

The RRCA At 50
by John Farrow

Clear blue skies. Sunbathing in the park. Calm winds and balmy temperatures. The calendar says it's March but is this Chicago?

“Ex-Daley Aide Indicted!!” screams the newspaper headline. Yes, this must be the place.

On March 23, 2007, President Bee McLeod opened the 50th Annual Convention of the Road Runners Club of America for a year-long celebration that has seen the fledgling organization grow in a half-century to the largest running organization in the world with income in excess of a million dollars, more than 770 member clubs and over 180,000 individual members. The event was hosted in Chicago by the Alpine Runners Club and Illinois Runs Training Programs.

This year saw the debut of the Club College, a core group of educational seminars designed to increase participant's knowledge of key areas of running club management. Some topics included Managing Your Nonprofit Club or Event, its Finances and Risk, Developing Youth Running and Beginning Runner Programs, Utilizing Technology, Medical Coverage for Events, and many more.

And if it's an RRCA Annual Convention, there's sure to be *Runner's World*. This year the magazine was represented by the hilarious John “The Penguin” Bingham, discussing the virtues of the four kinds of runners, from elites to the back-of-the-packers at the State Rep Luncheon sponsored by *Runner's World*. Ask him his marathon PR and he likely will reply, with a straight face, “Sunday.” Afterwards, he helped Ron Macksoud of Alabama, the State Rep of the Year, into his award jacket.

After more seminars, it was off to the Goose Island Brewery in the shadows of Wrigley Field for Chicago-style barbecue and locally-brewed beer with NCAA basketball all around as models from Fleet Feet strutted the latest running attire. “This year for the Cubbies?” I asked the bartender. He rolled his eyes and smiled sadly.

Saturday, the Club College seminars continued, along with continuing education for coaches with Mel Williams and Roy Benson. *Marathon and Beyond* hosted the day's lunch as Rich Benyo and Jan Seeley discussed changes in distance running over the past half-century. Remember races scored with popsicle sticks? Original Gatorade? It tasted like Sprite. Aid stations? A relatively recent, but welcomed, phenomenon.

Most years, the election of directors at the annual business meeting has all the drama of growing grass. This year it was anything but. Not only were three of the four board positions up for election this year contested by candidates nominated from the floor, each had campaigned in earnest for some time prior to the convention. And the level of interest in the election was evident as more than 140 clubs, events and past presidents cast ballots.

A few could be heard quietly lamenting the amount of politicking but in the end, the majority of voters heeded the recommendations of the nominating committee. Elected this year were Ken

Bendy as Southern Region Director, David Epstein as Western Region Director, and Lisa Paige and Bob Holmes as Directors At Large.

Then it was off to the conclusion of the silent auction and catch Jeff Darman and Michael Hughes hawking their wares at the live auction. All told, these two events raise thousands of dollars each year to benefit the State Rep program.

And as the auctioneer's gavel came down one final time, members began filing into the Grand Ballroom for the Awards Banquet as octogenarian Anne Klein warmed and entertained the crowd with her secrets for a long and active life. Klein, now 84, began running at age 55 with no previous experience. Since then, she has completed over 100 marathons and 142 ultramarathons, including a 145-mile stage race across the Sahara Desert, as well as an Ironman triathlon. This great-grandmother of four holds at least 75 world and national age group records, many of which may never be broken.

Also recognized at the Awards Banquet were Jenny Spangler and Judi St. Hilaire as inductees into the RRCA Hall of Fame. While the careers of both were hampered by injuries, Spangler is most noted for her surprise win at the 1996 Olympic Marathon Trials, while St. Hilaire's career was capped with a place on the 1992 Olympic team and an eighth place finish in the 10,000 meter final. Also honored that night were some nineteen RRCA volunteers for their efforts at promoting grassroots running in the United States.

The Awards Banquet concluded with the announcement that the 2008 annual convention would be held in Cincinnati in conjunction with the Flying Pig Marathon. Many expressed the hope that perhaps all the drama next year would be at a Reds baseball game.

Sunday dawned clear and sunny as runners made their way to the start of the LaSalle Bank Shamrock Shuffle 8K, the RRCA national championship at that distance. The race was capped at 30,000 entrants and had long been closed. Across the way, the venerable Chicago Hilton loomed along Michigan Avenue, the site of the 1968 Democratic Convention. Nearby Grant Park was full of sunbathers, walkers, cyclists and race spectators, a far cry from the violent demonstrations of that time.

Luke Watson of Madison Wisconsin, turned in the winning time of 23:26, while Tera Moody of Boulder, Colorado, won the women's race in 27:09. And as finishers continued to stream in, the beautiful spring weather and some leftover St. Patrick's Day enthusiasm seemed to provide an extra boost to the huge Post-Race Party in Grant Park.