

# MOHEGAN PARK AN UNDERAPPRECIATED TREASURE

By DON SIKORSKI  
*Special to the Bulletin*

Norwich's Mohegan Park, located in the heart of the city, has undergone plenty of changes during its extensive history. Yet it has continued to preserve much of its natural state and is open to the public year round for recreation and enjoyment. If you enjoy swimming, fishing, hiking, bicycling, basketball, running, walking, picnics, or entertaining your kids on a playground, Mohegan Park offers a place for any of those activities. The city has invested money and resources into improving Mohegan Park, and the Parks and Rec Department works hard to maintain the park grounds. For runners, Mohegan Park offers plenty of roads, paths, and trails with hilly terrain to challenge the fittest athlete and scenery that eases the pain of a long distance run. Plenty of serious mileage has been logged by Norwich runners in Mohegan Park over the years.

The Norwich Recreation Run Series, co-sponsored by the Norwich Recreation Department and the Mohegan Striders Association, has been conducted each July and August since 1965. During those 40+ summers, the race course has also undergone some alterations. During the first 13 seasons, the course began and finished near the Recreation Department Building located at the top of Reynolds Road. In 1978, the runs were moved to the Kelly Middle School parking lot off Mahan Drive due to the increased traffic on Rockwell Street and McKinley Avenue Extension. That 3 mile course was used for 23 years and featured some of the area's best distance runners who would gather intent on gearing up their summer training and test their fitness levels racing against their peers in a low key event. In 2001, the runs were moved to the center of Mohegan Park due to concerns of increased traffic on Mahan Drive. The new location now offers the opportunity to conduct a children's ½ mile fun run and a beginner's 1 mile race prior to the featured 3 mile event. Over the years, these races provided important training for both the serious and the casual runner, and the event usually attracts 70-80 runners per week for an 8 week series running from July 4<sup>th</sup> through the end of the August.

Mohegan Park appears to be the last available area left in Norwich to conduct such an event. Yet there is a proposal to approve an amphitheatre in Mohegan Park Center, forecasted to perform six shows per week during ten weeks of the summer. While the concept may appear on the surface to be a positive step for the city, a further review would demonstrate why this proposal is flawed and would not benefit Norwich. The City of Norwich has worked vigorously to develop a downtown theatre district downtown, and that concept, which has come to fruition in recent years, has begun to gain popularity and continues to thrive. Offering the same type of competing entertainment in Mohegan Park would be the equivalent of building a minor league baseball park in Taftville and still anticipating attendance at Dodd Stadium to increase. Norwich currently has only one significant remaining area of passive green space and that space is Mohegan Park. To eliminate this resource by catering to a proposal from one developer would be a mistake.

If you value having Mohegan Park as a resource in Norwich, I would urge you to attend the Mohegan Park Improvement and Development Advisory Committee meeting which will be held at 5:15pm on Thursday, September 8<sup>th</sup> at Norwich City Hall. This show of concern for the well being of Mohegan Park is open to all, not just Norwich taxpayers. Please make every effort to find the time to attend and let your voice be heard. There are some members of the committee who, unfortunately, rarely set foot in the park. It is important that they realize Mohegan Park is a valued resource that is very much used and appreciated in its natural setting.

## **This Month in History**

July 7<sup>th</sup> – August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1965 - Veteran Norwich distance runner Don Pirie volunteers to conduct a weekly recreation race series in Norwich Mohegan Park. Two divisions were established; a junior division race for high school runners and younger, and a senior division race for open runners. Both races course were advertised as 2.5 miles. Ribbons were awarded to the top five finishers in each division weekly, with medals presented to the top finishers during the 8<sup>th</sup> championship week race. NFA's Tim Smith captures the very first Rec Race title, establishing a course record of 12:05.7. Groton's Bob Beardslee won the senior division race in a time of 12:18. Groton's Amby Burfoot, a student at Wesleyan University who would go on to win the Boston Marathon in 1967, bested young Smith's record mark a week later by running 11:59.1. Burfoot would again return to Norwich for the final week's championship race to outduel Mystics Ray Crothers by 15 seconds, lowering his own course record mark to 11:48.5. Smith would claim five junior race wins during the eight week series that continues to take place today in Norwich's Mohegan Park Center.

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