

ROSE ARTS TRADITION REMEMBERED

By DON SIKORSKI
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Trying to explain the lure of the Rose Arts Road Race to someone unfamiliar with the long standing tradition of the race is like trying to explain why the golfer who throws a half dozen clubs per round finds the game to be “relaxing”. When Norwich closed the door on the Rose Arts Festival, the road race went with it, ending a 31 year June tradition in 1998. Runners from a dozen states would travel to Norwich to compete in one of New England’s most challenging races. The course stretched you out for two rolling miles before a series of uphill climbs on Canterbury Turnpike, then would spit you out down a steep unwind onto sun-drenched roads through Taftville and Greenville heading into downtown. Temperatures were usually warm and the air often thick and humid, sapping the runner’s strength early. The race distance wasn’t even to the exact mile (unofficially recorded to be 10.4 miles) but then again, personal bests were rarely claimed on this course. Still, there was something special about the Rose Arts Road Race.

Few road races carry more tradition than Rose Arts. And the names of runners who have pinned on a number to do battle at Rose Arts stacks up against almost any road race around. Fresh of a 6th place finish in the previous fall’s NCAA Cross-Country Championships, a Wesleyan student by the name of Ambrose Burfoot won the inaugural Rose Arts race back in 1967. There were 37 finishers that year. Burfoot was the real deal, in fact, the very next year, “Amby” would go on to win a much bigger race: The Boston Marathon. Burfoot returned to Rose Arts to win four more times.

Having logged consistent 140 mile weeks, comprised of twice daily 10 milers in preparation for the 1967 fall season, Burfoot had every intention of running, but certainly not racing, that first Rose Arts race as part of his training. But while registering, Burfoot glanced over at the prize table and spotted a black and white television set to be awarded to the race winner. Cursing the morning 10 mile workout already under his belt, Burfoot went on to win the race in 54:41. And rumor has it, he still owns the television set.

When former Ledyard High star John Flora set the course record in the 1979 race, it was Burfoot on the back of the media truck with a stopwatch in hand. Flora smoked a talent-rich field that day including two-time defending champion John Vitale and future champions Dave Raunig and Jim Uhrig. Flora’s win wasn’t a surprise; he possessed national class credentials and had qualified for the 1980 Olympic team at 10,000 meters as an alternate. What was a surprise was his aggressive approach for a first timer at Rose Arts. He hit the mile mark in 4:31 and immediately had a 75 yard lead on the field. Vitale put up a valiant effort and gave chase throughout, finishing only 46 seconds in arrears, but it was clearly Flora’s day. Sadly, it would be his only Rose Arts appearance, as a hip injury that flared up at the 1984 Olympic Trials ended his competitive racing career for good.

Plenty of other quality runners came to Norwich and won. John Vitale claimed a total of five Rose Arts titles. Bobby Doyle, Jay O’Keefe, Wayne Jacob, Dave Raunig, Jim Uhrig, Scott Mason, and Peter Pazik all posted victories at Rose Arts against deep and talented fields. On the women’s side, Sally Zimmer, Jan Merrill-Morin, and Mary Lynn Currier were three big-name runners that posted outstanding winning times. And Carla Thompson has virtually dominated the women’s field with a total of seven Rose Arts titles to her credit.

Plenty of top levels runners also failed to win the Rose Arts race. Mystic’s Johnny J. Kelley, a two-time Olympian and the 1957 Boston Marathon winner, finished in the runner-up position to Burfoot in that 1967 race. He would also finish 2nd in the 1968 and 1972 races as well, but would never win at Rose Arts. Mike Cotton, a 2:16 marathoner from New Haven, came to Rose Arts with aspirations of winning. He finished in the runner-up position three times. Bill Krohn was a world class 5,000 meter specialist (13:25 PR), three-time Olympic Trials qualifier, and former NFA track and cross-country star living in White Plains, NY when he finished 2nd to Poland’s Tomasz Gnabel, a two-time Rose Arts winner (1992-93), in his only hometown return.

The most recognizable runner in the Rose Arts race each year was local favorite Tim Smith. A 2:23 marathoner who had won dozens of road races in his career, Smith was the only runner to compete in all 31 Rose Arts races. His best finish was in the 1972 race, when Smith finished 3rd overall behind Burfoot and Kelley. “It was always fun to run at home,” said Smith of what attracted him to race at Rose Arts. “We all know the burden of travel and to bring the runners to our town was great. In the late 70’s and early ‘80’s, this area was loaded with these caliber runners, and the race drew from the nearby states as well. I remember that I would run no matter how I felt. It was right here in your back yard and I felt, how can you not respond?” Smith was injured for the 1985 race, but insisted on competing anyway. “I had money with me to make a phone call just in case,” laughed Smith as he recalled that incident. “I remember seeing a picture of me coming off School Street (in Taftville) with my calf wrapped from ankle to kneecap. Smith limped home to finish 322nd in 83:01 that year, over 20 full minutes slower than he would ever run for the Rose Arts race.

My own personal Rose Arts experience began back in 1981. As a spectator watching from the A&P parking lot on Boswell Avenue, I watched in disbelief as runners shuffled past seven miles of running in humid, sun-soaked conditions. I was in awe and promised myself that I would run (and hopefully finish) the next year’s Rose Arts race. I did. It was my first road race and I was hooked on the sport. To this day, every time I run a section of the course, I can’t help but think back to the memories of competing in the Rose Arts Road Race.

Memorial Run

For others that may reminisce about the former Rose Arts race, an unofficial Rose Arts Memorial group run will take place this morning beginning at Chelsea Parade (in front of Norwich Free Academy) at 9:00am. Runners will travel the original 10.4 mile Rose Arts race course. All levels of ability are welcome to participate.

ROSE ARTS FESTIVAL ROAD RACE CHAMPIONS

YEAR	WINNER	TIME	TIM SMITH'S RESULTS	
1967	Amby Burfoot	54:41	11th	60:02
1968	Jim Keefe	54:46	8th	60:36
1969	Amby Burfoot	55:52	10th	59:38
1970	Dan Moinihan	55:30	22nd	64:17
1971	John Vitale	53:28	8th	57:20
1972	Amby Burfoot	56:32	3rd	57:11
1973	Dan Moinihan	55:49	7th	60:50
	Toby Lenner	93:07		
1974	John Vitale	52:32	9th	55:26 (PB)
	Sue Hoagland	74:45		
1975	Amby Burfoot	53:43	9th	56:46
	Kathy Glenny	76:45		
1976	Amby Burfoot	53:14	4th	56:22
	Robin Graff	79:59		
1977	John Vitale	54:21	12th	58:56
	Cherrie Bridges	65:58		
1978	John Vitale	54:07	6th	56:22
	Carolyn Bravakis	65:26		
1979	John Flora	52:11 (CR)	15th	57:38
	Carolyn Bravakis	65:05		
1980	Jim Uhrig	55:37	4th	55:55
	Robin Snyder	66:58		
1981	John Vitale	53:17	13th	57:45
	Carolyn Bravakis	66:39		
1982	Bobby Doyle	52:29	10th	55:48
	Sally Zimmer	63:13		
1983	Jay O'Keefe	52:36	7th	56:32
	Carla Dossett	66:27		
1984	Dave Raunig	52:48	6th	55:44
	Carla Dossett	65:31		
1985	Wayne Jacob	53:46	322nd (Injured)	83:01
	Carla Dossett	64:16		
1986	Ron Cozean	55:06	8th	57:03
	Carla Dossett	65:01		
1987	Bart Petracca	53:18	14th	58:23
	Carla Dossett	66:54		
1988	Scott Mason	53:11	12th (1st 40+)	58:07
	Carla Dossett	69:01		
1989	Scott Mason	52:50	13th (1st 40+)	58:46
	Sally Zimmer	64:47		
1990	Spyros Barres	54:21	10th (1st 40+)	58:24
	Sue Faber	63:29		
1991	Wayne Jacob	54:13	5th (1st 40+)	58:01
	Jan Merrill-Morin	61:34		
1992	Tomaz Gnabel	54:02	6th (1st 40+)	58:08
	Mary Lynn Courier	67:09		
1993	Tomaz Gnabel	54:18	8th (1st 40+)	58:22
	Mary Lynn Courier	61:16 (CR)		
1994	Peter Pazik	53:36	8th (1st 40+)	59:03
	Carla Thompson	65:52		
1995	Steve O'Connell	54:55	14th (2nd 40+)	60:32
	Mary Lynn Courier	61:28		
1996	Peter Pazik	54:19	18th (3rd 40+)	62:48
	Madalena Boudreau	66:01		
1997	Houssine Siba	56:21	7th (3rd 40+)	61:42
	Madalena Boudreau	64:47		

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