

USATF RACES FAIL TO MEASURE UP

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

Road racing in Connecticut features a state championship race series. The recent problem is, not everyone is noticing. Consider that College Football has its Bowl games; Golf has a PGA Tour with four "majors". Bicycle racing is highlighted each year by the Tour De France, a grueling test of endurance and athleticism that pits the best riders in the world against each other for an extended period of time. The NASCAR circuit, the World Series, the NCAA Basketball Tournament, etc. all showcase the best athletes in their sport competing for what is universally considered to be their top prize. Scaling that same concept down to the state level, road racing in Connecticut, governed by USATF-CT (United States of America Track and Field - Connecticut), has created a 9 race seasonal series, designed to represent the state's championship races. Cash awards are offered for both individual and teams, male and female, in three age categories: Open, Masters (40+), and Grandmasters (50+). Race distances range from 1 mile to the marathon; race locations range from Norwich to Fairfield. So what's the problem?

Generally speaking, the state's best runners aren't always there competing. And the state's best races aren't always the designated championship events. By comparison to other sports, those are not desirable results. This year, for example, only this past week's 4-mile championship race in Middletown attracted a field of the state's top competitors. And while the next race on the circuit, the New Haven 20K on Labor Day, is considered one of the country's best road races (again serving as the U.S. Championship for the 20K distance as well), most of the earlier USATF races drew mediocre fields and average attendance numbers, especially considering the fact that these races are billed at Connecticut's state championship races.

A few flaws in the current system, coupled with demise in the running boom from 20+ years ago, contribute to the issue. Team competition has not lived up to the hype. The Open division has clear-cut favorites on both sides: the Mohegan Striders men's team and the Hi-Tek Racing women's team have won 11 of the 12 possible titles in 2003 to date. Hi-Tek also dominates the Masters competition. There isn't enough depth of top levels runners in Connecticut to attract 4 or 5 strong, balanced racing teams competing on an even playing field. A look at a few more race statistics supports these claims. The Terryville 5K, for example, attracted only 72 runners, who were forced to race over a brutal course, with only 3 runners under the 17 minute mark with no females under 19:00. Two weeks later, the Quassy Loop 12K in Middlebury had such a lack of depth up front that only 6 runners finished within 5 minutes of Stephen Herrera's winning time of 39:18. The Rose City Challenge and the Fairfield Half Marathon, both well organized and quality events, followed on the schedule, but both present a logistical challenge for runners traveling from the other side of the state to compete in these two early morning races. The scheduling of races is also not ideal, as many runners aren't crazy about having to compete in a half marathon only two short weeks after a hilly 10 miler.

The problem with the system set up by USATF is that there aren't many requirements to become a state championship event. The annual schedule of potential championship races is voted upon by Connecticut's running clubs every two years. Race Directors wishing for their races to become the designated state championship event for a particular distance are required to fork up all prize money offered by USATF. Using a simple break-even analysis, most Race Directors have found that the revenues generated from additional race entries from team competitors aren't enough to offset the required prize money. If entry fees were to increase to compensate for the prize money, then the casual weekend runner, most who don't figure to be a factor in the prize money anyway, would be turned off. And those runners comprise the volume of runners, an important factor considering that most road races serve as fundraisers aiming to attract the masses.

Based on the level of competition at most of the USATF-CT races over the past few years, it's clear that the current system in place is not ideal. Connecticut's state championship races aren't attracting the state's best runners, somewhat comparable to the concept of throwing what should be the big bash of the year and attracting only a few fun people. USATF-CT needs to revamp its current process if that trend is to be improved.

Racing Roundup

Uncasville's Ed Zubritsky has come out of retirement recently and continues to run well as a 40-year-old. Zubritsky followed up his 5th place finish at the Cannonball Mile in June with a comfortable victory in last week's Montville Master's 10K.....Chad Johnson of Lisbon won the USATF State 4-Mile Championship race in Middletown on July 20th. Uncasville's Chadwick Brown was 7th (21:03); Sue Faber of Oxford continues to be one of the state's top female runners at the age of 40, as she earned top female honors in Middletown in 23:14. Johnson's winning time of 19:55 was 4 seconds better than runner-up George Luke of Clinton and 30 better than the rest of the field.....Those looking to run a fast mile should consider traveling to Danielson on Thursday, August 7th for the 5th Annual St. James Downhill Mile. The race features an elevation drop of 170 feet from start to finish, nearly guaranteeing a personal best. Contact Gerry Chester (kchester@snet.net) or St. James Church for the specifics.

This Month in History

July 12th, 1987 – In one of the more competitive fields assembled for a local summer road race, Mike Cotton of New Haven and Carla Brown of Norwich earn wins at the New London Sailfest 5K Road Race. Cotton disposes of his nearest rivals Ed Sparkowski and Wayne Jacob to win the race in 14:37, 18 seconds up on Sparkowski (14:55) with Jacob 3rd in 15:02. Fran Houle (15:09), Tim Kane (15:11), Joe Banas (15:26), Master's winner Bill Marshall (15:29), Ed Zubritsky (15:31), Chris Hansen (15:40), and Junior winner Mike Zadora (15:51) round out the top 10 in the race, with 16 runners going faster than 16:10. Brown's 18:00 clocking is good enough to outdistance her nearest rival Janice Boyes (2nd in 18:58) by nearly a minute. More than 300 runners competed.

Don Sikorski writes a twice-monthly running column for the Norwich Bulletin. His "Coach's Corner" column can be accessed at www.moheganstriders.org. He can also be reached by e-mail at kdcsikorski@netzero.net.