

FAVORITES OUT IN FRONT EARLY

By DON SIKORSKI
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Think of the season-long road racing circuit as something similar to the Kentucky Derby. If the 2001 running and racing season, typically about mid-April through Thanksgiving, is viewed as a horse race, then you would probably be witnessing the favorites jumping out to the front of the pack right off the very first turn. Road racing in New England is fully underway, and Eastern and Southeastern Connecticut has already been flexing its muscles. At the USATF State 5K Championship in Simsbury two weeks ago, Waterford's Stephen Herrera did battle with Mark Robaczynski of Wethersfield right from the opening gun. Don King himself couldn't have scripted a better matchup this early into the season. With the absence of the Hi-Tek Racing teams' top runners from a year ago, many of which have since severed ties with their former team, it was clearly a two-man race between Herrera and Robaczynski. The two runners quickly separated themselves from the talented chase pack of contenders in the early going. Down the final stretch, Herrera found just enough to hold off his Hartford Track Club rival by a mere second to win the race in 15:12.4. Herrera avenged two previous losses to Robaczynski, 26, at the Tarzan Brown road race in Mystic in both 1999 and 2000 (Robaczynski and Herrera finished 2-3 both times to Danbury's Joe LeMay). Herrera also claimed the first individual state road race title of 2001 and helped put his Mohegan Striders team comfortably out front in the overall standings with their 2nd straight win of the season, having also won the Indoor Track State Championship event in March. After making his marathon debut at East Lyme last fall, Herrera has opted to pass on any offers to run a second marathon this year, electing to concentrate on some key road races and cross-country events. That strategy should spell trouble for the Connecticut competition this season.

Herrera may be running a cut above his fellow Southeastern Connecticut competitors, but the presence of a youth movement, which had in general been surprisingly absent from the racing scene during the past few years, can again be detected at the top of the racing results. Two runners showing much early-season promise have been Uncasville's Chadwick Brown and Canterbury's Chad Johnson. Brown, 25, who often trains and travels to races with Herrera, has already posted a 2:42:56 marathon effort at Boston this April. He then followed up with an 8th place finish in 15:52 at Simsbury less than two weeks later. Herrera and Brown had also clocked a 1-2 finish the day prior at the Flanders 5K in Niantic, with Brown logging a weekend of back-to-back personal bests at the distance. Herrera and Brown have cruised through some very impressive early-season races to date, also recording 1-2 finishes at the Salem 3 Mile Road Race in March and at the Lawrence and Memorial Spring Stride 3.5-mile race last week.

Johnson certainly has the talent to make an impact as well. The two-time state cross-country champion while at Norwich Free Academy looked sharp at Simsbury, finishing 6th overall in 15:48. Johnson also cruised to a comfortable win at his hometown Canterbury 10K race in early April. Also look for Kevin Grant of New London and Uncasville's Todd Bennett, both of whom have already claimed a few early-season wins, to be strong contenders up front this season.

On the women's side, Mystic's Martha Merz has showed no ill effects from some early season nagging injuries. Merz finished 2nd female overall at Simsbury, only 5 seconds behind winner Susan Faber, in an impressive 17:36 clocking. Merz returned with a strong showing at L&M, finishing 14th overall to claim the women's title. Another local lady that has been running extremely well to date has been Norwich's Melissa Perkins-Banas, who opted for the 10K race at Simsbury and finished a strong 2nd female in a brisk 38:40. Merz and Perkins-Banas, along with Stonington's Heather Bessette, Preston's Kris-Anne Kane, and Old Lyme's Jeannie Lucey, have all run well in the past month and again should be familiar names atop the leader board this season.

A number of Masters' (40-49) runners have also proven capable of mixing it up with their younger rivals. Bob Stack of Gales Ferry, Norwich's Joseph Banas, Bobby Clark of New London, and Preston's Tim Kane have all showed that they are capable of contending with the Open division's best this season. Dennis Crowe of Waterford and Tim Smith of Norwich again look to do battle in the Men's Grandmaster (50+) category. On the women's side, Pawcatuck's Carla Thompson, a very familiar name on the local racing circuit should again dominate the women's Masters division. Canterbury's Michaeleen Haeseler is one of the area's best age-group competitors in the 50+ category.

Race participation has also held strong to date, with many area races drawing decent attendance. Corporate running has also showed strong growth, lead by Team Pfizer, who brought over 90 runners to the L&M race. The Electric Boat Athletic Club and the Mohegan Sun Runners' Club both brought strong numbers to the L&M event as well. A healthy dose of good, solid competition is good for the sport and also tends to bring out stronger performances. Unlike most other sports, road racing doesn't feature a post-season or a pre-determined championship schedule throughout the season. No Super Bowl, no World Series, no four "Majors", no NASCAR circuit, no "March Madness" single elimination contests. Therefore, expect to see some of the better competitive races taking place over various distances throughout the state all season long. One final note: don't be intimidated by all this talk of fleet-footed contenders battling each weekend. Runners of all levels of ability are welcome and everyone should consider getting out to a road race event and participating, either as a runner, walker, or volunteer. Road race events, unlike some other sports, don't discriminate by age or ability. See you on the roads.

This month in history

May 21st, 1983 – The 10th Annual Danielson Springtime Festival Road Race becomes the first TAC sanctioned road race in Connecticut to award cash prizes. Jay O'Keefe of Mansfield, however, is forced to pass up his \$125 payday due to potential conflicts with his future NCAA eligibility. The 19 year-old O'Keefe, a former two-time State Open cross-country champion at E.O. Smith, had recently left Auburn University, but accepting cash would have jeopardized his future plans of returning to college and using his two remaining years of track and cross-country eligibility. O'Keefe certainly deserved something more than the small trophy he took home. He had just completed the 5-mile race course in 24:00, breaking Amby Burfoot's seven year-old course record by 2 seconds. James Murphy of the Central Mass TC was a distant second, 52 seconds back. John Luther, Wayne Jacob, and Will Rogers rounded out the top five finishers overall, while Mary Zuber was the first female finisher. John Pirie of Montville captured the 3-mile event in 15:18. The Danielson race was subsequently changed from two races at the 3 and 5 mile distances one 5K (3.1 mile) race.

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