

A giving tradition: Winner's Circle celebrates its 30th birthday

- By Chris O'Donnell
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Kathy Bailey gets a hug after finishing the "Run to the Beach 30k" in front of the Winner's circle in 2003.

Jim Vaiknoras
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SALISBURY — If it was a little louder than normal a few Saturdays ago at the Winner's Circle in Salisbury, there is good reason. Members of the Winner's Circle Running Club were upstairs Feb. 16 celebrating the organization's 30th anniversary.

Let's hope the members had an unlimited bar tab, appetizers and free rent. They have earned it and then some.

The WCRC is known for sponsoring races, for its large presence in road races on and around the North Shore, and some exceptional distance runners.

But what flies under the radar is the fact that the club is an invaluable philanthropic member of the Seacoast.

"It was a nice way to get everyone together," said Mike McCormick, a member of the WCRC for 22 years who has served in several capacities, including president. "We celebrated the history of the club and tried to get back some old members."

'A selfless club'

The Winner's Circle ought to make an addition to its sign overlooking Elm Street: Over \$125,000 donated. Sort of like the one at McDonald's that says "Over 90 Billion Served."

The \$125,000 is what McCormick estimates the Club has generated through the years.

When he joined, the club sponsored four races. To date it sponsors seven and, McCormick estimates, has drawn 36,000 runners.

One of the club's oldest races is the Hangover Classic, a 10K held New Year's morning the past 27 years. Around 10,000 runners have taken part in what has become an institution. The finish line is on Salisbury Beach and a select few take a dip in the ocean afterward.

Club members think nothing of extending their hands, evidenced by two of the races it has taken on in recent years.

When local standout Travis Landreth passed away while training with a Nike-sponsored team in Palo Alto, Calif., in 2001, the WCRC members started Trav's Trail Run 5K through Maudslay State Park.

The race has become somewhat of a kickoff to the summer running season, and the proceeds benefit the Travis Eliot Landreth Memorial Scholarship Foundation.

Last July, the WCRC took over responsibility for the Pat Polletta 5K, named after the late, longtime Amesbury coach.

This is what the WCRC does.

"It's definitely a selfless club. There is not much money devoted to us," McCormick said. "We've gotten new races and the numbers of those races have expanded. The issue of giving is more center."

That's not to mention the races to which the club offers its support with free timing and volunteers, not just on the North Shore, but in New Hampshire and the Lakes Region, such as the Atkinson (N.H.) 5K, Trick or Treat 5K and the Merrimac Lions Club races.

Generosity at the high school level

Perhaps the biggest beneficiaries of the WCRC have been the River Rival schools: Newburyport, Triton, Amesbury and Pentucket.

Back in August 2006, when Triton's athletic budget was voted down, Joe Colbert, the head cross country/track and field coach and a WCRC member, was left facing a year without sports.

"For the kids, it would have been devastating," Colbert said.

Colbert had the idea for a road race to help raise funds for the season. For help, he knew where to turn.

"The (Winner's Circle Running) Club had helped us before. I knew I could count on those guys. It wasn't even a question," Colbert recalled. "They didn't even flinch. They just said, 'Whatever we can do to help.'"

The WCRC stepped forward and backboned the Run for the Vikings Four-Mile, which raised \$2,500 to help fund Colbert's seasons. The club also sprang for the timing, T-shirts, mailings and of course, the post-race party at ... where else?

"It was still early enough in the school year where there was a lot of uncertainty," Colbert said. "To see the community rally around that race just raised everybody's spirits. It was a really fun event."

The year before, the WCRC allocated \$2,000 toward a grant program for which the River Rival schools could apply. The grant helped Colbert fund the Triton Triple Classic Track and Field Meet in the spring of 2006.

Don Hennigar, longtime cross country coach at Newburyport High, has always seen the WCRC as a beacon for the River Rival schools.

"They have been more than supportive of the sport at our level," he noted. "It's a very giving club, very supportive at a grass-roots level."

For its selflessness and giving, for its first-rate road races, and hopefully 30 more years, raise your next glass to the WCRC.

Its name alone could not be more appropriate.