

The Winding Road to Women's Fitness

Two female-only clubs provide training & support

By Jim Hage

It's difficult to be a woman runner. That's hardly news to half the population but may well be for the rest of us.

Aside from obvious physical limitations women face compared to their testosterone-swaggering counterparts, society—even in egalitarian America—hardly smiles on the female runner. Road-race participation numbers of about 33 percent reinforce that.

For most men who run, the verbal hoot by a member of the opposite sex is rare and usually, given our ravenous egos, flattering. For women, catcalls and visual muggings are commonplace—and, of course, sometimes much worse.

Such was the case last winter, when Sue Stottmeister was murdered while running on a popular bike trail in Montgomery County. A palpable sense of relief came to area runners when an apparently deranged man confessed to the murder in May. Foot and bike traffic has resumed in the Aspen Hill area, although a sadness lingers.

The Road Runners Club of America, sensitive to the unique training and racing needs of its female members, has long sponsored a variety of educational and fitness-related programs to promote women's fitness. In 1980, the RRCA inaugurated the Women's Distance Festival, a nationwide series of races intended to highlight the absence of an Olympic marathon for women. Four years later, Joan Benoit sped into the Los Angeles Coliseum, winning the first women's marathon gold medal and changing women's running forever. Not quite as spectacular but no less lofty in its result, the WDF continues to promote a summer schedule of low-key races for women; men are encouraged to

participate as volunteers.

The **Washington RunHers** is another vintage women's program that this year celebrates its 25th anniversary. The RunHers offers a 12-week walking and running program every spring and summer (the next one starting August 11). The final exam is a 5K WDF event. Registration costs \$17, includes club membership and covers

President Elizabeth Ottoway, helps coach more than 100 women every year in Annandale, Va. Both Gregor and Ottoway are certified by the Road Runners Club of America coaching program. Weekly workouts include a large dose of camaraderie.

"Without the group all working together, it wouldn't be possible," Gregor says. "There's incentive to participate but no pressure to com-

more than 115 women have been meeting weekly for supervised workouts. Like the RunHers, the FIT women target a WDF 5K for their graduation exercises.

"These women aren't trying to set records," says FIT member Kris Hammill, who is in her second tour in the program. "They are looking for some motivation and direction for getting in shape. I brought a friend. I told her, 'We can do this,' and we have."

Beside friends, several mother-daughter duos participate. The oldest FIT runner is 67, the youngest 11.

Diane Brandt, Striders women's committee chair, says directing the program has helped provide a personal outlet for her while she recovers from a serious leg fracture, after which a rod was inserted in her tibia.

"Like Kris, many women repeat the FIT program every year, so we are no longer targeting only beginning runners," Brandt says. "We also have walkers, intermediate and experienced running groups. A nice side benefit for the club is dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers."

Not to mention a legion of newly fit and self-confident women throughout the metropolitan area. For more information, contact Carla Gregor of RunHers at 703-212-0158, or Diane Brandt of FIT at dkbrandt@compuserve.com. ■

The Road Runners Club of America publishes a safety bulletin documenting attacks on women in the Washington area. To obtain a copy or subscribe, contact the RRCA at 703-836-0558.

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everything from instruction in training and recommendations on shoes to running safety and rehabilitating injuries.

"We get women of all types," says Carla Gregor, administrator, coach and motivator for the group. "Our goal is to have them run 5K in 30 minutes without stopping. So long as they are consistent with their training, that's achievable."

Gregor, along with Club

pete like you might find in a coed club. Everyone pretty much goes at her own pace. And then we encourage them to go just a little bit faster."

Farther north and off Interstate 95 in Columbia, FIT—**Females In Training**—also provides a haven for budding athletes. FIT, a program sponsored by the Howard County Striders, started in 1992 with several dozen runners. This summer,