

WHERE ARE THEY NOW: FRAN HOULE

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

When an athlete is asked about which coach had the biggest impact on their athletic career, Fran Houle can accurately say it was the high school baseball coach. Houle never did make the N.F.A. team and play baseball for the Wildcats; he was cut his freshman year. At the time, Houle, who was “99 pounds soaking wet and lucky to be 5 feet tall”, was disappointed. But it would prove to be a blessing. Looking for an athletic alternative, Houle chose to run cross-country for Coach Gene McGrath, who had guided some of the strongest teams in the state during his coaching tenure. Although Houle didn’t envision himself a long distance runner, he knew that he possessed some natural speed; the rest would be a product of conditioning. “Distance running never came into my mind,” recalled Houle of the decision to try another sport. Nevertheless, Houle was soon glad to be a part of a sport that determined success not by size but by actual results.

Through some hard work, Houle soon began to receive recognition from those results. Houle would graduate from Norwich Free Academy in 1980 as a three-time all conference performer in cross-country. He would go on to compete at the University of Connecticut alongside an outstanding cast of teammates, including John Bysiewicz, Tim Devalve, and John Murphy. Initially, Houle found the transition from high school to collegiate running a difficult one. “Freshman year was very tough,” says Houle of his start at UConn. “But I hung in there.” Houle would continue to get faster, a result of the adaptation to the increased training volume, as well as a much needed growth spurt. Houle blossomed from a 5’3” high school senior to a 5’8” varsity runner at UConn, and the additional size and strength, not to mention the experience of running with top collegiate runners, would pay dividends. Houle would continue to train and race after college, competing in weekend road races and battling some of the area’s best runners. They soon began to notice their new young rival as well. “Bill Marshall, Tim Smith, Phil Garland, Amby Burfoot, Joe Banas....”, recalls Houle when asked to recall some of the area runners that he respected and competed against during those early years. Houle would churn out some impressive personal bests during those years as a member of the Mohegan Striders and the Central Mass Striders, including a 14:52 5K in Danielson and a 31:27 10K in Clinton. Houle would also earn the course record at the 1987 Lisbon Fall Festival Road Race (3.5 miles in 17:20) and earn four top 10 finish in the prestigious Rose Arts Festival 10.4 Mile Road Race, including a runner-up finish to Wayne Jacob in the 1985 race (55:04). It is those highlights, as well as the camaraderie of his fellow runners, that Houle appreciates most even though he no longer competes. “I enjoyed the competition and the success of a top five finish,” says Houle. “And I really enjoyed the social aspect; I met a lot of good people,” Houle reflects on those years. “That’s what I miss most now”.

Today, Houle resides in Lisbon with his wife Karen and children Nicholas, 11, and Jonathan, 9. Both have shown an interest in running, although they may not be aware of just how fast their Dad once was. They both compete in cross-country and track for Coach Judy Fontaine at Lisbon Central School. Houle is also the owner of Prokop Signs in Norwich, a business he purchased right around the time his first son was born. The responsibilities of a new family and owning his own business cut into training time pretty dramatically, and Houle began to struggle with the decisions to retire from competitive racing. A natural athlete from a young age, Houle remains active with the Lisbon Recreation Department, and participates in softball, basketball, and volleyball. Houle did attempt one running comeback about ten years ago, and doesn’t rule out the possibility of a second comeback just yet. “I wouldn’t count it out,” laughed Houle, 44, when asked about a return to the running scene. “I would like my kids to be exposed to the road racing thing,” he says of the experience.

Fran Houle was one of the runners I looked up to when I began running. He was a great teammate and a true competitor who made up for his lack of size with heart and mental toughness. A return to the roads would be welcomed, but for now, we can thank his baseball coach for steering him in the right athletic direction.

Racing Roundup

The 30th annual New Haven Labor Day Road Race, now sponsored by Stratton Faxon, is anticipating over 5,000 entrants to participate in the 20K, 5K or 1/2 mile Kids Fun Run. The 20K race, which begins at 8:30am sharp and starts and finishes downtown on the New Haven green, will again host both the Men’s and Women’s USA Championship. Although last year’s champion and American 20K and Half Marathon record holder Ryan Hall is recovering from a virus and will not participate, an outstanding field is expected. Ryan Shay, a former New Haven 20K champion, will be amongst the favorites. Other top competitors include 2001 and 2002 New Haven 20K winner Dan Browne, last year’s 3-4-5 finishers Andrew Carlson, Joe Driscoll, and Jason Lemkohle, and 2006 NCAA Cross-Country Champion Josh Rohatinsky, who will be making his professional debut. On the women’s side, 2004 Olympian Elva Dryer of Colorado (2nd in 2006) and former Yale standout Katie O’Neil, are expected to challenge for the win. The New Haven 20K course record is Khalid Khannouchi’s 57:37, set in 1998. For race information, call (203) 481-5933 or go on-line at newhavenroadrace.org.

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@sbcglobal.net.