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Connecticut running events see participant surge

Area events seeing uptick in participants

By Christina Hennessy
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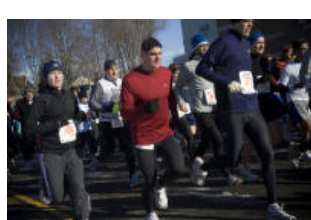
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For runners, Connecticut is a state rich in road races and running clubs, providing beginners to elite athletes a chance to test their training and to become part of an active community.

Recently, it appeared, at least to this observer, that more people were turning up at the area's running events.

To test this theory, I turned to some of the experts, those runners and race organizers who have been watching the sport ebb and flow over the past several decades. Has there been a surge in interest? And, if so, why?

When Marty Schaivone thinks about the late 1990s, he remembers road races that could attract 800 to 900 people. A runner and race organizer, he doesn't think those crowds will come back, but in the past several



years he has noticed that numbers are inching up.

"Every race I have put on this year has gone up 10 to 25 percent," the 55-year-old said of participation rates. He offered as an example the recent Trumbull Sunset Run, which he organized, that attracted nearly 400 people, an annual increase of about 100.

The Stratford resident runs MS Running Productions, which is organizing a half-dozen more races before year's end, including the 18th annual Great Pumpkin Classic Oct. 18 in Trumbull.

When asked for reasons behind the surge, Schaivone, a runner for 21 years who has put on about 200 races, surmised that technology may be a factor as race organizers can use the Internet and e-mail to get the word out about events and

encourage people to sign up over the Web.

"An e-mail blast every two weeks can get people juiced up," he said. "It is better than a flyer."

Technology has made a difference for Threads and Treads, a sporting goods store in Greenwich that coordinates races and other athletic events throughout the year.

"We've had good numbers all year," said Mike Yardis, whose family has owned the store for 30 years. He noted that a centralized e-mail list makes it easier to send out reminders, as well as information on how to register.

"We've also had great weather this year," he said.

The rainy, cool weather of summer's start may not have been a boon for beachgoers, but for those who rack up the miles running, biking or hiking, the lower temperatures and relatively low humidity made for a much more comfortable pursuit.

Running in the USA, a Waukesha, Wisc.-based online directory of races, results and other information, listed about 300 road races across the state this year. Some are one-time events, others are part of racing series, which feature incremental mileage increases over the course of several weeks or months. Hitekracing.com, a Stratford-based Web site run by Tom Kulhawik, has a calendar that shows just how many opportunities there are to compete. Next month, alone, there are more than 60 races, walks, triathlons, cycling events and half-marathons across the state.

Some events are organized by sporting goods shops and businesses; some by independent race organizers and directors; some by volunteers; some by nonprofits and charities; and some by running groups. There are several running organizations in this area, for instance, including the Pequot Runners and the Milford Road Runners Club. Running in the USA has more than 20 such clubs listed on its Web site.

"Around here, the calendar is pretty crowded," said Jim Gerweck, an editor at Running Times magazine, who also writes The Running Column, which is published on Sundays in the Advocate of Stamford and the Greenwich Time. The Norwalk resident organizes several events in the area, including the Boston Buildup January through March in Norwalk and the cross-country series on Tuesday evenings in the summer at Waveny Park at New Canaan.

"Locally and nationally, racing and running are as healthy as ever," said Gerweck, who has been running for the past 40 years. "The numbers are up; and it has been a trend over the last three to five years. There has not been a recession in running."

While overall statistics were hard to find, many area races posted record crowds this year. In June, registration for the Stratton Faxon Fairfield Road Race was closed days before the race when record numbers pre-registered.

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"That never happened before," Gerweck said.

More than 4,200 racers, about a 1,000 more than last year, showed up at that June 28 event at Jennings Beach to compete in a half-marathan, 5K race or 1K fun.

But even smaller races and series are attracting more people.

The Boston Buildup four-race running series, which occurred earlier this year, featured record crowds. The intent of the event, in its 31st year, is to help runners prepare for the Boston Marathon. For instance, the 25K final race attracted about 220 finishers, breaking a two-year-old record.

Gerweck's summer cross-country series, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary, has high numbers, too. He has heard other summer series have seen more people show up over the past several years and in some cases race officials have been overwhelmed by day-of registration numbers.

"Nationally, it has been the same," Gerweck said, adding that the Chevron Houston Marathon and Aramco Houston Half Marathon reported that its open registration for next year's event sold out in record time. And, earlier this year, registration for the TD Banknorth Beach to Beacon 10K in Maine, which was Aug. 1, closed 1 hour and 45 minutes after it began, a record, according to organizers.

Ronnie Behringer, 51, who is a triathlete, said she has seen race registrations close after only several weeks. She is in a sport that also has seen a surge in interest. USA Triathlon, an organization which sanctions events across the country, has seen interest spike over the last several years. The Colorado Springs, Colo.-based group said it had more than 115,000 members this year, in comparison to the 15,000 to 21,000 it recorded from 1993 to 2000.

Behringer suspected the numbers could be up because people are staying more active and competitive as they get older, and, in some cases, getting even faster.

"The 50s have become very competitive," she said.

Whatever the reason behind the increase, it is clear that the running community remains a tight one.

Beh thinks the social component cannot be overlooked. At a time when people might be staying home and avoiding costly summer vacations or are turning to exercise and fitness to maintain health and take their mind off stresses such as unemployment or pending layoffs, these races and training series breeds camaraderie -- as they always have.

"It becomes a social thing," she said of some of the training events. "The run, sometimes, is almost secondary."

Schaivone, who has completed about 40 marathons and many smaller races, also credits running with introducing him to some "tremendous" people. "I have made some great, great friends in all these years," he said.

And the variety of running events might make the activity an attractive one for all skills.

"You can go from absolute simplest race " where it costs \$3 to register and you hold a popsicle stick with your number on it, to one that costs \$45 to register and you are timed with a disposable chip," he said. "This really is a runners' state, even if it is a small one."

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On the run

The running season remains strong through year's end, for those looking to join the pack. There are several organizations and Web sites that feature a list of upcoming races. Some also have tips on training and other information. Some of the sites include:

www.runningintheusa.com

www.hitekracing.com

www.hitekracing.com/msrunning

www.clubct.org

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