

A Relay Good Time Celebrates its 50th



by Bob Fitzgerald

When USATF-NE Director Steve Vaitones alerted us that the Wednesday evening Lynn Woods races were entering a 50th year, the news elicited a fond memory. Many moons ago, yours truly was lounging against one of the glacial boulders strewn throughout the woods, waiting for Michelle to deliver the baton to begin the anchor leg of our 4 x 2.5 mile relay team, kickstarted by the aforementioned Stevie V. and sent into hyper-drive by “Mr. Lynn Woods” Lou Ristaino of East Boston. Lou set more trail records than anyone at Lynn Woods, most still extant.

Lou had previously run on a championship team with Paul Croft, Bill Harrington and W.F. Newhall, who was descended from one of the earliest families to settle in the area. Championship out of the way, we’d convinced Lou to join a “fun” team. Fun with a capital “F” was what the Lynn Woods Relay was back then...and remains to this day.

So it was imperative that we gas up and head north from Boston’s South Shore. Driving through the main entrance to the dirt

The young guys going long.

Photo by MickFoto/NERunner

(Right) Coming off single track by Walden Pond and leading to the finish by the ballfield.

Photo by MickFoto/NERunner

parking lot facing the woods, the first person we meet is Croft. Now a Mass T&F official, Croft has been running here since high school. He’s just back from the Bolder Boulder 10K and pinned to his new race t-shirt, in stark contrast, is a dilapidated bib number we learn is over a decade old.

This is unique to these Wednesday night races, a cost saver, because it’s also unique that these races are free and always have been. You go to the timing van, check your name off, and keep your bib to wear throughout the season and the years that follow.

Lou is the second person we meet, lucky to be here after suffering cardiac arrest and collapsing during a walk in 2003. If not for a trained professional driving by at the exact moment Lou went down...well, his racing days are over, but Ristaino, also a Mass T&F

official, is showing plenty of enthusiasm approaching this evening’s 2.8-mile race that goes off with the sound of a cowbell along with the Junior 1.59 for kids and families. There are usually three races, the longer version (5.7 this evening) heading out first. Paths alternate between dirt/gravel fire road and single track with no one spared the Goat Path.

Bill Mullen is running the show with event founder Joe Abelon handling the electronic scoring. Joe is in his early 80s but incredibly spry and energetic. When he was coaching at St. Mary’s the school didn’t have its own cross country course, so Joe piled some colleagues in his VW Beetle and charted some paths (back when there was limited vehicular access to the woods). The summer races started a few years later.

“I was in transition between coaching at



Background photo by FitzFoto/NERunner

St. Mary's and Lynn Tech, looking for something to do, and I thought a summer series at the woods would be fun," said Abelon, perhaps not realizing how "fun" tends to extend itself. "We had small fields back then, a few dozen runners and we just did hand timing. Now, between the three races, some summer evenings we're looking at close to three hundred."

When Joe settled into his coaching duties, the town Parks & Recreation Dept. took over, until, as Mullen explains, "in 1979 or '80 when the Proposition Two and a Half override kicked in, they said they couldn't manage the races anymore. Wayne Spinney, who was a hell of a runner, said he'd take over and I said I'd help him. A year later he moves to Oregon."

There are a lot of people who've pitched in over the years; most are dutifully collected and recorded in Paul Arrington's book, "Running in the Woods." It is telling that the book is dedicated to a man, John Robertson Sr., that Arrington had never met but whose contribution to Lynn Woods running and the local community spanned decades.

Arrington himself is a latecomer to Lynn Woods. "I ran for Salem High when Joe was coaching at Lynn Tech and we ran against them all the time, but I never made the connection between Joe and the Lynn Woods races, didn't even know about them," confesses Arrington. "Decades later I had a friend who mentioned the races, that they were a fun time and I should go. So I did, and I recognized a lot of familiar faces. We all set off running through the woods and that was it, I was



The Captain of the Woods, Joe Abelon.

Photo courtesy of Paul Arrington



Bill Mullen and Paul Arrington.

Photo by FitzFoto/NERunner

hooked."

Arrington felt a need to pay tribute to the woods, the races, and the many people involved over the years. It took him a year of organizing and then two of writing. (A pdf of the book can be found at the Lynn Woods website: www.lwrun.org.) His backdrop to the Lynn Woods races is a history of Lynn Woods itself. The woods and surrounding land were bought from the Pawtucket Indians for \$75 in 1629. A major fire in 1869 lent the

woods much of its current shape, including its three ponds—Breed, Birch and Walden. Twenty years later, famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead was contacted regarding Lynn Woods and replied that what currently existed was better than a public park or garden, it was a real forest and should remain unspoiled as it would "supply a place of refreshing and restful relief."

There were also times that the woods suffered from lack of funding, maintenance and



Sunday, November 3, 2019 • 7 a.m start

- Post-race, join us at our celebration featuring music, food and beverages •
- Special VIP perks for teams with 20 members •
- Awards to top three in 7 age divisions •

www.runsignup.com/Race/MA/Cambridge/CambridgeHalfMarathon





The mid-distance participants. (Above)

Photo by
FitzFoto/NERunner

When you take a digger and bruise your knee, a helping hand out of the woods is just what's needed.

Photo by
MickFoto/NERunner

overall neglect. The torching of cars and illicit activity once forced its closing. Even more ominous, in 1960 a proposition was floated suggesting I-95 cut through the middle of the woods. After fierce opposition by local civic groups, the plan was abandoned a decade later. In 1990, the Friends of Lynn Woods was formed, preserving the original intent set down in 1881 by the Trustees of the Free Public Forest that the woods remain and be maintained as a public space in perpetuity.

The kids 1.59-miler is drawing to a close and isn't it a juxtaposition



to hear a young girl exhorting her mother, "C'mon mom, you can do it, just follow me." Ristaino staggers across the finish line laughing, "I can't believe it, I went off course. I should know every foot of these woods but I made a rookie mistake and watched people in front of me and not the arrows."

Central Mass Strider Jim Pawlicki, author of the blog, "Good Clean Run", emerges from the long race with another quality effort. In 1995, Jim ran 30:45 for 5-miles here to place as runner-up. Greater Boston TC coach Tom Derderian also has given it a 'go' after many a fine effort from yesteryear.

These Wednesday evening races run throughout the summer and end on Sept. 29. The vaunted Relay is on August 21 and there is a nominal \$70 fee for a team of four (\$17.50 per member).

What lies ahead or lays behind is much the same here. Refreshing that there are no gaggles of youth huddled around cell phones (or parents for that matter). Old friends catch up, new friends are acquired. The serenity and tranquility of the woods has blotted out the chaos, congestion and electronic noise of the outside world, if only for a few hours, but what a precious few hours. A tip of the hat to this sister and brotherhood of the woods

Long live Lynn Woods, its races, relay and participants.

NR



Boston Volvo Family Fun
Run 11:15 AM (FREE)

Memorial Cancer 5K
Walk 12:15 PM

Ralph Lord 5K
Genesis Battlegreen
10K 12:15 PM

11.3.19 - LEXINGTON, MA

\$15 for 18 & Under

\$25 by August 31

\$30 Sept 1 - Oct 31

\$35 Nov 1 - Race Day

REGISTER ONLINE,
WWW.BATTLEGREENRUNFOUNDATION.ORG

Join us for live music, raffles and a post-race buffet at our 24th Annual Genesis Battlegreen Run!

Many local charities benefit from this race. Please visit our website to volunteer, participate or learn more.

Lynn Woods Records

2.5 Mile	Dave Dunham12:05 (1991)
	Julie Leclair14:09 (1986)
2.6 Mile	Lou Ristaino13:48 (1991)
	Eileen Hennessey17:00 (1994)
2.75 Mile	Paul McGovern14:35 (1991)
	Carla Morilla18:03 (1991)
3.1 Mile	John Ayers16:50 (1995)
	Jen Toomey18:57 (2008)
Twin Towers (4 Miles)	Paul McGovern20:59 (1991)
	Eileen Hennessey28:14 (1990)
Tour de Lynn Woods (4.5 Mile)	Lou Ristaino25:07 (1993)
	Beth Cohen34:44 (1993)
5.0 Mile	Lou Ristaino27:07 (1994)
	Carla Morilla33:07 (1991)
Triple Towers (5 Miles)	Paul McGovern26:54 (1993)
	Sarah Thomson35:30 (2007)
5.5 Mile	Lou Ristaino30:47 (1993)
	Erin Sullivan37:59 (2001)
5.75 Mile	Lou Ristaino31:13 (1990)
	Katie Toner39:11 (1985)
6.0 Mile	Lou Ristaino32:17 (1990)
	Jen Toomey40:05 (2008)
8.0 Mile	Joe Rocha44:49 (1995)
	Liz Wilson53:28 (2007)
Duathlon	Tom Diegel49:12 (1994)
	Kathy Stevens65:45 (1992)
Relay (4 x 2.5)	Sully's Ice Cream50:10 (1991)
	(John Doherty, Terrence White, Mike Chambers, Dave Dunham)
	Waltham Track Club59:41 (1987)
	(Julie Leclair, Pam Butler-Sears, Diane Murphy, Maura Leclair)