

The First Years: 1963 - 1966

Written by Steve Bainbridge

Saturday, 21 November 2009 00:35 - Last Updated Tuesday, 19 July 2011 17:37

Equinox Marathon History

The first years 1963 --- 1966

Nat Goodhue is the person most often credited with starting the Equinox Marathon and setting out the 26.2 mile trail that starts and ends at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) campus.

Fred Boyle, a ski coach hired by UAF in 1958, and Jim Mahaffey, hired by Fred in the spring of 1962 to serve as the assistant ski coach, no doubt had some influence on Nat as the idea for a marathon was tossed out for discussion in the early part of 1963.

Bill Ordway, the basketball coach at the time, was also one of the first at UAF to get on board with the idea of the marathon, advertising the race as something that would take place in the autumn of 1963. Nat, Jim Mahaffey, John Samuelson, and others were involved in the planning of the course in the spring of 1963, and when coach Ordway and coach Mahaffey left Fairbanks for the summer, Nat and some of his friends worked to clear the trail. These friends included Gail Bakken, Tim Middleton, and Cathy Love to name just a few.

Trail clearing was tiring work, and presented some risk, as noted in one instance where a bear showed up on Ester Dome and caused the clearing crew to rethink the route leading up to the "chute".

Private property owners granted permission verbally and the trail was informally marked with tin can lids that were spray painted orange and placed along the course.

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The first Equinox Marathon was held on September 21st, 1963. The weather conditions were noted as “sunny, warm, and clear --- temperature 60 degrees F”.

Entrants were grouped in four categories The Men’s Division, the Women’s Division, the Boy’s Division, and the Girl’s Division.

According to the official results, 24 men were entered in the first Equinox Marathon, and 17 men completed the marathon. Eight women entered, and 4 finished 21 boys entered and 21 finished. The girls provided an interesting story.

As noted in the September 23rd, 1963 Fairbanks Daily News Miner, “The girls, including

64 high-schoolers, traveled mostly in packs, and if one hadn’t the knowledge a race was taking place, he might have believed the girls to be off on a two-week camping trip. In each group at least one girl was equipped with a transistor radio.

One 16-year old, with a radio as big as an overnight bag bouncing on a shoulder strap, puffed happily along the trail listening to Wee Willie Walley.” Other girls carried extra shoes, sneakers, warm clothes, lunches, first aid kits and other paraphernalia ... one was seen stopped along the course as she carefully applied fresh makeup.”

Nat Goodhue won the event for the Men’s Division and the overall marathon, with a time of 3:54:22, and his fiancée, Gail Bakken, won the event for the women with a time of 6:08:00. Mike Scanlon won the Boy’s Division with a time of 3:37:56, which was also good enough to place him second overall in the marathon.

Judy Mitchell won the Girl’s Division with a time of 7:15:04.

Further quoting from the September 23

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News Miner, "Dr. Francis Pyne, new athletic director at the university, acted as first-aid man up on Ester.

He said he was "amazed at the determination and endurance exhibited by the entrants, especially the girls", and felt the race was "extremely successful".

The second annual Equinox Marathon was held on September 19th, 1964. Quoting from the September 21st edition of the Fairbanks Daily News Miner, "the race attracted a total

of 323 entrants, with 258 finishing. Both marks exceeded the 143 entries and 69 finishers in the inaugural event in 1963. The large turnout required a few makeshift procedures at the last minute.

After the officials ran out of the conventional numbers they used cards with printed numbers and as these were exhausted they penciled numbers on the back of entry blanks and course maps to fill the need."

Weather conditions were near ideal, with the autumn chill just enough to keep the runners from getting overheated while brisk enough to spur the walkers along. Many contestants carried cameras to record the beauty of the autumn colors."

Private First Class Jerry Varnum of the U.S. Army Biathlon unit at Fort Richardson won the marathon with a time of 3:38:42. Other division winners were:

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Boy's Division -----Pete Evans, Palmer High School 4:11:28

Women's Division --Ruth McCoy, U of A student from Haines 6:15:03

Girl's Division-----Judy Mitchell, a junior from Lathrop High School 6:34:18.

* It should be noted that Judy Mitchell became the first two time winner in the

Girl's Division, taking 40 minutes and 48 seconds off the time she posted in 1963.

One of the interesting aspects of the 1964 marathon had to do with the "course sweepers". In addition to first aid stations and food stops where contestants could pick up on water, lemonade, and other energy foods, there were two "post runners" (Bill Ordway and Dennis Sperl) who walked the course starting one hour after the racers began.

Their purpose was to be sure there were no stragglers who needed assistance.

Among the safety precautions of the race rules was the one that disqualified an entrant and required that they leave the race at the next checkpoint if the post runners caught up with them.

This was to be sure that entrants were off the trail before dark. The Aortic Amateur Radio Club provided seven check points along the trail to relay information o the monitor station at the finish line.

In addition to providing race coverage, the group was available to summon aid in case of an accident along the trail or if a message had to be passed along.

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The running of the Equinox Marathon in 1965 featured a total of 329 finishers ----- 46 men, 144 boys, 14 women, and 125 girls. An additional 24 persons crossed the finish line but were disqualified for missing one or more checkpoints. "There were also 257 persons who made application, but did not finish the race, either because of dropping out along the way or because they did not start.

Winners in the different divisions were as follows:

Men ----- Edward G. Williams 3:07:10

Women ---- Patricia Pyne 6:45:13

Boys -----John Eckerson 4:39:42

Girls -----Susan Johnson 6:09:02

The 1966 Equinox Marathon went on record as establishing new records for finishers in all the classes as well as new extremes in the ages of the finishers, with ages ranging from age 7 {Greg Whisenant} to age 69 {James Fotheringham}. The youngest finisher in the Girl's Division was Libby Dalton, age 9.

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The winners in the different divisions were as follows:

Men ----- Allen P. Small 3:21:12

Women -----Patricia Pyne 5:32:33

Boys -----Laurence Dunlap 3:53:37

Girls -----Debbie Haines 5:24:10

Compiled by Steve Bainbridge, based on conversations with Nat Goodhue and information from post-race-day editions of the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner ... 1963, 1964, 1965, and 1966.