

LOCALS CONTINUE TO MAKE KELLEY RACE AN ANNUAL TRADITION

By DON SIKORSKI
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Running is a relatively inexpensive activity. The Ocean Beach / Kelley Road Race takes that positive one step further, offering a free entry for every runner, regardless of speed. Couple this perk with a free day at the beach and it almost makes the thought of running 11.6 miles in the summer heat sound appealing.

The Ocean Beach / John & Jessie Kelley Road Race will take place on Saturday, August 4th. The race starts and finishes at Ocean Beach Park in New London with the starting gun fired promptly at 9:00am. It was back in 1963 when Schafer Beer Day at Ocean Beach Park coordinated a road race, and a local speedster named Johnny J. Kelley, the 1957 Boston Marathon winner and a two-time Olympian, outran 18 other competitors for the inaugural win. The race is now named after Kelley and his late wife Jessie, who was an integral part of the Southeastern Connecticut running community. Now in its 45th running, the race continues to draw praise from runners who return to New London each year.

Norwich's Kevin Grant plans to be at this year's race, although he expects this year's run will take much longer than it did in 1991 when Grant won the race (58:59). "What comes to mind lately is how I really need to pace myself to run 11.6 miles comfortably," said Grant of his current outlook on next week's run. "I know I can do it, but I don't run that far regularly anymore." Grant is one of many top notch runners that won't be running at 100% effort on Saturday, instead opting to get some quality miles in and enjoy the day afterwards. As he climbs the upgrade near his former Waterford High School training grounds, Grant may reflect on that past winning effort to get him to the finish line. "I think I remember it most because I was all alone from the start," recalls Grant of that effort. "I wanted to win the race and knew I was in good shape, so I figured the course record might have been possible. I wasn't used to running many long races, so I discussed it with (my coach) Norm Higgins, who suggested I make people run to my level to beat me." With local ties, a Kelley race win was especially satisfying to Grant. "This was a special race through the streets that I ran daily in high school; hearing and seeing many people I knew along the route was a lot of fun". Although Grant fell short in his course record attempt, he does have the coveted pewter mug and plenty of race memories."

Tim Smith is another Norwich runner with strong ties to the race's long history. "I think my first Ocean Beach race was either summer '64 or '65," recalls Smith. "I always got goose bumps seeing the NY/NJ charter bus coming in because it was loaded with running notables. The race use to start at noon on one of summer's hottest days. In the early years, the major (race) sponsor was the F.M. Schaefer Brewing Company, the post-race event was described as the largest seafood buffet in New England, and it was all free! I really loved that buffet." Smith recalls plenty of big names runners that blend in amongst the regulars. "Tom Fleming, John Vitale, and of course, Amby (Burfoot), were all regulars." Smith also remembers those who gave their time in directing the event. "The race has evolved aptly under a number of good stewards: Tony Pero, "Katie" Sabilia, Jack Dempsey, and of course, Way Hedding, continuing to do a remarkable job. The free race and park entry is especially appreciated by families."

Bob Stack of Gales Ferry first became familiar with the Kelley Race when he moved to the area from Rockville, Maryland. Reflecting back on the tradition and competition of the Ocean Beach event, a race he had finished 19 times, still keeps him inspired. "The field was always competitive," recalls Stack of those race battles. "It was like homecoming. It was one race I never got nervous about running because I knew that there was any number of others who could win; fortunate if I could finish in the top ten." During his prime competition years, Stack was certainly one of the area's very best runners. His personal best time of 61:20 (a clip of 5:17 per mile in the summer heat) from 25 years ago got him into the top 10. That time would probably be good enough to win now. "I always liked the course; it was challenging but fair," says Stack of the Ocean Beach race. "I'm a traditionalist," claims Stack. "And besides, you can't beat the price".

Race Director Way Hedding of Niantic continues to successfully promote the event, drawing a quality field and insuring the post-race festivities go smoothly. Hedding assumes the leadership role from the late Jack Dempsey, who brought a true party, down to earth atmosphere to the race. "You have to suffer dehydration before you can enjoy re-hydration," Dempsey was quoted after the 1979 race. Hedding certainly has no trouble keeping that same spirit alive today.

The course records (Gary Nixon's 57:33 and Agnus Ruane's 66:57), were both set in 1985. Griswold's Gavin Coombs (61:59) and Norwich's Melissa Perkins-Banas (74:25) are the race's defending champions. The race features professional timing services by SNERRO, live entertainment featuring the party rock band "Run For Cover" on the boardwalk, complimentary refreshments, age division awards, and a free day at the beach. Entries will be accepted on race day, and volunteers are always needed. Call the Kelley Race Hotline at (860) 739-9927, e-mail Race Director Hedding at heddingw@aol.com, or check out www.moheganstriders.org for more race or volunteer information. Make plans to include a trip to Ocean Beach in your running schedule next weekend.

"You have to suffer dehydration before you can enjoy re-hydration" – Jack Dempsey

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