

# History of the Club

*By E. Packer Wilbur, Founder*



**In 1976, four of us began to meet** each Saturday morning at 8:30 to do a relaxed five-mile run. We usually met at Jim Dolan's house at 712 Harbor Road in Southport and the group included Jim, Jay Lambert, Jim Crawford and myself. Our run was essentially the five-mile course which we now use for the Thanksgiving Day Race, but we ran it in reverse, out Pequot Avenue and Beachside and back on Greens Farms Road to Westway Road.

Early in the summer of 1977, I decided to try to expand the group into a running club by giving it a name, setting the Wakeman Boys' & Girls' Club as a meeting point, putting posters in store windows, distributing leaflets at local races and getting articles published in the local papers. After two or three Saturdays, we had about 40 runners and it became apparent that Sunday morning at 8:00 would be a more desirable starting time for many in the group. So we switched over and the Club continued to grow.

While fitness and exercise are the predominant attractions of the Pequot Running Club, many friendships have been formed and the Club and its founder are proud to report that introductions initiated at Club events have resulted in several marriages. There have been a number of informal breakfast groups meeting on Sunday and during the week after a run. At least one group meets for dinner once a week. Every year, late in the summer, the Club sponsors a well-attended dinner – most recently a clambake – for all members. During the summer, some members meet to do interval workouts at one of the local high school tracks and a few members get together to complete long runs training for various marathons and sometimes ultra-marathons. A growing group of walkers circumnavigates Southport on Sunday mornings as the others run. In one year, we sponsored a cross-country series and for several years we held a 12 mile race as part of a "Boston Build-up" series before the Boston Marathon.

During the first year the Club became a member of the Road Runners Club of America and the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), now USA Track & Field (USATF). In 1980, the Club was incorporated. For several years, Pequot awarded certificates to members for exceeding age and gender standards. Several courses were measured and mapped, including five-mile and 10-kilometer courses, and shorter 2.7 and .4 mile distances.

In 1979 or 1980 we initiated “pie races” for children where each age group ran an appropriate distance and everyone who completed the distance (everyone!) was awarded an entire 10” apple pie. This was very popular and usually drew 70 or 80 children with little or no promotion.



In 1978 we had our first Thanksgiving Day Five Mile Race which has become a Connecticut tradition and is now in its 31st year. I think we had 630 runners in 1978 and over 1100 the next year. Our homegrown scoring system broke down that year and we had finishing runners backed up from the finish line in front of the Club, all the way out under the railroad bridge to Pequot Avenue.

One proposed solution was to locate the finish line 30 yards behind the actual five-mile mark so the runners would keep moving and not bottleneck at the finish. Another proposed solution was to dig a deep trench across the finish line and sort out the finishing order by a runner’s location in the pile. Luckily, saner opinions prevailed and we are now fully computerized!

The race grew rapidly to the present 5000+ registrants and could be much larger if we had the space, wider roads, and if we wanted to do more promotion. In 2005, a 2.7 mile walk was added and it already attracts about 600 entrants.



For years, one of the large houses facing the water on Beachside Avenue set out a very powerful amplifier and played the theme song from “Rocky” as a motivator for the runners. In one year, a parade of antique automobiles

enhanced the scenery as the race proceeded by. Every year, the Trumbull Bagpipe Band adds color and dash and leads the runners out to the starting line. After the race we have sometimes been entertained by the Easton Banjo Band. Although it has been difficult, we have fought off attempts by the media to characterize the race as a "turkey trot" instead of our preferred and dignified title: The Pequot Running Club Thanksgiving Day Five Mile Race.

The Thanksgiving Day Race now raises substantial amounts of money for local charities including the Wakeman Boys' & Girls' Club, Fairfield Community Services, the Domestic Violence Crisis Center, Westport EMS, the Keystone Club, Weston High School Boosters, the Laddie Lawrence Scholarship Fund (founded by us twelve years ago), and the Fairfield Police Explorers. We are grateful for all the assistance we receive from the Towns of Fairfield and Westport, their respective Police and Fire Departments, Emergency Medical teams, and from many local organizations, schools and businesses.

For two or three years the Club administered the Dogwood Festival race for the Fairfield Chamber of Commerce, but two major races a year created too much work for the membership.

Many members have served the Club as officers and volunteered their special talents as graphic designers, legal advisors, coordinators of various social activities, race officials, photographers, refreshment providers, and so forth. Even a simple running club needs time, talent and effort. Getting race sponsors, dealing with the towns of Fairfield and Westport, organizing the volunteers and coordinating with the Wakeman Boys' & Girls' Club requires a high level of ability and is very time intensive. Over the years, many members have become expert at handling race mailings and registration, setting up and taking down all of the infrastructure needed for the course and the finish line, race administration at the finish line and out on the course, and the tabulation and distribution of the results. Club Presidents have included Jim Dolan, Beth Harris, Andy Garson, David Ditmann, Jeff Palmer and myself. Race Directors have included Beth Harris, Tom Harding, Marty Iselin, Andy Garson, David Ditmann, Jeff Palmer, and myself.

Jeff Palmer has emerged as the most recent leader and over the past 22 years has served as the Club President and has also taken on the massive job of planning, coordinating and running the Thanksgiving Day Race. Despite the intensive effort needed to put on a major

race, the Club has largely succeeded in maintaining a balance between the need for organization and the desire of most members for a relaxed uncomplicated Sunday morning.

Although the Pequot Running Club has changed and grown over the years, the low-key atmosphere, the companionship, and the enjoyment and challenge of the running and walking have remained the same.

The Pequot Running Club, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) organization.

— *December 2007 (edited September, 2011)*