

Abe Simon: He gave so much time to help people enjoy road running

We keep hearing about all the good things running can do for us — how it strengthens our bodies, helps us overcome illness and cope with mental stress. But the sport also seems to develop special people who are more interested in helping others than themselves. To parallel President Kennedy's words, they ask not what running can do for them, but what they can do for running.

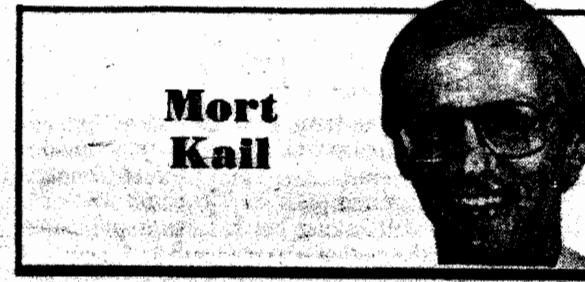
You see them talking exhausted runners through the last miles of a marathon even if it means that their own time will be slower. When they aren't racing, you'll find them serving along the sidelines on the water brigades, calling off the times, catching exhausted finishers or doing the hundreds of other behind-the-scenes jobs necessary for a successful race.

They are the same people who sacrifice their own precious running time to jog slowly with beginners they never saw before to get them started on the right foot.

One of these special people was Abe Simon, who rates more credit for putting runners on the roads of Westchester and helping them keep going than anyone else in the County. Ever since he first started jogging 15 years ago to help recover from a heart attack, he never stopped running to the aid of others — not until he died of cancer last week at the age of 59.

When Abe started road running in the late 1960's, you didn't see many mature men dashing through the streets of Scarsdale in their shorts. People would come out of their houses to watch the "nut" and dogs would set up a chorus of yapping.

Soon he was joined by other runners in their 40's or older, and they decided to call themselves the Scarsdale Antiques. No one ever elected him president — Abe just assumed all the duties. He and his wife Sandy did the mailings, contacted members, organized pre-race parties, ordered running outfits for everyone, arranged transportation to races and published results in the local newspaper. In one of the wealthiest communities in the country, no member was ever asked to pay dues. Most money came in through contributions.



Mort Kail

On running

The Scarsdale Antiques became the detonator for the running explosion of the 1970's in Westchester. Members came from all parts of the county and many formed similar social running clubs in their own towns. The name "Antiques" changed its meaning to reflect the members' value, rather than their age, which ranged from the teens to the seventies. Abe maintained that the Antiques should dominate the back of the pack, but there are many front runners in the club.

In 1970, he urged his members and local officials to sponsor a 15Km race through the streets of Scarsdale. It soon became a classic, second only to the Yonkers Marathon as the County's longest running and most prestigious race.

In the fall of 1970, he and other Scarsdale Antiques contributed \$100 to help finance the first New York City Marathon, which was then run entirely in Central Park. It was the largest contribution by any one group that year. Now corporations ante up to \$1 million to become official backers of the long run through New York City.

Abe never kept track of the hundreds of races he ran, but he was proud of his 35 marathons and best time of 3 hours and 21 minutes. He ran the grueling Yonkers route at least a half dozen times, Boston twice and New York every fall until this year.

Even when he began to slow down during the past year, he continued running many races and remained as cheerful as when he was winning his age group. He made the New York Marathon as endurable as possible each year for scores of runners from Scarsdale

and surrounding towns. They'd find Abe out in his torn sweat shirt at dawn on Marathon Day making sure everyone got on the buses he had arranged to take them to the start in Staten Island. During the ride, nervous runners would share coffee, vaseline and support, then stay warm on the bus until a half hour before the starting gun.

Although exhausted from running the race himself, he waited at the last bus next to Central Park until the final runner from his group staggered across the finish line. Then he'd record everyone's results and make sure their names got into the local newspaper.

The funeral service was a reflection of what Abe had accomplished through his devotion to others. The chapel, halls and vestibules couldn't hold the overflow crowd of relatives, fellow runners, business associates and friends. Although they came from different avenues of his life, they all shared the memory of Abe being there to help them and cheer them up when they needed it most.

Instead of grief, the conversation was more of cheerful memories. Every runner had at least one anecdote of how Abe had given them a laugh or a boost during their years on the road together.

I remember the first time I ran into Abe. I had just started jogging and he was on a long run which took him through my town. When he saw me struggling along by myself, he slowed down to my pace to give me pointers on how to train and eventually race. It wasn't until we exchanged names as we headed for our homes that I realized that I had been matching strides with a living legend of running.

Harvey Lauer, who took over most of the presidential duties of the Antiques as Abe's health failed, urged in his eulogy that the Scarsdale 15 Km race be known as the Abe Simon Memorial 15 Km Race from now on. After the services, Abe's fellow runners paid their tribute by going on a memorial run past his house. Like the fly-by of an Air Force squadron after it has lost its leader, the point position of the formation was vacant.