

ROSE CITY CONTINUES TO MEASURE UP

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

It seemed like there was a buzz going around in Norwich about road racing like we haven't heard in years. I couldn't even lace up my shoes and go for a run anywhere without being asked "are you running on Sunday" or "save something for the ten miler". They race they were referring to was the Rose City Challenge, which in it's third year has continued to fill the shoes of the once-mighty Rose Arts Festival race that had been a part of road racing in Norwich for over 30 years until the Festival was discontinued in 1998. Even though I would not be competing in this year's race, I soon began to appreciate the fact that there was again a growing interest in the event, reminiscent of the running boom days during the 1980's.

The Rose City Challenge matches up pretty well with the former Rose Arts race. The heat and the hills are still major factors (there's plenty of both), but the finish in the Dodd Stadium ballpark is unique and certainly a welcome sight for the 300+ weary runners that were looking forward to getting there from the start at Kelly Junior High School. The quality of the field up front has also regained its status as one the state's strongest. Kenya's Nelson Ndereva had the misfortune of missing his plane from Philadelphia back to Kenya (his goal was to get in two good weeks of altitude training there) and instead made the best of his stay here by effortlessly crushing the field in a new course record of 52:25.9. When I asked Ndereva what he thought of the course (I've never had someone run so fast on some of the same roads that I train on daily), he didn't complain about the heat. He didn't complain of the grueling uphill stretches of Canterbury Turnpike or White Plains Road. "It was a good race but I needed more competition," Ndereva replied innocently. "It would have been better if there were others running with me". This from a guy who has won the prestigious Beijing marathon twice and was 11th at the 1998 Boston Marathon in 2:14 and change. I hated to be the one to break it to him, but you generally won't find much company running that fast. Ndereva, whose training base is currently in East Brunswick, New Jersey, is hoping to run either the Beijing or Chicago Marathon this fall. "I'd like to run around 2:09", said Ndereva. I personally guaranteed him that both race courses would be cooler and flatter than here.

Danbury's Sergio Ribeiro, who hung in with Ndereva for the first three miles, fought off some ugly blisters to finish 2nd in 54:52. Chad Johnson, a two-time State Open Cross-Country Champion while competing for NFA, ran a superb race for 3rd overall and led his Mohegan Striders teammates to a 1st place finish. Mary-Lynn Currier, a former Olympic Trials qualifier in the marathon, successfully defended her women's title in 1:02:36. Two-time Rose City winner Mike Slinsky did not compete. In the accompanying 5K race, Ndereva's fellow countryman Patrick Wihwa had an easier mission, hitting the finish line first in 13:03. Kris-Anne Kane was the top female finisher in 17:05. Unfortunately for the 5K participants who walked away pleased with their new personal bests, the course was later found to be approximately ¼ mile short.

Overall, the Rose City Challenge is a terrific event that offers runners all that they could expect from a true New England summer road race. Race Director Pete Volkmar, along with race organizers Richard and Maureen Pichard, are to be commended for their fine efforts in bringing the tradition of the Rose Arts Race back to Norwich. And certainly the people of Norwich that were out along the race course providing water and support to the runners are also a big part of what makes this race special. Now if they would only stop asking me why I didn't run this year.....

Racing Roundup

Both the weather and the racing scene are beginning to heat up in June. Races are more frequent than ever, and there's been some strong performances despite the increased heat and humidity. Uncasville's Kevin Gallerani is returning to form after a bout with leg injuries this past winter. The 46 year-old Gallerani stole a win at the YMCA World's Largest 5K in Manchester, New Hampshire on June 2nd in 17:53.....New London's Kevin Grant finished 3rd overall in 58:20 at the 22nd Annual Bristol 10 Miler also on June 2nd.....Waterford's Stephen Herrera won the 3rd Annual Niantic Bay 10K on Friday, June 8th (two days prior to his Rose City effort) in a course record of 32:42. Herrera, who showed no effects of a recent calf injury two weeks earlier, finished comfortably ahead of Chris Schulten (34:29) and Todd Bennett (35:23). Stonington's Heather Bessette was the top female finisher in 38:46, outdistancing Old Lyme's Jeanne Lucey (40:14).....Kenyan runners have made a major impact in Connecticut. Besides Ndereva's and Wihwa's wins in Norwich, Godfrey Kiprotich (34:21) and Jackline Torori (41:12) also won at Litchfield Hills the same day. Joe Lemay (7th in 35:58) and Marc Robaczynski (11th in 37:24) were the top state finishers there.....Nice cover story on Lemay in the July/August issue of Running Times; check out Lemay's personal web site at www.joelemay.com for a more in-depth look at the state's best runner.....Connecticut College will be hosting the 13th Annual USA Track and Field Eastern Regional Championship Meet on Sunday, July 8th. The event begins at 1:00pm and features six national events: The Elite Women's 400m Hurdles, Long Jump, and Discus and the Elite Men's 400m Hurdles, High Jump, and Triple Jump. In addition to these events, a complete schedule of track and field events will be offered with team scoring form bot men and women. Several potential Olympic qualifying athletes are expected to compete. Make the trip to New London as a competitor, spectator, or volunteer if you can. Contact meet Director Kevin Grant at (860) 439-0222 for more information.....The Norwich Recreation Department and the Mohegan Striders Association will again present an eight-week series of Thursday evening racing through scenic Mohegan Park. The series begins on Thursday July 5th at 7:00pm starting from Kelly Junior High School on Mahan Drive. There is no entry fee to participate. Contact the Norwich Recreation Department for more information. These races are a great way to stay in shape and enjoy the camaraderie of other area runners.

This month in history

June 20th, 1967 – The 1ST Annual Norwich Rose Arts Festival 10.6 mile road race takes place at 11:00am from Chelsea Parade. Amby Burfoot, who the previous fall had finished 6th in the NCAA National Cross-Country Championships while competing for Wesleyan University, makes the trek to Norwich from his Groton, Connecticut home with the sole intention of only a second training run of the day. Burfoot has been routinely been completing "doubles" of 10 miles in the morning and 10 more in the afternoon, consistently logging 140 mile weeks in preparation for a future marathon effort. Despite his lack of tapering for the race, competition gets the better of Burfoot as he cruises through the hills and the heat to win the race in 54:41. Only John Vitale, who's would run a blistering 52:32 in 1974 and go on to win Rose Arts a record five times (1971, 1974, 1977-78, 1981), would run faster than Burfoot until John Flora's 1979 course record of 52:11, which still stands today. Burfoot would go on to win the 1968 Boston Marathon, as well as two more Rose Arts titles in 1975 and 1976. A total of 40 runners entered the inaugural race, with 37 finishing. The race continued to grow in popularity, drawing over 800 entrants in the early eighties, before being discontinued after the 1997 running. The Rose Arts race, longtime considered to be on of the most challenging road races courses in New England, would also move the 11am start time up to 9:30am in 1982 to accommodate runners in the June heat.

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