

# The Great Outdoors *sports*



(Sentinel Photo by Bill Lovejoy)

The pack will be back again Sunday, running along E. Cliff Drive for the annual Wharf To Wharf Race, starting at 9 a.m. at Municipal Wharf.

## Wrong-Way Finish Started History Of Wharf To Wharf Race

**B**ACK IN 1973, Mark McConnell was one of those who helped map out the Wharf To Wharf Race course. But when it got down to the finish of that year's first annual run from Santa Cruz' Municipal Wharf to the Capitola Wharf, McConnell, then a Stanford undergrad two years out of Soquel High, could only think about catching up with the leader.

McConnell noticed something was wrong when a course marshal waved leader — and eventual winner — Jack Bellah, out onto the Capitola Wharf. McConnell knew that wasn't where the race was supposed to finish. "I heard the guy direct Jack out there," McConnell recalls. "And I figured I'd better follow Jack. I shouldn't have; I should have called him back. But I was just trying to catch him."

So were 18 runners right behind them, all following the two leaders onto the wharf while the rest of the pack whizzed by to the actual finish line in the Capitola Village. McConnell remembers feeling before the race that his only advantage was that he "knew the course." He also remembers at the finish of that first Wharf To Wharf Race a policeman standing where the leaders were misdirected. "Nobody tried to stop us," he says.

McConnell knew they were off course. "About halfway out on the wharf, Jack was looking around and I realized something was wrong. About 20 people went out there. It was pretty embarrassing." But they went to the race official and the top 20 were allowed to judge among themselves how they finished. And Bellah was crowned the winner.

Thus began the legend of the annual Wharf To Wharf Race, a race that features runners wearing anything from combat boots to bikinis and where no one's surprised if there's somebody in both. It's an event in itself; an outlet for the top-class racer, yet easy enough for the twice-a-week jogger to handle. The race that started out to be a simple fund-raiser for Soquel High track programs has become the most popular running race in the Monterey Bay area, with a projected field of over 3,500 to line up on Beach St. Sunday at 9 a.m. for the 5.813 point-to-point run.

Ken Thomas, then a teacher at Soquel High (he's still a track and cross-country coach), was the spear which headed the Wharf To Wharf's origin and he's looking forward to this year's eighth annual race. "We're anticipating a record turnout," Thomas says, noting that through Wednesday there have been over 1,400 already pre-registered. McConnell and his father, John, another long-time race coordinator, have been opening envelopes upon envelopes, and expect to continue that process through Saturday. (The official pre-registration deadline was Wednesday, but Mark McConnell says that if they are received beforehand, "We won't throw them away."

### RUNNING

Ed Vyeda

Through proceeds from Wharf To Wharf, the race committee offers a \$250 scholarship to a senior boy and senior girl from Soquel for their first year of college. And, Thomas notes, over the years their contribution to the school's track programs amount to about 80 percent of what he calls, "operating types of expenses; things like hurdles, shots, cross bars, sweats and uniforms." And in the past year, the equipment the Wharf Race people have financed include a video tape machine, which Soquel's famous resident and world class discus thrower Mac Wilkins helped test.

(Wilkins, in fact, is to be the celebrity awards presenter in Capitola Sunday morning, which will definitely add a touch of class to the ceremony.

For a race that is less than six miles, having 3,000-plus runners can crowd the course — and especially the finish area. Last year the Wharf officials went to a format where men and women runners finish in separate shutes and Thomas feels that system, which will be in use again Sunday, has helped relieve some of the congestion that confounds some finishers.

"Trying to give out (placement) sticks is impossible," says Thomas, though the top 500 to 800 finishers will probably be counted without much problem this year. "But once it reaches the point of stacking up past the finish line, that will be disbanded," Thomas said. "Usually, you're talking about the first 500, but the two shutes help."

Thomas remembers the first Wharf Race and the mixup at the finish. But the fact that the top 20 could get together and make an accurate tally of who placed where is testimony — Rosie Ruiz, if you're reading, take heed — that nobody will be able to cut into the race at some point and walk off a champion of an impostor.

"They know who is where," Thomas says, "especially through the first 500 runners. The first year when all that happened, they lined up and said, 'Okay, Jack's first, McConnell's second...' so and so is third and right down the line."

Thomas admits, though, for a race the size of the Wharf Race, it's virtually impossible to keep tabs on everybody. Indeed, there often seems to be more non-registered runners on the course as those who have officially entered. Over the years the race officials have tried to weed out those to don't sign up, but it's a monumental task.

"You try to register everybody," he says, "but there really isn't anything you can do. And if somebody gets in his car and drives to 41st Ave., gets out and starts running, there's no way of telling whether or not someone has run the entire course."

The Wharf Race officials really haven't concerned themselves much with that potential problem, leaving the best of the field to police themselves. So far it has worked. Just keeping officials at road intersections and having law enforcement agencies patrol the course can be headache enough. But cooperation over the years has been good.

The course is, in Mark McConnell's view, very fast and easy, which, he feels, is one of the reasons so many turn out for it. "It follows a coastal route and is basically flat," he says. "There is one hill going up to the tressle (near the boardwalk), but that's only at the one-mile mark and you're not really into the race. From there on, it's mostly flat with slight grades — nothing for a runner to think about, but a jogger might think about it." Now, entrants Sunday will be able to tell if they are a runner or jogger, just by how they assess the rolling climbs along the way.

"The one thing that helps in its popularity," McConnell feels, "is that it's fairly short and an easy course. People don't mind running five miles, though they might not want to run Johnny's 10-Miler. They feel they can make it five or six miles flat. But," he says, with a mark of wonder punctuating his tone, "I often wonder myself why it's so popular."

The course starts at the Santa Cruz Wharf, takes a left turn briefly onto Riverside St., then right to make its first appearance on E. Cliff Drive. Just past the one-mile mark, runners veer left onto Murray St., then turn right toward the Yacht Harbor and the two-mile mark.

From there, it's back onto E. Cliff to the halfway point at the Cheese Factory, where the course turns right, closer to the ocean, and continues through the Pleasure Point area, the Opal Cliffs residential section of Capitola and down the finishing hill to the village.

There will be eight divisions in which runners may sign up, with medals for all winners through varying, by division, top finishers. Race-day registration is \$4. For information, call 423-1665. T-Shirts will be sold at the race for \$5.

Registrations will be held Sunday in the parking lot of the Depot Restaurant between 7:30 a.m. and 8:45 a.m.