

ROAD RUNNERS CLUB OF AMERICA A HISTORY: 1950's - Today

THE EARLY YEARS

In the late 1950's, jogging for health and fitness was practically unheard of in those days. Competitive long-distance running was an official Olympic sport, but with the exception of a few races in New England, there were very few distance racing events in the United States.

In those days, the Long Distance Log was the chief means of communication with distance runners, primarily cross-country athletes. The publication had a circulation of 126 readers. In the August 1957 issue of the Long Distance Log an editorial by Olympian Browning Ross proposed the development of an organization for American distance runners. The concept was modeled after the Road Runners Club of the UK founded in 1952. He suggested that membership include not only runners, but officials, race sponsors, coaches, and more. Ross envisioned the group would encourage running, meet regularly, raise funds, coordinate schedules, recruit sponsors, and promote competition in long-distance races such as the one-hour track run.



Browning Ross at AAU Championship 1954

Response to the concept was positive; meetings were held in December 1957 and shortly thereafter, the Middle Atlantic Road Runners Club was established.

On February 22, 1958, the Road Runners Club of America was born.

Meeting at the Paramount Hotel in New York City, Ross and nine others discussed the general direction for the organization and developed the basic operating structure. Ross was named acting provisional president. The first RRCA National Championship races were awarded, including a one-hour run, a 12 mile run, a 15 mile road race, a 5 mile junior championship road race, and a 10 mile track relay. The events were held in Chicago, New Jersey and Philadelphia. One of the oldest distance running traditions, the RRCA Championship, continues to this day.

Interest in the RRCA began gathering and by April 1958, the New York Road Runners Club (now the New York Road Runners) was established with twenty-nine members. In February 1959, the Michigan Road Runners Club was established in Detroit by Hugh Jascourt and Frank McBride. Several months later, the RRCA held an annual meeting at the Paramount Hotel in New York City. At the meeting the group elected the president, treasurer and secretary. Dick Donohue (president), Steve Thomas (treasurer), Tom Osler and Browning Ross (co-secretaries) served as the first officially elected officers of the RRCA.

At the 1960 annual meeting Ted Corbitt was elected president with Joe Kleinerman serving as vice-president and John Sterner as secretary-treasurer. “Those were tough days, days of survival [for the RRCA]”, Corbitt wrote. “Instead of recognizing the good work the RRCA was doing to promote distance running, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) refused to admit the RRCA as a member club and took the position that the RRCA was illegal.” In those days, the AAU was the ruling body of sport; they advised the RRCA to function solely as a social or fraternal group and not conduct races.

Also in 1960, there was very little for runners to read. Under Corbitt’s guidance, the RRCA published The World’s Fastest Marathons by Nat Cirulnich (It was a one page dietary review of the pre-race meal). In addition, under the leadership of Corbitt, the RRCA began work on a booklet about accurately measuring road running courses. The booklet was officially published in 1964.

The early 1960’s saw the development of new running clubs around the country. In 1962, the RRCA began a long history of supporting the development of US elite distance athletes. At the annual meeting that year, the members discussed the possibility of sending a runner to the 52 mile London-Brighton race. Small donations were collected and in the fall of 1962, the RRCA sent Ted Corbitt to England to compete in the race. At the same meeting, the membership re-established the collection of 25 cents per member per year to cover expenses. To address the organization’s precarious financial position, donations totaling \$28.50 were collected from those attending the annual meeting. By the end of the RRCA’s third year, their members had hosted over 600 races around the country compared to the previous handful of races.



RRCA Logo circa 1960's

Newly elected president Hugh Jascourt set out to tackle the political issue of the RRCA’s relationship with the AAU and the newly formed United State Track & Field Federation. The USTFF took the damaging steps of prohibiting several of its affiliate universities from letting RRCA member clubs use their tracks. RRCA events had historically been sanctioned by the AAU, and the USTFF had declared a governing body war on the AAU. The RRCA, trying only to promote long-distance running, was caught in the middle.

In 1963, the RRCA took the political position of going on record as favoring the removing the AAU age requirements for racing, removing the AAU medical requirements and not setting air temperature limits for races. The RRCA also voted to assist track and field committees in sponsoring long-distance races for women.

By 1964, the RRCA took further steps to officially advocate that race doctors accept medical certificates made within 90 days of the race. Under AAU rules, at the time, only the “race exam” given at the race by the race doctor was acceptable for competition. In addition, the RRCA Standards Committee began certifying course accurately measured, and the RRCA awarded certificates to runners that accomplished certain times on the certified courses. While the program was slow to catch on, it formed the basis for modern day course certification (The USATF certifies courses today, though the original process was developed and implemented by the RRCA).

In tandem with its efforts to enhance competition through course certification, the RRCA also established the first events for recreational joggers. The events were called “Run-For-Your-Life” and came to be commonly known as fun runs. These events did not fall under the jurisdiction of the AAU.

This was great news for women who were not allowed by the AAU to run distance more than 1.5 miles. Women and girls of any age could participate in the fun runs which were typically 2 mile events.

In the fall of 1965, the RRCA held its first National Women's Cross Country Championship at 2.5 miles, despite significant objection by the AAU.

In 1967, the RRCA officer structure grew to what are now the regional director positions on the board of directors. The later years of the 1960's showed slow growth for the RRCA and by 1971, there were fourteen members in good standing. That same year, the RRCA Hall of Fame was officially established. It was designed to recognize individuals who had made outstanding contributions to long-distance running in the US.

Under the leadership of Gar Williams, the 1970's began the tremendous surge in growth of the RRCA. In 1973, to address the need to better communicate with members, the organization re-launched FootNotes. The two-page mimeographed RRCA newsletter grew into a newspaper, followed by a magazine, followed by an on-line magazine. Many regional newsletters were also started by RRCA members. Williams saw the need to develop a "how to" manual and compiled that first RRCA Handbook which has seen several editions (1974, 1976, 1978, 1984, 1991, 2000) and is still in print today.

The RRCA Personal Fitness Program was developed in 1974 under the direction of Joe Fleig. It was designed to motivate beginning runners by setting mileage goals and they were rewarded for their efforts based on achievement of their stated goals.

In 1974, the RRCA applied for and received IRS group exemption status. This allowed the RRCA the ability to grant 501(c)3 status to affiliate members that desired and qualified for the designation. That same year, a cadre of RRCA State Representatives were engaged to assist RRCA members and recruit potential members. This evolved into the formal development of the RRCA State Reps Program which provides similar services today.

By 1977, RRCA membership had grown to 92 clubs and by the following year the membership included 142 clubs representing over 33,000 individuals. The logo was re-designed to include the image of both a male and female runner. The RRCA ceased the opportunity to serve as a leader in the growing health and fitness movement, and in 1978, the RRCA adopted a policy that the organization would not accept sponsorship money from cigarette companies or producers of hard alcohol.



RRCA Logo Circa 1978

THE RUNNING BOOM

The late 70's and early 80's are commonly referred to within the running community as the first "Running Boom". During this period, running went from a sport of a handful of aficionados to an activity that attracted thousands of health conscious people.

In 1977, the importance of liability insurance was underscored by the first major lawsuit against a road race. A runner suffering from heat injury at the 1977 Peachtree Road Race in Atlanta, Georgia filed a class action lawsuit against the sponsors. He sought \$500,000 in damages for himself and fifty others. The case was ultimately dismissed but the suit underscored the need for insurance coverage to protect races, clubs, and organizers.

In 1978, RRCA President, Jeff Darman helped lobby Congress for the passage of the Amateur Sports Act of 1978. The Act changed the nature of amateur sports in the US and essentially disbanded the AAU. This ended the virtual monopoly that the AAU had on Olympic sports governing in this country. The result of the breakup of the AAU was the formation of "The Athletics Congress/USA" (TAC/USA). Between 1980 and 1992, TAC/USA served as the official governing body for the sport. In 1992, TAC/USA changed their name to USA Track & Field (USATF) to increase recognition for their organization and the sport. USATF continues to serve as the governing body for the sport. The AAU continues on primarily as a youth sports organization.

In 1979, the RRCA started "National Run For Life Day" on May 19, 1979. "Run For Life Day" was designed to educate and motivate entry-level runners to start and stay with an organized running program. This, along with the National Run to Work Day, was combined in 2006 to form the RRCA National Run@Work Day with the message of incorporating thirty-five minutes of exercise into a person's daily routine to improve general health and fitness.

During the early 80's, many important publications were developed including *Running Women—The First Steps* by Henley (Roughton) Gabeau and Ellen Wessel of Moving Comfort. Other RRCA publications included fact sheets on cold and hot weather running, safety for runners, guidelines for buying a pair of running shoes, and many more.

By 1983, the RRCA membership included 400 clubs and under the leadership of Harold Tinsley, the volunteer spirit of the RRCA was reaffirmed with the development of the National Volunteer Awards.

1986 marked an organizational shift as the first woman president was elected by the membership. Henley Gabeau assumed the responsibility during a time when the insurance industry was in crisis and could no longer offer coverage to RRCA clubs. Despite the crisis, Gabeau was able to retain members, implement new programs, including the RRCA Children's Developmental Running Program. The first edition of the *RRCA Children's Running Booklet* and the *Parent & Teacher's Curriculum* authored by Don Kardong and Jim Ferstle were circulated to thousands for clubs, teachers, schools and more. The year also marked the establishment of the volunteer staffed RRCA National Office.

In 1988, a national logo competition was advertised and Les Kidd's design was selected out of 65 submissions. Kidd's logo design is still used by the RRCA today.



Current RRCA Logo

By 1989, the RRCA regained its liability insurance policy, a significant benefit of membership. Membership was up to 450 clubs, and Gabeau was preparing to serve the organization as the first paid executive director. With a 650-square foot office in Alexandria, VA and a \$4000 IBM computer purchased personally by Gabeau, the RRCA embarked on the development of a professional organization.

The early 90's brought new organizational focus on developing internal financial controls, increased professionalism for the staff and board, and developing and improving publications. In 1996, the RRCA developed and launched the RRCA Coaching Certification Program. In 1996, the RRCA launched www.RRCA.org through the assistance of webmaster, Warren Finke, who still serves in that role today.

In 1996, the members elected 1976 Montreal games Olympic marathoner, Don Kardong, as the RRCA president. Kardong continued to build on the success of RRCA programs and services and introduced Miss Road Manners in FootNotes, implemented National Run to Work Day and the highly successful Roads Scholar Program. While participation in the sport of running boomed in the 90's, elite American distance runners virtually disappeared as a factor in major U.S. and international road races. Lack of funding and the disappearance of the sport on television are credited with this decline. However in 1997, the RRCA gave a grant through the new Roads Scholar Program to a young distance runner by the name of Deena Drossin (Kastor) who went on to win the bronze medal in the 2004 Athens Olympic marathon.

THE NEW MILLENIUM

In 2001, after six years of board service and ten years of service as the RRCA's first executive director, Henley Gabeau retired from the organization. After her departure, the organization's attention turned to finding a replacement and managing a negative financial position brought on by the rising cost of producing FootNotes coupled with a financial loss from a previous national convention. On September 11, 2001, the RRCA was set to announce the new executive director, David Dobrzynski but delayed the announcement for a week while the nation recovered from the shock of the largest terrorist attack in U.S. history. By 2002, the RRCA was forced to halt production of FootNotes and cut programs. It was evident that the organization was in the throws of an organizational mid-life crisis. Over the next four years, the RRCA would experience turnover in staffing and downsizing in an effort to improve financial position.

A small group of members split from the organization and formed the America Association of Road Runners (AARC) in response to the organizational issues faced by the RRCA. Despite the challenges facing the organization, the RRCA stayed true to its mission and a dedicated group of volunteers vowed to bring the organization back to prominence.

By 2005, the AARC memberships merged back into the RRCA as a result of agreed upon organizational improvements. By the summer of 2005, experienced professionals dedicated to the sport were hired, and the organization finished the year with significant positive assets. A feasibility study and business analysis was conducted on re-introducing a print publication for the general membership. As a result, the RRCA launched FOOTNOTES as a web-based, e-magazine for the members. The board also developed an operating reserve fund to ensure long-term financial stability for the RRCA. The largest individual contribution of \$100,000 was received to support the State Reps Program. The gift was designed to fund State Rep's travel to the annual convention for important training and networking. Membership in 2006 exceeded 740 member clubs and events. The future of long-distance running and the RRCA's impact on the sport will continue to be written for years to come.