

Wharf to Wharf Race Marks Its 35th Year

by Michael Thomas

On Sunday, July 22, thousands of runners, from pros to weekend joggers, will gather at the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf for a six-mile dash along the Central Coast south to Capitola Village. This year will mark the 35th Anniversary of the Wharf to Wharf race. The longevity is impressive for an event that was first held as a one-time competition to attract spectators for a historic landmark dedication in Capitola

It will also be the first time the event will culminate with an award ceremony on the new bandstand at Capitola's Main Beach. As usual, the signup limit of 15,000 runners was reached months in advance and participants are expected from 40 different states and a dozen foreign countries.

"It has kind of become a homecoming for a lot of people who have lived here and then moved away," said long-time race director Kirby Nicol.

First Year Had Some Hitches

The Wharf to Wharf race was first conceived as a way to attract spectators to a plaque dedication for the historic Hihn building at 201 Monterey Ave., along Capitola's historic seaside esplanade. The building, constructed in the 1880s, served as the headquarters for Camp Capitola until 1930.

In 1973, it had recently been restored by owners Jim and Barbara Reding. State and local politicians were scheduled to present National Registry and State Historical Landmark plaques at a ceremony on July 23 of that year. However, organizers worried that few people would show up.

Jim Reding says he came up

with the idea for a foot race culminating at the historic building.

According to Nicol, "It was kind of an accidental thing. It wasn't something that was dreamed up as an event for the city."

A team was formed to make the event a reality. The Redings were joined by community leaders Wayne Fontes, Ken Thomas and Doris Susjan.

the first runners dashed down the hill into Capitola Village, a confused police officer — whom to this day, no department seems willing to claim — directed them to the wrong finish line.

"He directed all the runners out to the end of the wharf when the finish line was at the palm tree," Reding recalls. "We had to straighten it all out."

Later, when they received

to become an annual event. They approached Ken Thomas, who was the track coach at Soquel High, about doing the event again. Nicol, then the school's assistant track coach, jumped on board to help make it happen.

"Lo and behold, about 500 people showed up," Nicol recalls. "It doubled in size every year up until about 1979."



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There was a lot of organizing to do, with support and permits needed from a battery of jurisdictions and public safety agencies. Ultimately, the race was confined to one side of the road, so the first-ever Wharf to Wharf runners were sharing the course with cars.

"That was difficult to do," Reding recalls.

In spite of all their best efforts, there were a couple flubs that have gained humorous value over the years. When

their medals, the winners discovered that they had just won the "Warf to Warf" race. The printing mix-up still inspires dog jokes, and Fontes, who was in charge of the printing and also the principal of a local school at the time, later received a gold-plated pocket dictionary as a memento of the mixup.

It Grew and Grew...

It was the runners themselves who pushed for the race

According to Nicol, the race and the sport grew.

"It was a time when running was popular and becoming more popular. Running shoes were getting more sophisticated," he added.

In 1983, 3,700 people showed up, but race organizers had a vision of a more professionally managed and promoted event that could raise money for school sports facilities such as all-weather tracks, starting with Soquel High.

Nicol became executive director and within five years, race enrollment had topped out at 12,000 runners. Nicol is still the only paid organizer for the event. The event relies on an army of volunteers, some of whom have been working the race for two, even three decades, according to Reding.

Registration Capped at 15,000

Nicol said that establishing a reasonable limit on the number of runners has been crucial to the continued success of the event.

"You never want to have a race that's so big that runners get to the finish line and can't cross it because it's all jammed up," he said. "It would suffer from its own popularity."

Limiting the enrollment for the race proved to be a lesson in modern psychology.

"Once we capped it, all of the sudden it became more popular," Nicol said.

The popularity of the event has translated into major fundraising, the vast majority of which goes to local schools. Last year the event raised nearly \$300,000 for local youth athletic programs. Another \$20,000 was contributed to the bandstand project.

Nicol estimates that the race has raised about \$4 million for youth sports over the past 35 years. The rush of visitors also provides a boost for the local hospitality industry. Nicol said that participants and spectators spend an estimated \$4.4 million, mostly for lodging and restaurant meals, over the course of the weekend.

This year's Wharf to Wharf race begins at 8:30 a.m. on Sunday, July 22. The first runners should cross the finish line in Capitola Village at just after 9 a.m. A map of the race course is online at www.wharftowharf.com. ■