

A Bayou City Classic  
by John Farrow

The 49<sup>th</sup> Annual RRCA National Convention unofficially got under way the evening of March 9<sup>th</sup> with a slap shot and lots of body-checking at a Houston Aeros hockey game in the Toyota Center. RRCA Vice-President Tom Downing of Alabama questioned several calls of icing and off-sides. “Where I come from, icing is something on a cake and off-sides is a five yard penalty on a football field.” No matter. The action was fast and furious out on the ice.

The following morning, Houston Mayor Bill White, a runner himself, officially declared the day “RRCA Houston National Convention Day” and the convention was under way with a moving tribute to the unofficial Georgia State 5K Championship Race held at Camp Stryker, Iraq. The American flag that flew during the Freedom 5K was presented to the RRCA and its 50-foot race banner unrolled and hung in the hotel lobby for the duration of the Convention.

And this being Texas, where sports and cleavage are inextricably intertwined, the opening session also featured the Houston Rockets’ Power Dancers, who entertained the crowd with several energetic routines.

It wouldn’t be an RRCA convention without *Runners World’s* Bart Yasso with his slides and stories of running around the world at the State Rep Luncheon. “You smell the penguins before you see them,” (at the Antarctica Marathon); “This looks like the turn-around point to me!” (on encountering a rhino during a trail run in Sri Lanka); “If your partner is an ass, don’t be surprised if he sometimes acts like one,” (while mule racing in Colorado); “Do you show your medal to your mother?” (at a clothing-optional race in Washington State).

The State Rep Luncheon also honored Joan Davis of Hawaii, the 2005 State Rep of the Year and the fifth in a row (“One for the Thumb”) from the Western Region. But then everyone was pleasantly stunned to learn of the generosity of an anonymous donor who has pledged \$100,000 over the next three years to help fund attendance of state reps at the annual conventions.

Later it was down, down, down as we descended into the bowels of the Houston tunnel system for the Convention Walk Rallye, there to wander with other troglodytes searching for such items as Greek treats and green, purple and round things. Ultimately we surfaced to peruse such Houston landmarks as the Toyota Center (Yao Ming has how much clearance at the parking lot?), Minute Maid Park (Who’s on first?) and the Rice Hotel, the tallest building in Texas when built in 1913 and the first to later have air conditioning. Slipping inside, you could sense the presence of history in the now-faded lobby – Dad Joiner desperately selling and re-selling oil leases to raise money to keep drilling his Daisy Bradford #3 well until it blew in to announce the discovery of the huge East Texas Field in 1930, Howard Hughes after his record flight around the world in 1939, or President John F. Kennedy at a dinner in his honor on November 21, 1963.

Finally everyone made it to Bayou Place for barbecue, beer and rocking Texas blues in the park. Lyrics from Robert Earl Keen came to mind, “. . . got a trunk full of Shiner Bock and Lone Star.”

While beer and barbecue might not be the recommended pre-race meal, the RRCA board of directors nevertheless threw caution to the humidity and won the Bayou Classic club centipede category, running as a giant toga party. “Toga! Toga! Toga!” The more serious race saw John Hedengren take home the RRCA National 10K Championship with a time of 31:57. Roads Scholar Trent Briney was third overall, while Heidi Hullinger won the women’s race in 37:30.

Throughout the convention, attendees heard from a myriad of speakers at seminars ranging from the usual on Preparation of Club Newsletters, Small Race Production and Insurance Issues, to more exotic fare such as Adventure Racing, Triathlon for Runners and Blogging. There was also time to peruse the HEB Bayou City Classic Race Expo and vendors such as Fuel Belt, Run Wild Sports Timing and USA Track & Field, all the while getting to know Jean Knaack, the new Executive Director of the RRCA.

Saturday Jan Seeley and Rich Benyo of Marathon & Beyond entertained over lunch with stories of how the magazine came to be with them as publishers. Then it was more seminars, especially fitting being one on Revving Up Your Metabolism, just the thing to deal with the filling Tex-Mex tacos and pastries. Sure beats running the 300 miles from the bottom of Death Valley to the top of Mount Whitney and back, as Rich once did, the damn fool!

Then it was over to the silent auction to benefit the state rep program for a final check of merchandise as Jeff Darman and Phil Stewart hawked their wares nearby at the live auction to benefit the Roads Scholar Program. Who knew that a Wheaties box autographed by Bill Rogers would be worth so much? But thanks to the generosity of everyone, the auctions raised more money for these programs than ever before.

“Next year in Chicago!” The awards banquet got under way with the announcement that the 50th Annual RRCA Convention next year will be hosted in the Windy City by the Alpine Runners of Lake Zurich. The 2007 convention will close with the Lasalle Banks Shamrock Shuffle 8K, the national championship race for that distance. This immediately sent the board scurrying to learn if the race included a centipede category.

The banquet featured a duet of guest speakers in the person of Kathrine Switzer and Roger Robinson, who read excerpts from their new book, “26.2 Marathon Stories.” The book will be released in conjunction with this year’s 110<sup>th</sup> Boston Marathon in April, but Switzer auctioned the first copy to benefit the Roads Scholar program, and both she and the winner seemed genuinely surprised when it sold for \$150.

The significance of Kathrine Switzer’s presence at the RRCA convention was not lost on those in attendance. “It was the courage of women like Kathrine that have enabled me to

have the opportunities I have today,” said Executive Director Jean Knaack, no doubt speaking for many in the room.

No doubt she was also speaking for Hall of Fame inductee Deena Kastor, who, along with Meb Keflizighi, were honored by video tribute. Neither was able to attend due to their busy race schedules but Meb, who had won the Gate River Run earlier that morning and had become a father the week before, nevertheless sent his thanks.

Following the awards portion of the banquet, it was upstairs to the Striders’ hospitality suite and a last chance to visit with friends before they disbursed around the country. Also tequila shots late into the night, courtesy of Chicagoan (by way of Mexico City) Beth Onines.

Sunday morning arrived early – too early for some – but the post-convention run out Buffalo Bayou Park and onto the 2003 USA Cross-Country Championship course was a great eye-opener, as were the breakfast tacos afterwards. This was followed by the annual business meeting which quickly took care of business, noting with satisfaction that the RRCA is back on solid ground financially thanks to continued support from members and national sponsors.

And with that, I took a walk down to Pappa’s Barbecue for a leisurely lunch of sliced brisket and sweet iced tea as I remembered it. Having grown up in Texas, coming back to Houston was just like slipping on a pair of old brown shoes. And thinking back over the past few days, all the hard work of the Striders was evident as this had truly been a classic convention on the bayou.