

An elemental marathon

In 34 years, HARRC runners have never missed a step of their weekend races, no matter the weather — or national emergency

BY BRIAN BIANCA
For The Patriot-News

This Sunday, Harrisburg Area Road Runners Club will host a free local road race open to any interested party.

Or, to phrase that more accurately: this Sunday, like they have every single weekend for the past 37 years, HARRC will host a free local road race open to any interested party.

Thirty-seven years, no exceptions.

It is a streak that would impress the immortal ironman, Cal Ripken, or cause a metronome to tip its cap in salute.

The group will occasionally substitute a local marathon for the Sunday race or bump a run to Saturday should a holiday interfere, but every weekend since the spring of 1974, the club has put on some form of open, organized, timed run.

“We referred to it as the staple of our diet,” said Walt Green, a charter member of the HARRC. “We wanted anyone, even high school runners, to come out and run with us.”

Originally created as a way for local runners to get competitive experience in an era when road races were as scarce as a solar eclipse, the Sunday run morphed from a two-mile jog along the Harrisburg riverfront to a HARRC staple spanning multiple locations and distances.

There are now scoring systems involved, online results and award banquets honoring the most prolific winners.

Even now, members still treat it with a reverence that shows just how much the Sunday run is ingrained in the club’s DNA.

“Since 1974 the officers

have changed, the club members have changed, but we’ve always kept that standard of having the run,” said member Chris Gipe.

“The Sunday race is the heart and soul of the club. It is why we exist.”

The Sunday run is the postal service of area road races. Rain, sleet, snow, ice, wind, heat — even the threat of nuclear annihilation — nothing stops at least some HARRC members from lacing up their shoes and running the two, four, five, 10 miles or more that the race demands.

HARRC president Brad Colwell recalls one soggy Sunday about a decade back when a local radio DJ, rather than read through a list of all the area events postponed because of weather, simply said, “Everything’s canceled.”

Colwell got a chuckle out of that as he drove over to Wildwood Lake to meet six other runners for a five-mile jog around the park. He came back looking like he went scuba diving without a suit. But the streak stayed alive.

At least it wasn’t cold. If there’s one particularly loathed foe of the Sunday run, it’s the bottom of the thermometer.

To help mitigate the stifling midstate summer heat, the club moved the start time from 1:30 p.m. to 8:30 a.m. beginning in 1984. The decision paid dividends in July and August.

Come January, though, the crack-of-dawn kickoff results in temperatures more suited to penguins than people.

Gipe remembers more than a few winter runs around Harrisburg Area



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Chris Gipe, right, a charter member of Harrisburg Area Road Runners Club, reminisces with other runners about the group’s history during a 2007 race in Riverfront Park.

Community College when it was snowing so hard the group had to find its way onto the road and use tracks from the snowplow as a path.

“It’s a very dedicated club,” Colwell said. “Or a very crazy club. However you want to put it.”

Gipe is a bit more direct: “Runners aren’t known to be the sanest people.”

“I was willing to cancel it, but we never got the clear-out-or-you’ll-die alert.”

Nick Marshall,
HARRC’s first president, on running during the TMI crisis in 1979

And there’s no better example of this than the group’s Sunday run during the week of March 26, 1979.

Nick Marshall, HARRC’s first president, spent the early half of the week recruiting local runners for an ultramarathon he had

planned for that Sunday, April 1.

He had dozens of participants from the Northeast and Canada scheduled to attend but wanted some local talent to fill out the roster. That is, until a nuclear reactor on a speck of dirt in Middletown called Three Mile Island suffered a partial core meltdown.

Somehow, as many Harrisburg residents ran from their homes in an effort to evacuate what they feared would soon

be a nuclear wasteland, Marshall managed to secure four locals for his race, including one out-of-towner who had never heard of TMI and had no idea what all the commotion was about.

“I was willing to cancel it,” Marshall said, “but we never

got the clear-out-or-you’ll-die alert.”

These days, the Sunday run is less of an event than it used to be. Participation has waned as the club’s baby boomer base has grown long in the tooth.

Colwell was chosen as the club’s president in no small part because of his desire to attract younger members, but until his initiatives begin to take hold, the Sunday run will likely be the vestige of a small pocket of club members and their close compatriots.

Which is more than OK for the Harrisburg Road Runners. The Sunday run was born to give local athletes a place — a consistent place — they can come for a competitive, enjoyable run.

In that regard, it has been — and remains — a resounding success.

“It’s never been a big thing,” Marshall said. “But it’s been a lasting thing.”