

THE BIG TIME RACE EXPERIENCE

By DON SIKORSKI
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Runners fending off the staleness of weekend after weekend of the local 5K and 5-mile road race scene should consider another alternative. Not that there's anything wrong with participation in local road race events. For runners, these are the bread and butter races that give us a reason to be out there pounding the pavement on a daily basis in an effort to maintain some semblance of respectability when battling our local road rivals. But taking advantage of the opportunity to compete in a major road race will do wonders for long-term motivation; one of the driving factors of our sport.

Big time road races offer the runner something that many smaller road races cannot. Race courses are usually certified and will feature terrific volunteer support and spectator enthusiasm along the way. Competing against the masses and against runners you aren't banging heads with every weekend can be a refreshing change and allows for alternative race strategies without worrying about where your age-group rival is at the mile mark. Traveling to major road races can also present the chance for a brief vacation, to see new places, and to meet new people. Many large races now offer pre-race fitness expos, pasta dinners, and other events designed at creating a complete social event with something for everyone. But probably the most important perk these type of races offer is the opportunity they present. Distance running is one of the few sports that allows the casual, every-day jogger to compete side by side in the same event as the best in the world. Consider the following: Although I'd cherish the opportunity to step up to home plate at Fenway Park, to take the court with my buddies five-on-five against Kobe and the Lakers, to play a round of golf with Woods, Mickelson, and Els next weekend, or to brutally sack Kerry Collins on a brisk Sunday afternoon in November, the truth of the matter is that none of these situations will ever take place in my lifetime. Those sports won't allow me anywhere close unless I have a ticket in hand. But I have, on numerous occasions, competed head-to-head against many of the best distance runners in the country and in the world. I warmed up on the same streets, started on the same starting line at the same time, raced as fast as I could on the same race course, and crossed the same finish line (although a bit later). How many other sports can make that same offer? These races offer runners of all level of ability the opportunity to measure themselves against the Kobe's and the Tiger's of our sport. So consider adding a major road race to your racing calendar this year.

Racing Roundup

48 year-old Bob McCusker of Simsbury was the top Connecticut finisher at the Mt. Washington 7.65-mile race on June 16th. If you think McCusker's 1:20:08 clocking, approximately 10:30 per mile pace, sounds pedestrian, try running all the way to the top of Mt. Washington without stopping to walk and then tell me what 10:30 mile pace feels like.....Todd Bennett (21:12) and Lynne Hansen (26:14) posted wins at the St. Catherine's 3.8 Mile Road Race on June 21st. Despite ever-increasing traffic along Route 164, the St. Catherine's race continues to remain one of the best small races in the area.....On June 23rd, Gideon Mutisya, also from Kenya, won the State Championship 10K race in Harwinton in a course record 32:17. How difficult is this course anyway, when Kenyan runners aren't running near 30 minutes? Sergio Ribeiro again finished in the runner-up spot (32:52) as the 1st USATF finisher, while Sue Faber set the female course record, finishing in 39:01. The Mohegan Striders Men's Open team, which hadn't lost a team race all season long, suffered its first setback by finishing 3rd behind the Hartford Track Club and Hi-Tek Racing. The Striders were led by three very solid performances from Steve Herrera (3rd in 33:18), Chadwick Brown (4th in 34:11), and Chad Johnson (6th in 34:25).....John Yuda of Tanzania (1:02:39) and Teresa Wanjiku of Kenya (1:16:02) were winners at the Fairfield Half Marathon on June 24th. Norwich's Melissa Perkins-Banas was the 9th place female finisher (1:23:21). In the men's race, the top seven finishers ran 1:06:15 or better, 8th was 1:09 and 9th place ran 1:13. It's clear to see which runners are from other countries there to chase the cash and which are the locals at the next highest level of the sport.....Alan Webb fell short in his bid to become the first high schooler since Mary Liquori in 1969 to win the 1,500 meters at the USA Outdoor Track Championships. Webb ran to a very respectable 5th place finish in 3:38.50 and will unfortunately probably have to shoulder the burden of saving American distance running for the next few years.....Dathan Ritzenheim is a name you may not know yet, but you will very soon. Buried beneath all of the Alan Webb hype, the high school senior recently ran 13:44.7 (11th place overall) for 5,000 meters at the USA Track and Field Championships, missing Gerry Lindgren's high school record by a mere .7 seconds. Ritzenheim, who will attend the University of Colorado this fall, had also run 13:52 at the Penn Relays, so this recent effort was no fluke. At the high school level, his performance for 5K, which averaged 4:26 per mile for over 3.1 miles, is arguably superior to Webb's.....Plainfield's Chad Johnson (4:28) and Preston's Kris-Anne Kane (5:21) were the top finishers in the Cannonball Run on June 28th. Johnson had to get past two runners with some serious middle distance resumes: Chris McCormack (2nd) was the 1999 State Open champion at 800 meters in both indoor and outdoor track competing for Montville High School, while Chris Downe (3rd) recently won the USATF Indoor Mile championship and has run 1:50 for 800 meters in college. The popular 1 mile point-to-point race continues to draw more participants looking for a unique chance to run a road mile.....Nathan Brannen, the fastest high school miler in Canada, won't even be the fastest guy in his dorm room this fall; he will be rooming with Webb at the University of Michigan, which will be either a terrific plan or a terrible strategy depending on both of their collegiate performances.....The Norwich Recreation Races now feature a brand new course in 2001, which begins from the center of Mohegan Park instead of the former Kelly Junior High School location. The series, co-sponsored by the Norwich Recreation Department and the Mohegan Striders, features a 3-mile race course that runs entirely through the park, beginning at 7:00pm each Thursday evening during July and August. There is no fee to compete, and runners of all ability levels are welcome. There is also a ½ mile and a 1-mile fun run beginning at 6:30pm.

This month in history

July 12th, 1987 – New Haven's Mike Cotton continues to show why he's Connecticut best distance runner, winning the New London Sail Festival 5K Road Race in impressive fashion. Cotton's 14:37 clocking is good enough for an 18-second win over Ed Sparkowski (14:55). The top ten finishers in the field of over 300 are a who's who of the areas best runners: Wayne Jacob (3rd), Fran Houle (4th), Tim Kane (5th), Joe Banas (6th), Bill Marshall (7th), Ed Zubritsky (8th), Chris Hansen (9th), and Mike Zadora (10th). Norwich's Carla Brown is the first female finisher in 18:00, outdistancing former NFA standout Janice Boyes (18:58). The popular New London Road Race continues to be run today in conjunction with the downtown Sailfest.

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