Ewoldt's persevered. They would quickly build an extremely loyal group of customers. After three years in their cramped quarters, they moved across the street to their current location – which turned out to be a welcome expansion. And in 2000, the company also changed its name – the new name would be Peak Performance. The Ewoldts were also busy expanding. They have now opened stores in Sioux City, IA, Ogden, UT, Lincoln, NE, Spirit Lake, IA in addition to two more stores in the Omaha metropolitan area. Recently, Mike discussed his successful business strategy with a group of business students at Bellevue University. He attributed his success to the efforts of his employees to go the extra mile with their customers. His philosophy is to do the little things that anyone else could do – but won't. He calls that his competitive advantage. This includes things like remembering customer's names, working hard to address customer's needs when they first enter the store, maintaining a frequent customer rewards program, and hosting lots of fitness events and activities at their store.

Because of Peak Performance, the Omaha area now has many more options when it comes to running events. The Ewoldt's event strategy is simple: a) Schedule many fun events around holidays, themes or unusual concept. Initially, the Ewoldt's offered lots of races. They filled holes in the running calendar with races like the Forerunner, a 4.4 mile event around Lake Zorinsky, Gut Check, a cross country run at Tranquility Park, and the Keystone Classic –a 5K on the trail. Holiday runs included events like a revitalized Trick-or-Treat Trot, complete with a costume run, Run in the New Year, a New Year's Even 5K that started shortly before midnight and was run along a luminaire-lit Keystone Trail, the Groundhog Day Run, that was either a 2-mile or a 4-mile event – based on whether or not you could see your shadow at race time, and the still wildly popular Blarney Run – which is held at 6:00 PM every St Patrick's Day. They put on unusual events, sometimes irreverent events. One of the most popular races in the area is a cross-country challenge event called the Beer and Bagel Run. The first B&B was held in the spring of 1994 at Tranquility Park. At that time, there weren't a lot of cross country events – outside of high school/college meets. So there was pent-up demand to get back and run cross country. Add to that the unusual beer and bagel name and concept – and you had an instant success. The "drinker with a running problem" t-shirts have become collector's items. As the event moved from Tranquility to Elmwood Park to Cunningham Lake and finally Crescent Ski Hills, the number of entrants steadily grew. Other unusual events have included the Great American Rundown – a handicapped 10K that gave most runners a head start based on their age and sex, the Big Dog Duathlon, which combined a biking and running competition, the Pump-and-Run, which combined weightlifting and a run, and the Big Dog Pentathlon, which required competitors to run a 100 yard dash, 440 yard run, 880 yard run, and a one mile on the track – and finally a 5K on the trail. b) Provide a festive post-race celebration that everyone can enjoy – Typically, a post race Peak Performance event includes beer, soft drinks and some sort of food. The recent Cinco de Mayo 5K in Lincoln drew over 125 runners on a Thursday evening, many of whom said they showed up simply because the race advertised free margaritas and tacos at the post race party. Most races include pizza or sandwiches. The Peak-to-Peak 10 miler in August features a DJ and post race Bar-B-Que. As might be expected, the Blarney Stone Run offers corn beef and cabbage along with a pizza buffet. And their Chili Run in the fall obviously features chili. c) Awards – lots of hardware – The Ewoldt's redefined the concept of running awards. From the very beginning, they have offered numerous trophies and medals at events they have either sponsored or supported. Aside from the customary five-year age groups, special trophies are awarded to the three finishers overall, the top three masters, and typically the top three senior finishers – for each sex. Because of these additional categories, it is not unusual for most runners to go home with a medal or a trophy. d) Provide broad support to the running community. Much like the Omaha Running Club, Peak provides the expertise, finish line support, and scoring for sponsors who want to organize an event but don't really know how. Although they appear to be competitors, the ORC and Peak have a strong, healthy relationship – and frequently work together for the benefit of all runners in our community. Peak and ORC split the cost for the running schedule magnet you may have received earlier this year. Peak also offers merchandise discounts to members of the ORC. The flagship Peak Performance store on 77th and Cass is the home of the ORC Runners Hall of Fame and also the site of the ORC annual summer marathon clinic. Based on the many high school track and cross country team pictures that line the walls of their stores, and the many plaques from local charitable groups – it is easy to see why Peak has become the heart of Omaha running in recent years. The Ewoldt's have made a huge contribution to running in the Omaha

area. Their formula is fairly simple but requires a lot of hard work – and financial risk. Their success is closely intertwined with the past and the future of Omaha running. Let's hope the Ewoldt's enjoy continued success and thrive long into the future.

On any given weekend, a runner in the Omaha area can find at least one road race within an hour's drive of their home – and most of the time, there are several options to consider. Some of these events have been around for many years and have become a tradition for their loyal followers. Over the next few newsletters, I will critique some of these long-standing events. For those of you who are new to the running scene or who haven't considered venturing outside of town – you may want to put some of these races on your calendar. Not only will you get a change in scenery, but these races have dedicated volunteers who put together a fun experience.

King Korn Carnival Run/Walk (September 10) – The second weekend in September is festival time in Plattsmouth, NE. This annual event, which includes parades, carnivals, and tons of activities is typical of the many small town celebrations held across the midlands. Anna Fisher started this event in 1988 and continues as the race director today. What is unique about this race is everyone runs/walks the same distance – 2 miles. The race was originally held on a flat access road just outside of town – but three years ago the race was moved to Rhylander Park. Now the event is held on the Plattsmouth High School Cross Country Course. If you've never experienced a cross country course – this is an excellent opportunity to get a feel for running on grass. There are really no hills – and the two miles go very quickly. Anna always has lots of trophies. Between the overall finishers, masters and five-deep age groups, most people take home some hardware. Plattsmouth, NE is located just south of Bellevue and is a very short drive down the Kennedy Freeway.

Tri State 10,000 Popcorn Run (September 10) – This is another festival run (Popcorn Days) but this one is held in Hamburg, Iowa. The unique feature of this event is that the 10K actually takes place in three states. Because of a quirk in boundaries, you start the race in Nebraska, spend a couple of miles in Missouri and finish in Iowa. School buses haul the runners to the starting line – and you run the basically flat course back through town, and around the high school track to the finish line. There is also a 2-mile event. Hamburg is 55 miles south of Omaha but the interstate highway makes it a quick trip. This race has been around for 25 years and is very popular with Omaha runners.

Buffalo Run (September 11) – This is a Lincoln Track Club event that is held in Pioneer park. The five-mile course is very challenging with a couple of tough hills to navigate near the end of the race. This is a race that has been around a long time – 29 years – and always attracts the fastest runners in the area. This is one of those races that many competitive runners point to each year to measure what kind of shape they are in. Instead of a t-shirt, race organizers give out running shorts – which is fairly unique. This is one of Lincoln's most popular events and typically draws a fairly large group of runners. Pioneer Park is a beautiful setting for a road run, and the LTC always does an excellent job of organizing their runs.

Bohemian Alps Endurance Run (October 8) – You will note this event is called an endurance run rather than a road race. There is a reason for that. This rugged half-marathon goes across what race director Dale Nielsen calls "undulating terrain". There are lots of rolling hills – on gravel and dirt roads, cross country trails and some pavement. This is the 22nd year for this event which has recently been shortened from a 25K. The race starts and finishes in Brainard, NE and proceeds across roller coaster hills through the Village of Loma. There is a pig-roast barbecue after the race – and custom-made medals are awarded out at the finish line to the top 25 male finishers and 10 female finishers. Ribbons are given to all finishers. There is also a 4-mile event which gives the runner a taste of the longer course – and a 1-mile fun run for the kids. Dale also puts on a 50-mile ultra endurance run a few weeks before the half-marathon (September 17 in 2005). Brainard is less than an hour's drive west of Omaha and it is really a beautiful scenic drive – particularly in the Fall. The trip is well worth the experience.

Richfield Run (October 9) – At 28 years and counting, this is one of the oldest events in the area. Originally dubbed the Richfield Cafe Run, John Peterson decided to continue the race even after the restaurant burned down several years ago. There isn't much to the town of Richfield, but John puts on an outstanding event. This is a "must-do" for those of you who haven't given this event a try. The main event is a shotgun start 10-miler but there is also a popular three mile race for those of you who aren't up to ten miles. There is a band providing entertainment before, during and after the race. John has excellent food catered in and awards are one-of-a-kind. The handcrafted walnut pen sets and heavy-duty medals are real collector's items. The 10-mile run is a challenge with an out-and-back course that is basically rolling hills. Richfield is probably much closer than you would think. About 5 miles south of Papillion, this is a tradition you don't want to miss. There is also a kids one-mile event – which makes this a great event for the whole family.

Heaven Can Wait-WYUKA Run (September 18) – This is a very interesting and unusual run that typically falls on the same day or weekend as the Corporate Cup. Because of that, most Omaha runners haven't had a chance to experience this unique event that has been around for 11 years now. The main race is a 5K which is held entirely in the WYUKA Cemetery in downtown Lincoln. Although some people may balk at running past tombstones for 3.1 miles, the course is shaded and very beautiful. The 5K loops around the hilly graveyard on a cobble stone road – which isn't always the best footing – but this is a rare, race experience that is worth a trip to Lincoln. There is also a 1-mile event for kids.

Applejack Run (September 17) – Last year, Karen Barr resurrected one of the more popular runs of the 70's and 80's. The Applejack Run is held in conjunction with Applejack Days – a huge celebration in Nebraska City. The road race went away several years ago, but while it was held, the 10K was a favorite because of its scenic course. Karen has shortened the main event to five miles – but has retained the highlights of the original longer course. Starting in Steinhardt Park, the course makes two loops through the famous Arbor Lodge, and then proceeds through the neighborhoods. As can be expected, there will be lots of apples – and apple cider door prizes. There will also be a 1-mile fun run for the kids. Many people already make the trip to Nebraska City each year for the festival and a chance to buy apples. If you schedule your trip around this event – it will be a great chance to get in a fun run and see the sights of Nebraska City as well. Nebraska City is about 35 miles south of Bellevue on Highway 75.

Information and entry forms for all of these events are available on the Omaha Running Club Website.

In most parts of the USA, organized running in late Fall means two things – turkey trots and cross country. The Omaha area is no exception. Although you pretty much have to venture outside the city limits – there some traditional events that are extremely popular – and are well worth the drive and the entry fee.

Turkey Trots have become the rage all over the country. A couple of years ago, USA Today had a feature story discussing the huge numbers these events are drawing. Although it would seem unlikely that families would want to venture out, early on a holiday that can involve either a) sleeping in, or b) lots of work preparing food – that is exactly what is happening. Entire families have made a tradition of getting up early, and burning some calories before settling down at the table.

A look at the area racing schedule finds Thanksgiving Day runs in places like Beatrice, Fremont and Red Oak, Iowa. And following nationwide trends, these events are very popular. The Fremont Turkey Trot, which started in 1987, has been around the longest. The YMCA sponsors the event which includes both a 5-mile run and a 2-mile run. Both of which are extremely flat. The biggest surprise about the Fremont run is not so much the number of runners (which is relatively high), but the quality of runners. This event draws some of the fastest runners from Omaha, Lincoln, and the small towns in between. Although there isn't a lot of hardware, (like - ten-year age groups) Fremont Turkey Trot is typically one of the most competitive races in the area.

Cross country events have also become very popular and draw surprising numbers. Cross Country within driving distance include the Beer and Bagel Run, Living History Farms, the Lincoln Track Club Holiday Run, and the relatively new Lavista Halloween Run. The Lavista event has been around three years and judging by its popularity—will probably be around next year. For those of you who have never run cross country – this is a great place to give it a try. The course is relatively flat and includes two loops around a golf course. There is a costume division, which is typically very entertaining – along with the competitive 5K race. As is typical with most cross country runs today, this event draws a lot of ex-high school cross-country runners. You will see people at these events that you won't normally see at other events. And once you try cross-country running, you'll see why. It is a lot of fun, and offers a very different experience than running on the streets.

The Beer and Bagel Run is a Peak Performance event which has been around since 1984. The first B&B was held at Tranquility Park and has since moved from Memorial Park to Lake Cunningham to its current home – Crescent Ski Hill in Iowa. The Crescent ski resort is the perfect match for this quirky event. The distance is advertised as roughly 4 miles – but who knows. This is a challenging event that is not for the faint-of-heart. The hills redefine the word steep, the terrain is dangerous, and for much of the course, the only way you will know where to go is by following the flags that guide you through the shrubs and high weeds. As crazy as it sounds, this event is one of the more popular events in the Omaha area and draws large numbers of loyal runners. Among the usual post-race snacks, there is beer and chili. And the "drinker with a running problem" t-shirts are coveted collector items. With B&B – either you love it or you hate it. The scenery is beautiful. The view from the top of the Loess Hills allows a view of the Missouri River and Omaha that you will not find anywhere else in the metro area. And everyone is there to have fun. Even the most gifted runners find themselves walking up some of the hills – so although there are age-group awards, it is not so much a competitive event as it is a challenge.

The Saturday before Thanksgiving is Living History Farms day. Literally hundreds of Omahan's will make their way to Des Moines to run this extremely popular event. Another quirky cross country, this event is in its 29th year and has boasted for several years that it is the largest cross country run in North America. The last few years there have been over 4,000 finishers and the event continues to grow. Again, this is not your typical cross country course. Until recently, the actual course layout changed from year-to-year. You were never sure if the distance would be until race day. The distance varied from four to six miles – but one thing was certain – you would find yourself crossing creeks, going over fences, and using ropes to get out of the creek beds. Cornfields, trails through the woods, cow manure. This event has everything. And in mid-November, the weather can vary dramatically. Some years, it is warm enough to run in a t-shirt, other years, there may be snow on the ground and ice on the creeks. And speaking of creeks, recent rainfall determines the real challenge of the course. During droughts, you can pretty much jump the streams – but if it has rained recently, the water level can be knee-high. If you do this event, plan on throwing away your shoes when the race is over. Now, why would anyone drive to Des Moines to go through this? Because it's wildly fun. For many, it is a costume run.

Winter in Nebraska is brutal. Below zero wind chills, icy roads, and snow. If runners don't hold road races in Houston during the hot

summer months – conventional wisdom would say there would be no road races in Omaha during the winter. But oddly enough, the calendar for December through March is loaded with competitive opportunities.

On the first and third Saturday of each month, you can find Mick Freeman in the northeast parking lot of Lake Manawa. That's where he collects the \$3 entry fee, and gathers the pertinent information for anyone wanting to run a 10K or a 2 mile race. Mick has been directing his Bluffs Track Club events since 1973. Last year, when he was inducted in the Omaha Running Hall of Fame, it was estimated that Mick had directed over 250 races for his winter series alone. As a cross-country coach in Council Bluffs, Freeman started holding the events as an opportunity for high school runners to stay in shape in the off-season. But the jogging boom was just beginning – and his race quickly became popular with the older crowd. Over the years the numbers have been heavily skewed towards the masters and senior masters – rather than the teenagers.

It's easy to understand why the high schools kids don't scramble out of bed on Saturday mornings and head to Mick's events. It takes a hard-core runner to brave the elements at Lake Manawa in the dead of winter. There is typically a strong wind. The lake is frozen for most of the winter – and when the wind blows across the ice – it chills the temperature even more. A predictable comment at the starting line is "it felt much warmer when I left my house this morning".

But there is beauty at Manawa in the winter, as well. Most Saturdays, there are bald eagles circling the lake. Bird watchers park around the shoreline taking pictures of the various water fowl that migrate through the area. And the course is flat. Sometimes, the race circles the lake, other times it's an out-and-back – but in either case, the races are low key and offer a chance to run hard and compete year-around. Mick awards medals to the top five finishers in ten-year age groups – for both races. With a typical turnout of around 20-30 runners, most people "score". More so than the hardware, though, Lake Manawa offers a chance for people to get together and socialize. Although new faces show up regularly, there is a core group that has been showing up for decades.

A few years back, there was a bad ice storm on the Friday before a race. Mick could not get out of his driveway – but some of his faithful runners were able to get out of theirs. After Mick didn't show up for the usual 10 AM start, the group went ahead and collected the entry fees and started the race. At the next event, someone handed Mick an envelope with the entry fees and a list of the times for the half dozen or so runners that had showed up.

On the second and fourth Saturdays, another ritual takes place in LaPlatte, Nebraska. Craig Christians is in the school parking lot collecting entry fees for his No Frills Racing Series. Craig has been filling out the winter calendar with this five mile race for 11 years. The entry fee is the same, but the format is a little different. He doesn't award medals to finishers – but instead keeps a running point total over the winter. Points are awarded based on age adjusted times. Craig has a table which adjusts a person's actual finish time based on his/her age. So, a 50 year male old runner who finishes the five mile

event in 35:00 minutes may actually end up with an adjusted time of 32:30. For each race, Craig then rank orders the adjusted times and awards points to the top ten finishers in each sex. . The table appears to be pretty accurate. Based on world record times for each age – most runners note that their best adjusted times are pretty close to what they ran when they were in their prime. At the end of the season, the top finishers are awarded cash prizes. This format encourages a more competitive atmosphere. Even though you may not be able to see the runners ahead of you, it is highly possible you could actually finish ahead of them with your adjusted time – so if you are competitive – you need to push hard the entire way. At other races, you can see where you stand in the pecking order – and it may not be necessary to exert yourself at the finish.

The LaPlatte course is excellent. The first two miles are flat – with a gradual up-hill to the turnaround point. It's an out and back, so you get some momentum going back down to the 3 mile point – where it is flat the rest of the way in. The mile splits are accurate and marked – and Craig is usually at the mile mark calling out times. Most of the course is sheltered from the north wind by wooded bluffs. The other side of the course parallels Hansens and Chris lake so it's a pretty nice view. Although there is more traffic than at Manawa, it is still a nice, peaceful run. Although it also gets icy, snow packed and cold at LaPlatte – the turnouts have been growing. Last year there were some races where the numbers approached 40-50 runners.

Both Craig and Mick hold special events to cap-off their season. Mick has the CB 13 which is a 13 mile run (along with a 10K and 2mile). The CB 13 is one of the oldest events in the Omaha area and is popular with people training for a spring marathon. The event is held on the first Saturday in March. It involves going around the lake twice. Craig's final event in March is a 10 miler. The course extends farther west and is a challenge because the turnaround point is at the top of a steep hill. But it's all downhill from there.

One other staple on the winter racing calendar is the Chiller Challenge. The Chiller is a membership run for the Omaha Running Club. If you join the club, you get to race free. This event has been around since 1986. It is held at Dodge Park and involves an 8K. Awards are handed to the top finishers as they cross the finish line – and there is typically a bowl of chili and other goodies in the pavilion. The course is flat and fast. The date of the Chiller Challenge varies from year-to-year. The weather is unpredictable. The race has been held on unseasonably warm days – and it's been held in the middle of a blizzard. In late January, you never know what you are going to get. But the race is a great value. By joining the ORC, you get all the typical club benefits, discounts at running stores, free newsletter, and the annual meeting fun-run and feed – as well as free entry into a quality event.

Omaha is lucky to have dedicated people like Mick Freeman, Craig Christians, and the Omaha Running Club. They take time to go out in the elements and put on events for the rest of us. It is nice to be able to run hard and compete throughout the winter. The Saturday races provide an incentive to keep training at a time of year when it would be easy to take some time off and subsequently – get fat.

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 23rd 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.

Americana. What does that word mean to you? You probably haven't given it much thought –but for me the word Americana comes to mind when I participate in some of the small town road races that crop up in Nebraska and Iowa during the summer and fall months. The race calendar is reminiscent of the school closing list you hear following a winter snowstorm: Schuyler, Wilber, North Bend, Amherst, Walton, Treynor, Bellwood, Bennington, Wisner, etc. The list goes on. My guess is that every town in Iowa and Nebraska has hosted a road race at some point in the last twenty years. Some are one-time events, for instance, the Morse Bluffs centennial run back in 1987. However, many have a dedicated race director who keeps the event going for years – often in conjunction with the town's annual festival or celebration. Road races are another way to get people involved in the community. Typically, there is a longer run, such as a 10K or 5-mile, and also a shorter run/walk option. My guess would be that about half of the participants in these events will not enter another road race until the next year's festival comes around.

Many of these road races have a long, rich history. They are staples in the community – and many times the organizers don't even bother to advertise. The race director knows there will be a bunch of local kids and runners there to run or walk, so the race might not even get posted on a race calendar. The Ralston Fourth of July Run is a great example of a community race that draws huge numbers – but organizers haven't marketed the event outside of Ralston for years. The course snakes through the residential community and roughly half of the race follows the parade route. Blankets and chairs mark people's "territory" for the afternoon parade.

In other cases, the race may directly precede the parade. Craig Christians Arrow-to-Aerospace Run is a one-mile event that actually is held on the route – minutes before the parade begins. People are already sitting in their chairs and blankets when the runners stream by. If you really want the feeling of Americana, participate in an event in one of the smaller communities – and then stick around for the parade. Small town parades typically include not only the Shriners and their wacky vehicles – but also local teenagers and their polished cars, farmers and their new tractors, local politicians, local cheerleaders, the high school band – and kids with their decorated wagons and bikes. The rest of the community lines the route and cheers their friends and neighbors on.

One of my favorite events is Junction Days in Red Oak, Iowa. The road race has been around for over twenty years. Race directors have changed periodically, but the format remains the same. The race starts at 7:00 AM in the town square. Even at 7 AM, the place is busy. The local radio station broadcasts live from the town square (the DJ can be heard on speakers throughout the area), and families are getting ready for the children's pet show – which starts at 7:30. Meanwhile, there is always a line for the pancake feed as the locals converge on the square for breakfast. The race itself includes a 10K and a 2-mile and draws large numbers. The majority of participants combine a walk and a jog to get through the shorter event. That doesn't mean the 10K is not competitive. For years the race was dominated by the top runners from the Omaha area. The Hall brothers were regular winners throughout the 1980's and early 1990's. But in recent years, there are fewer Omaha runners making the trip – and high school kids from the area have been the stars. I usually head home right after the

award ceremony and on way back to Nebraska there is always a string of antique cars and Shriner vehicles heading to Red Oak for the parade later that day.

Another great small town event is held in Exira, Iowa on the Saturday prior to the Fourth of July. Exira is located about midway between Des Moines and Omaha –so it attracts some pretty good runners. The allure of Exira is the challenging course. The 10K circles through town and goes out into the country. There, runners climb a series of roller coaster hills, all on crushed rock. The bad thing about roller coaster hills, as you reach the peak of one hill, you can see what is coming next – another steep hill. One other issue, along with dusty roads, the course proceeds through tall cornfields. There is nothing more humid than a run in early July through cornfields. The last mile proceeds on asphalt, through the town and finishes by the town square. The only problem, it is uphill all the way. The best thing about the Exira Road Race is that it is sponsored by the local Budweiser distributor. Coolers full of ice cold Budweiser attract not only the runners, but many local spectators, as well. The race has been around since the 1982. Gary Julin is a local legend in Exira – having won the 10K while in his thirties, forties, and fifties. Gary was either the overall or masters champion at Exira 18 times.

Another event with a rich history is the North Bend Old Settlers Run. The race was extremely popular in the early 1980's, but went on hiatus for a number of years, until Todd Nott resurrected the event as a 5K in 2000. In its early days, the race drew the top college runners from across Nebraska. The 5-mile was flat and fast – and was held exclusively on residential streets. Local residents were stationed along the course with their garden hoses to cool off the runners. It was typically hot, and the race finished in front of the swimming pool – which was open and free for all runners. North Bend was the only race I have participated in that actually seeded the top 50 runners. Names of the seeds were announced through a loud speaker prior to the start of the event. The race was tied to the towns Old Settlers Day, and was a big draw – with around 300 total participants at its peak. Every runner received a copy of the North Bend Eagle in the mail. The local newspaper included a large section of results, interviews, and pictures. Everyone's name and time was listed. Todd Nott has turned the race into a cross-country run – and it is growing in popularity. Last year, there were 140 participants.

Probably my all-time favorite event is one that I have only participated in once. Logistically, it is a nightmare. It has a 7:00 AM start and is about a two-hour drive for me – so I am not a regular. But for anyone who wants to make the commitment, the Duck and Dumpling run in Wilbur, Nebraska is a classic event. I remember arriving at the festival at 6:30 AM to the strong aroma of bohemian cooking. The Czech festival draws huge numbers throughout the weekend, and everyone who comes to town wants to eat. So the food preparation begins late Friday night and doesn't stop until Sunday night.

To add to the atmosphere, polka music can be heard on speakers throughout the town. At the race I attended, the awards ceremony was held in the beer garden at the Prague Hotel – and ice cold beer was the highlight of the morning. Many of the runners arrived the night before and stayed in hotels in either Wilbur or Crete. Most were there for the party, not necessarily the race, so it was a very festive atmosphere. If you can make it through the day and stick around for the festivities, the town really rocks at night. The bars cannot hold the crowds, so the party is out in the streets.