

REMEMBERING JESSE KELLEY

By DON SIKORSKI
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I have been actively involved in the running community for over 20 years now. In all of my years of running, the one thing that I have learned to appreciate most about the sport is all of the good people that I have been fortunate enough to meet and all of the good friends that I have made through running. In all of those years, I can't recall meeting a nicer person than Jesse Kelley. Sadly, Mrs. Kelley passed away on June 6th at the young age of 70.

I first met Mrs. Kelley as a high school runner visiting her Kelley's Pace running store, then located on Pearl Street in downtown Mystic. Kelley's Pace was the place to go when you needed running shoes or clothes, long before the days of athletic chain stores in malls or mail order catalogs. Besides, those places, even years later when they would become the norm, couldn't offer the personalized service that Mrs. Kelley provided. She would always take the time to talk to every person who came into the store, and every runner, no matter how fast or slow, was treated like royalty. Her offer of 10% off "because I was a high school runner" was extended to me well into my mid-twenties. Together with her husband Johnny, the 1957 Boston Marathon champion, the Kelley's Pace store later moved to its current location in Mystic Village, but the impeccable service remained the same. Mrs. Kelley, slowed by arthritis in her later years, would still attempt to personally wait on every customer, dragging a half dozen different boxes of running shoes off the shelves for her customers, searching for just the right shoe and size.

This week's Memorial Mass for Jacintha "Jesse" Kelley drew more people from the running community than most road races do. It was a who's who of Southeastern Connecticut distance runners from the past 40+ years. There were Boston and New York City Marathon winners, former national and world class runners, Olympians, coaches, top weekend road racers, members of the "WLMK" Racing Team ("We Love Mrs. Kelley"), sportswriters, family, and friends. Some faces I hadn't seen in 10 years or more; others I never knew in person but their impressive running credentials had been an inspiration to me from the day I started running. I walked away with a true appreciation for the strong bond that the running community in Southeastern Connecticut possesses, and how glad I was to be a part of it. Mrs. Kelley will truly be missed.

Rose City Wrap Up

The 5th Annual Rose City Challenge featured overcast skies, fairly cool temperatures, over 200 finishers, some top level competition, and of course, the hills. There's no way to get from Kelly Junior High School to Dodd Stadium without encountering some challenging uphill stretches of road. Those hills have now become a part of the Rose City race tradition, carried forward from the glory days of the former Rose Arts Festival road race that began and ended at Chelsea Parade. Canterbury's Chad Johnson, who has established himself as one of the state's top runners, executed his pre-race game plan to a tee to earn his first Rose City victory, hammering the challenging 10-mile course in 53:52. Johnson's new Mohegan Strider's teammate Marc Robaczynski of East Hartford ran a strong race to earn runner-up honors, finishing 53 seconds behind Johnson. Mary-Lynn Currier ran 64:04 for top female honors, good enough for 28th place overall. Although the new Rose City event will probably never draw the numbers or the depth of top talent that its predecessor did during the running boom of the 1980's, the race is one of the best organized and best values around, with a fantastic finish along the warning track of Dodd Stadium and a complimentary ticket to the ball game later that afternoon. A special thanks to all those who donated their time and energy to put on the event.

Racing Roundup

Former state cross-country runner-up Tyler Cardinal, now at Iona College, won the 3rd annual Delaney Dash in Old Saybrook on May 24th. Cardinal's winning time of 25:38 was comfortably ahead of Steve Swift (2nd in 27:20). The race remembers former Mohegan Strider Racing team captain Sean Delaney, who passed away from cancer in May 2000.Uncasville's Todd Bennett followed his win at the L&M Spring Stride by claiming top honors at the Reliance House 5K race in Norwich on May 30th, outdueling Chadwick Brown to claim his 2nd win of the month. Norwich's Melissa Perkins-Banas was the top female finisher.Alan Webb got most of the pre-race hype, but it was local boy Dan Wilson, a former UConn distance running standout currently training with the ZAP Fitness Program, that stole the show at the Connecticut Invitational Mile at New Britain's Willowbrook Park following the CIAC State Open. 14 of the top milers in the country gathered in a no prize money race with the goal of a sub four-minute mile, a task accomplished only once in Connecticut (by Villanova's Gerry O'Reilly in 1987). Although the race fell short of this goal, it was the 24 year-old Wilson winning impressively in a time of 4:01.16 on the same track he had won a state championship at 1,600 meters six years prior while competing for Notre Dame-West Haven. Webb, with his 3:53.43 high school mile time and Nike swoosh becoming targets on his back, never led and finished 3rd in 4:02.70 behind Wilson's Zap Fitness teammate Karl Savage.

This Month in History

June 24th, 1984 – With the race field somewhat depleted thanks to appearance fees offered by the Meriden 10-Mile Race the same day, Dave Raunig of Gales Ferry wins the 18th Annual Rose Arts Road Race by a comfortable margin. While Meriden draws some of Raunig's strongest potential challengers including defending champion Jay O'Keefe, Mystic's Wayne Jacob, former Rose Arts winner John Vitale, Gary Nixon, and Jim Uhrig, more than 600 runners are entered at Rose Arts. Raunig, a 29 year-old Navy lieutenant coming off a somewhat disappointing 2:33 marathon effort in Boston two months earlier, disposed of Kevin O'Keefe (Jay's brother) after mile 2 and outruns his nearest challenger Phil "The Deuce" Garland by nearly 2 minutes. Raunig's winning time of 52:48 is the 4th fastest ever run at Rose Arts. Norwich's Joe Banas runs down O'Keefe to claim 3rd in 54:57, while Ron Knapp (55:41) rounds out the top 5. Norwich's Tim Smith (6th in 55:44) fends off Bill Marshall (8th) for the Submaster title, with John Dugdale (10th) and John J. "The Younger" Kelly (94th) claiming the Masters and Grandmasters titles respectively. In the women's race, Norwich's Carla Dossett wins her 2nd straight Rose Arts title, running 65:31 (4th fastest female time ever at Rose Arts) to outdistance recent NFA graduate Janice Palonen (2nd female in 67:30). Mystic's Pat Swim finishes 3rd female overall to earn the Submaster title. Norwich's Chris Hansen (18th in 57:48) and Palonen earn the junior titles. There were 531 official finishers, with 31 runners under the prestigious 1-hour mark on the challenging 10.4-mile course.

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