

The Running Life: Still Meeting at Joanie

A running group revisited

By Candace Karu

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The picture clipped to the worn folder tells a big part of the story. A little faded and curled with age, it shows 10 women crowded around the statue of our town's native daughter, Joan Benoit Samuelson. The early fall morning was chilly and we were eager to get running, but we managed to stay still just long enough for the shot. Jayne is making bunny ears behind Joanie's head. Laurie still has her sleepy face on. And, in a futile effort at adding vertical inches, I'm standing on tiptoes.

As I read the pages in the folder, I am struck by how much has changed, and how much remains the same. In the fall of 2000, I wrote a feature called "Meeting at Joanie," the story of my running group. Seven years later, only five of the original group remains. In our most recent photo I can see how we have transformed.

The biggest difference, as this current picture will attest, is the most obvious. When the article first appeared, we were a group of women runners. Back then, having a man join us on a run, while always appreciated, was a rarity. Though I can't remember when things started to change, I do know that on our Saturday run last weekend, of the 13 regulars gathered in the parking lot, six were men. As we ran, I tried to recall how or when our group became decidedly, enthusiastically, and perhaps irrevocably coed.

I think it must have been Ray who led the way. Looking back, I have to admire the way he slipped seamlessly into our girl gang, sussing out the spirit of the group with relative ease. Never one to shy away from sharing the ideas that fill his heart or his head, Ray was the perfect XY pioneer. It says something of his effortless integration that no one seems to remember the circumstances of how he became one of us.

It might have been Ted and Jim who joined us next--but again the transition was subtle, making the chronology impossible to pinpoint. What I do know for certain is that they have brought depth and color to the proceedings and have schooled me in subjects both mundane and delightful. My appreciation for the finer points of baseball and hockey is richer for having run with them, but so is my understanding of the unofficial history of Cape Elizabeth, commercial real estate transactions, and prosthetic testicles.

Our numbers are up. On a good day there are 15 people in the parking lot, knocking fists in greeting, observing the obligatory Five-Minute rule. We cut latecomers some slack, but only five minutes' worth. Training schedules, fitness levels, and the previous night's activities dictate who runs with whom, but often it's the men who dominate the lead. Conversations range from rehashing golf games to recalcitrant children, from fantasy football to fantasy sex. Very few topics are taboo. This has been true from the beginning and didn't change with the arrival of the menfolk. On the contrary, our discussions are often more interesting with input from the guys.

The growth of the group has been organic. We never set out to be for women only; it just came together that way. I loved those years of sisterly solidarity. For me it was like being on a sports team, something I missed entirely in my youth. But if I am completely honest, I'd have to say that having men in the group has changed very little of its essential nature. My day is always better for having started it with these people, men and women. And my running improved by training with runners, who are, for the most part, faster and more dedicated than I am. They inspire me to train harder every time we run together.

Last month, we gathered in the early morning dawn to run to the highest point in our town. It was a regular Tuesday morning run from Joanie, with a twist. This was the day of the total lunar eclipse, a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. On a clear, late-summer morning, 13 runners stopped to experience the cosmic, a shared celebration of the running life.

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Its a running life - still meeting at Joanie