

MEMORIAL SERVICE TO HONOR RUNNING FAMILY AND FRIENDS

By DON SIKORSKI
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Sports teach us many things about life. We learn how to compete, how to play by the rules, how to push ourselves to accomplish more than we realize we are capable of. And along the way, we develop friendships, many of which last a lifetime but are often taken for granted in day to day life. Having been involved in distance running for 25 years now, I sometimes find myself reflecting back on how many great friends and acquaintances I have made through the sport. The Norwich-based Mohegan Striders Association was formed in 1972 and over the years has developed into one of the top running clubs in New England. I joined the Striders as a high school cross-country and track runner and have remained an active member of the organization ever since. Lured to the club by the opportunity to compete with the area's best road racers; Tim Smith, Fran Houle, Billy Marshall, Jim Uhrig, Joe Banas, I soon learned that runners were much more than weekly mileage and racing flats. Along the way, I also met a terrific group of people. Despite their different backgrounds, runners share a common bond, which is something that makes our sport unique and special.

In the club's 32 year history, the Mohegan Striders have named a total of seven honorary members to its organization. Sadly, three of those honorary members passed away in 2004. Al Morrison was not a runner, but he was an enthusiastic supporter of the sport of distance running and track and field. Al served the Mohegan Striders organization as timer, statistician, and honorary coach. He was named the club's third honorary member in January 1976. Though his health failed him during his later years, many area runners fondly remembered Al's storytelling abilities and statistical memory. Joe Lonardelli began assisting the club with its Summer Recreation Race Series in Norwich's Mohegan Park back in 1981. He had participated as a volunteer at that event every year until his passing this past June. Retired after 30 years of service with the City of Norwich Public Works Department, Lonardelli served as Kevin Crowley's right hand man with the youth track and cross-country programs in Norwich, and donated countless hours of his time to dozens of local road races in the area. Bob Carbray served as the club's Recording and Membership Secretary for seventeen consecutive years. In fact it was Carbray who had recruited Lonardelli's assistance that summer of '81. Carbray also served on the Rose Arts Road Race Committee and was an active member on the Board of Directors of the East Lyme Marathon Committee. All three of these individuals contributed a great deal to the Mohegan Striders and to the sport of running in Southeastern Connecticut. John Degange, a former sportswriter for the New London Day, and Harold Tantaquidgeon, a direct descendant of Uncas, Chief of the Mohegan Nation, are two other honorary members of the Mohegan Striders that have passed away. These individuals, along with a number of family or friends of the Striders and of the running community, will be recognized at the Mohegan Strider Memorial Service and Run next month.

Long-time runner Marshall Collins of Salem is responsible for establishing the 1st annual event for the Striders. Reflecting back on what people like Morrison, Lonardelli, and Carbray meant to the running club inspired Collins to organize the memorial event. "There have been a number of people who have died this past year," explained Collins of the club's recent loss. "And as different people as they were, they were all important people to the club. Sean Delaney.....he was a great runner (Delaney, the Mohegan Striders Men's Open Racing Team Captain, passed away in May 2000). Al Morrison, on the other hand, never ran a step in his life. But he was an ambassador for running. Jessie Kelley.....look at all she did for running. So the idea came about as to how do you honor and remember these people without it being a sad occasion?" After tossing the concept around at a few of the running club's weekly social gatherings, Collins realized that the idea of a memorial service, to include a social group run and post-event refreshments, would be a great way to accomplish this task.

Club President Tim Kane of Preston also recognized the need to honor those individuals who have meant so much to the organization and to the sport. "The Mohegan Striders are over 30 years old now," said Kane. "Many of the people who were there with the club in the beginning have moved on. In 2004, three of our honorary members passed away. It brought to light to some of the members of our club to tell a story about the people who established the club into what is today." Kane, a competitive runner and cyclist who has served as the club's President for nine years now, also feels that it is important to recognize the bond that the honorary members had with the local community that extended past road racing. "Joe Lonardelli, Al Morrison, Bob Carbray.....these were three guys who were a part of the community in Southeastern Connecticut," explained Kane of the recent loss of three of the club's honorary members. "The Mohegan Striders want to remain close to those roots; the community we live in. And it's a good thing to memorialize the people who did good things".

The 1st Annual Mohegan Strider Memorial Service / Run will take place at Fort Shantok in Uncasville on Sunday, April 3rd. The event kicks off at 12:30pm with the National Anthem, followed by a group run and walk through the park. Around 1:00pm, a brief prayer service and remarks will take place. Names of honored family and friends of the Mohegan Striders Association will be recognized. Expect the Striders to share stories and memories with post-run refreshments following the service. The event is free and open to the public. Anyone interested in making a donation to the Mohegan Striders Memorial Fund should contact Marshall Collins at (860) 859-1555 or by e-mail at mrcolsal@aol.com.

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