

KELLEY RACE A SUMMERTIME TRADITION

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

For years, Race Director Way Hedding has lured runners from all over New England to the John J. Kelley Road Race with the same simple tactic; the promise of a free “comp” entry for the recruited runner making the trek to New London for his race. The gimmick sometimes works. What Hedding doesn’t always reveal is that the Kelley Race is free for every runner, from the race’s elite finishers right on down to the casual jogger. In an era of inflating prices, the Kelley race is clearly the best deal in town.

Consider that running 11.6 miles in the heat and humidity of an August morning isn’t so bad when you combine the perks of a free day at the beach and the companionship of 300+ fellow runners. Runners will have that opportunity on Saturday, August 5th as the 44th Annual Ocean Beach / John J. Kelley 11.6 Mile Road race takes place beginning and ending at Ocean Beach Park in New London. The race began back in 1963, when the City of New London collaborated with Schafer Beer Day at Ocean Beach Park to organize a road race event. Local standout Johnny J. Kelley, a two-time Olympian with a Boston Marathon win and eight AAU Marathon titles to his credit, would win that inaugural race, which consisted of only 19 runners braving a 12:00 noon starting time. Years later, the city of New London would pay tribute to Kelley by naming the road race after him. Over 40 years later, the event continued to flourish, and continues to maintain its no entry fee policy.

Race Director Way Hedding of Niantic, a 1968 New London High School graduate and road racing veteran, competed in the Ocean Beach / Kelley race after his high school years and learned the ropes by assisting then-Race Director Jack Dempsey, who passed away back in 1998. Dempsey stepped down in 1988 and passed the torch to Hedding, who is now in his 18th year as the race’s Director. Hedding’s approach to managing the event is consistent with Dempsey’s philosophy. “You have to suffer dehydration before you can enjoy re-hydration,” Dempsey was quoted at the 1979 race. That theme has remained.

At 44 years strong, the Kelley race is the 2nd oldest in the state (behind the Thanksgiving Day Manchester Road Race). The course (designed by 1968 Boston Marathon winner Amby Burfoot) winds through the picturesque neighborhoods of New London and Waterford and offers plenty of water stops along the way. Asked why the Kelley race has outlived its competitors and remains such a popular race, Hedding offers a number of explanations. “The race has a mystique to it,” explained Hedding as he discussed all the great names that have competed at the Kelley race in past years. That tradition helps maintain the race’s “throwback” image, which is perceived by many as a positive. “It doesn’t have the glitter and gloss of a big sponsor race,” said Burfoot years ago of the allure of the race. “It’s described as a race for runners and that’s just what it is”. Hedding has also demonstrated the ability to promote a road race as well as anyone, attracting both the masses of middle of the pack runners as well as a top notch race field to battle up front. “We treat the last runners that finish just as importantly as the first runners,” says Hedding.

Despite the absence of prize money, the race historically attracts plenty of quality runners. The start time change from Noon to 9:00am, which took place in 1985, helped produce both course records, as Middletown’s Gary Nixon (57:33) and the late Agnus Ruane (66:57) lowered the course’s best mark that year. England’s Dave Clark, who finished 2nd to Nixon in that 1985 race, holds the Masters mark of 58:56. Bloomfield’s Jane Arnold ran 76:06 in the 1982 race for the female Master’s record. Past winners include Kelley (twice), Burfoot (seven times), John Vitale (three times), Norm Higgins, and Wayne Jacob. Norwich’s Melissa Perkins-Banas is expected to return to defend her Kelley Race title (1:15:25). Her husband Joe, himself a past champion with a win in the 1988 race (1:04:45), may also compete. They are the only husband and wife team to claim Kelley Race victories.

The Ocean Beach / Kelley Road race features complimentary refreshments, professional split and finish timing by SNERRO, and age division awards on the boardwalk following the race. The event takes place thanks to the sponsorship provided by Dave Sugrue and Ocean Beach Park. The race was also recently voted “One of New England’s Top 80 Best of the Best Road Races” by New England Runner Magazine. The Connecticut Defenders have also stepped in for this year’s race, donating tickets as awards for the top runners. Starting time is 9:00am, leaving the runner’s plenty of quality beach and social time. Race day entries will be accepted (Hedding will gladly accept a post-race beverage at the Port N’ Starboard Lounge in lieu of an entry fee) and volunteers for water stops, split times, and at the finish area are always needed. Call the Race Hotline at (860) 739-9927, e-mail the Race Director at heddingw@aol.com, or check out www.moheganstriders.org for more race or volunteer information.

A special event will also take place at this year’s race. Runners are asked to bring old pairs of unwanted running shoes or sneakers for donation, as the Nike Shoe Company is coordinating a project in conjunction with the Mohegan Elementary School to install a rubber ground covering around the school’s playground. Nike will be funding the melting and construction to upgrade the handicapped accessible playground, and is looking for 10,000 pairs of rubber-soled shoes for the project. So clean out your garage or basement for a good cause, and make every effort to include the Ocean Beach / John J. Kelley 11.6 Mile Road race in your summer running plans.

Racing Roundup

The Mohegan Striders Summer Racing Series continues through Thursday, August 24th in Norwich's Mohegan Park. There is a ½ mile kids run starting at 6:30pm, with a 1 mile developmental run at 6:45pm and the 3 mile recreation race starting at 7:00pm. Races are conducted every Thursday evening, all events are free of charge, and all begin and end in the center of the park. All levels of ability are welcome.....For those looking for more of an off road challenge, head up to Franklin's Giddings Park on Route 207 every Monday night. There is also a preceding kid's race at 6:30pm, with the 3 mile XC run starting at 7:00pm. The Franklin course offers a good, low key test for those looking to get off the roads and get in some good training.

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.