

The Bay Area Runner's Club - The Early Years

Written by Larry Sundberg:

In early May of 1977 the Bay Area Runner's Club was born in the men's 2nd floor faculty lounge at Bay City Central High School by Track and Cross Country Coach, Al Kayner and myself.

Al and I decided to start a "full blown" runners club to replace the Wolves Track Club, which was exclusive to Central High School. Two or three minutes were spent coming up with a name for the new club. Al suggested Bay Area Road Runners, BARR. Al liked his beer and thought that was a pretty good name. Bay Area Runners Federation was another suggestion, BARF. We finally settled on Bay Area Runner's Club and immediately called Mike Sturm, sports editor of the Bay City Times and an article appeared that afternoon. Mike Race, Ted Davenport, Bob Skinner, Bill Agresta and a few others immediately became charter members.

The Wolves Track Club

But you can't talk about the start of the Bay Area Runner's Club without a discussion of the Wolves Track Club.

In those days, High School teams had regulations regarding training start dates. Al got around the rules by forming the Wolves Track Club, a common practice at the time. Since there were almost no road races, Al decided to put on a few. Al developed a schedule of 5 running events that were open to all. They were the January and February Winter races at the Bay County Fair Grounds, a July 4th race at Delta College and a Labor Day race at Vets Park and in 1974, the first St Pat's. As many as 15 runners would show up, toss 50 cents in a bucket and get a time and a place as they crossed the finish line.

Al never liked to run the same course twice. Every year he would tweak the course a bit. The winter races at the fair grounds were always loops, but, the loops always changed from year to year, One year, Al thought it would be cool to run the half mile horse track oval, so we did. Most of these events were for some charity or another. Al would gladly donate the few bucks that

were brought in to Special Olympics, Jerry's Kids or some other special "Kayner" project. Al dipped into his own pocket many times to make sure the charity was covered.

The early Wolves Track Club events had no inside registration, no restrooms, no aid stations, no course marshals, no showers, no finish line refreshments, no real finish line, just a line scratched in the dirt. You got an accurate course, a finish time and most of the time, a ribbon. Al liked to give out ribbons.

Though technically, not a WTC or BARC event, the first running event in the area was the Delta Cross Country Invitational held the last weekend in September. 60 or more schools would participate in the all classes, all day, 2-mile event.

After a few years, Kayner added an "Open" event and BARC members along with anyone who happened to be there was invited to run the course. As years passed, The Michigan High School Athletic Association turned to the 5K as their official distance that Kayner refused to adapt, and the Delta Invitational continued as a 2-mile distance until his death a few days after the 2001 event.

Early St Patrick's Day races

Al's Bay City Central cross country team won the class A state championship in 1972 with Bob Hunt, Larry Graves, Scott Johnston, Bruce Remington and a few others. That was about the same time the winter races started and by 1974 Al decided to go big time and put on the first St Patrick's Day Road race.

The 1974 event started in Vet's Park, looped around a bit, crossed the old 3rd St Bridge and finished in downtown Bay City.

The 1975, 76 and 77 St Pat's races were held at Carroll Park. Each year, Al changed the loop configuration but all finished on the parade route ending in downtown Bay City. Like the other Wolves Track Club events, early St Pat's had no pre registration, no aid stations or anything else that runners expect in today's events. The early St Pat's were much larger than the other

WTC events. 150-200 runners participated in the St Pat's races at Carroll Park. The distance was 5 Miles. Additional distances were added years later.

All of the early St Pat's races were for Special Olympics and drew the Speaker of the Michigan House, Bobby Crim. He took the race idea to his home town of Flint and started the Bobby Crim 10 Mile road race for Special Olympics in 1977.

By the time the 1978 St Pat's race rolled around, the Bay Area Runner's club was off and running and Al decided to go "really" big time, offering tee shirts, having pre registration, aid stations, course marshals and other modern amenities. The event was moved to Garber High School. Close to 700 runners finished, one of the largest events in Michigan at the time. The first 38 runners missed a short loop through Carroll Park, causing controversy as to who finished where among the top runners and \$2,000 was donated to Special Olympics.

Each year after 1978, St Pat's continued to grow, eventually peaking in the early '80s at 3,100 participants.

A special St Pat's feature during the "Garber Days" was to start the women 4 minutes before the men in hopes of having a dramatic male-female finish. Al got his wish one year when Jeff Drenth chased Melanie Weaver and passed her just yards from the down town finish line.

Bob and Margaret Skinner hosted a post race St Patrick's party for years during the early St Pat's days.

The early scoring of St Pat's and the rest of the BARC events included a stop watch, tic sheet and numbered popsicle sticks. In about 1980, Pat Race purchased a Radio Shack Model II computer with 8 inch floppy discs and BARC hired him along with Al's daughter Karen, to do what we called "computer assisted scoring" The actual event was scored the old fashioned way and then the times and places were hand input into the computer and the Bay City Times printed the results.

In about 1983 or so, I purchased a Radio Shack Model III computer and used the same method as Pat to "computer assist" the scoring of the event. It was

not until 1984 or 1985 that I was able to completely computer score St Pat's and other BARC events

Back to the Early Bay Area Runner's Club

With the Wolves Track club events as the starting point of the Bay Area Runner's Club, the club was off and running.

Charter membership of \$3.50 included a BARC tee shirt. Bill Agresta may still have his shirt.

BARC started co sponsoring events like the St Stan's Polish Fest race and the Auburn Corn Fest and others, eventually growing the schedule to 20 or so events.

A BARC highlight was the summer track series held during the early 80's on Wednesday evening at local high school tracks. The events were different each week but always included the one mile race and usually drew over 100 participants.

The one mile was generally divided between those runners who could break six minutes and those who could not. That allowed the slower runners to have a chance to run a mile at the front of the pack and also gave them a chance to watch the faster event that followed.

The under six minute mile was always quite competitive. Many runners could run the mile under 4:30.

One particular year, in a track meet held at Bridgeport High School, Paul Butterfield, a senior at Bridgeport and the state champion in the one mile and eventual runner for the University of Tennessee walked to the line. His coach was there and whispered to Paul, "stick with that guy and blow him away with 1/8 mile to go." That guy was 35-year-old Matt Savage, one of BARC's best runners. At that time all events started in the middle of the track at the 50 yard line.

Paul did stick with Matt for 3 ½ laps and did blow Matt away on the backside of the track. As Matt was coming around the final turn, twenty or

thirty yards behind, he put on the after burners and pulled in Paul in the home stretch. It was a sight to see that old timers still talk about.

At another track meet, the best Flint runners showed, including Sam Torres and Paul Baldwin. Savage finished about 7th or 8th place and ran a 4:15 mile. The winning time was under 4:10.

Lots of average runners participated in the track meets and everyone received ribbons for each event. There was no limit on the number of events you could enter and some individuals would run them all, usually 8 to 10 events ranging from the 40-yard dash to a 5K on the track.

Elliott and Peggy Deyo brought their son Dan to the summer track series. Next thing you know, they were timing events and helping out where ever they were needed. It was not long after that Chuck Keene started helping out. Elliott, Peg and Chuck devoted countless hours volunteering to BARC over the years.

Overall, times on the track and at the road races were much better in the late '70's and early '80's then they are today. In those days, the Boston Marathon qualifying time was 2:50 for male runners under the age of 40. Despite the fast time, many BARC members qualified including Al Kayner, Ken Jezerski, Jack Chase, Mary Ann Schiller, Tom Doran, Tom Roth, myself, Frank Rynalski, Matt Savage, Tim Flues, Darwin Heme, Pat Whyte, Mike Swank, Chris Jacobs, Jerry Bruce, Larry Graves, Eugene Meyer, Scott Johnston, Chris Glowacki, Tom Rasdale, Dennis Hoyt, Dan "legless" Lawless, Phil Ouillette and "The Dork Brothers", Stan Mischley and Wayne Christopherson and several others.

The summer track meets were always followed by good food and good beer at the closest eatery. Twenty or thirty hungry and thirsty runners would show for the post event activity.

Al showed by example and in 1976 started a running streak that lasted for about 17 years. I followed him in a running streak a year later as did Bob Skinner, Kay Chalmers and Matt Savage.

For several years, early BARC sponsored a Corporate Challenge. Generally 8 to 10 teams entered but it always came down to a match up between Dow Chemical, managed by Fred Warner and General Motors managed by Russ

DeBolt. One particular year, it came down to the famed one mile run. Dow was leading and GM needed to win the one mile to take the crown.

GM had a ringer. Tom Roth, a pretty good runner, but a bit bigger than the average miler, was put in the field at the last second to muck up the race. Tom did a great job getting in the way and, to this day, GM and Dow are still arguing as to who actually won the challenge that year.

In the early days, the Labor Day race was held in Vet's Park, a loop course, of course. After a few years, they put up a couple of road barriers to stop traffic from roaming around the park. The barriers did not stop Al. At the start, he just instructed the runners to watch out for them and jump! Eventually the event moved to the Skill Center and a huge picnic followed in a nearby park.

The Holiday Race started at the fairgrounds and eventually moved to St Stan's. Many years later, the New Years event started at Bay City Central going through the streets of downtown Bay City at 7:00 PM on New Year's eve. A party at the Green Hut always followed.

For several years, BARC co sponsored and then took over a Triathlon at Sanford Lake. The distance was a one-mile swim, twenty-five mile bike and 10K run. The event attracted about 200 participants each year.

One year in the early '80's BARC sponsored a relay from Downtown Detroit to Mackinaw City, co sponsored by Miller Lite Beer with help from other running clubs like the Motor City Striders, Riverbend Striders and The Saginaw Track Club. The several hundred-mile relay was divided into 10-mile segments over 5 days in July or August. The first day started at Detroit's Hart Plaza and finished at Bridgeport High School. The starter was Willard Scott, the NBC Today Show Weather Man at the time.

Bill Agresta, cross-country and track coach at Hemlock High School and Pat Whyte, owner of the Whyte Goose Inn decided to run all of the legs the first day. That was 9 legs for a total of 88 miles.

Several hundred runners took off from Hart Plaza and proceeded north on Woodward, 10 miles at a time. By mid day, the pack had dwindled but Agresta and Whyte were hanging in there. After about the 4th or 5th 10-mile

leg, they started to fall back and began stopping at various small stores along the route and drinking a beer or two.

After sixty or seventy miles, Agresta threw in the towel and left Whyte to make it in on his own. Agresta was picked up by the trail vehicle and taken to Bridgeport High School. However by the time he got there, he changed his mind and went back out and met Whyte who was doing just fine. Whyte and Agresta pulled into Bridgeport High School about 1:00 AM.

Pat Whyte, by the way, was an Ultra Marathon guy who participated in most of the well-known Ultras in the country. Agresta also participated in a few including the famous JFK Run in Washington DC.

The relay left Bridgeport the next morning and with the help of the State Police and a huge water buffalo supplied by the Army Reserve, followed back roads north to the finish line at Mackinaw City High School.

The night before the finish, the entire relay team of about 100 or so filled a watering hole in Wolverine. It was a pretty raucous place. It calmed down by midnight and the relay took off about 7:00 AM the next morning on the last stretch toward Mackinaw City.

For those who don't remember Al



Al has been gone for a while but his name and memory are attached to the St Patrick's Day Race for good reason.

Running was Al's passion long before running was popular. Al ran the 1969 Boston Marathon 3 years before Frank Shorter made running popular in America by winning the marathon in the 1972 Munich Olympics.

Al felt you should not just run for yourself but for others as well. All the early events raised funds for Charity. Long after Al left active involvement in the Bay Area Runner's Club, he continued charity work. He drove children to the Shrine

Hospitals, sold onions in the middle of the street for charity and participated in many other charitable events.

His children, Karen, Kristine and Steven and wife Judy were always at the early events pitching in, doing whatever their dad asked them to do. Prior to computer scoring, Karen did much of the hand scoring for her dad. Their house was full of running stuff.

Al was a pretty good runner himself, competing in the Skylon International Marathon from Buffalo to Niagara Falls in 1976-77 and 78 running a personal best of 2:50. One year, Al ran one marathon per month for a year.

Al liked to pick up pop cans along the road and financed a trip to the Miami Marathon with his earnings.

When you run this year's St Patrick's race. Think of Al Kayner. He is the guy that started the whole thing.