

## Event grows from humble roots

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Diane Myers' memory of the first Freihofer's Run for Women has nothing to do with her 10th-place finish, or the birth of one of America's premier road races.

"I remember it was freezing cold," said Myers, who resides in Colonie. "I couldn't wait to get to the finish because my hands were cold."

It was 42 degrees when 502 women approached the Freihofer's starting line for the first time on April 8, 1979.

Back then, it was known as the Run for Life, benefitting the American Lung Association. It was designated as the 10-kilometer AAU national championship race (although there was also a 5k division).

How things have changed.

Although the forecast calls for rain, the temperature should be considerably warmer on Saturday morning, when more than 3,000 runners converge Saturday morning on Madison Avenue for what's now strictly a 5k race.

There were no future Olympians in the first Freihofer's; now the event draws elite competitors from around the world.

Denise Herman, 52, of Saratoga Springs has run in every Freihofer's and is expected to extend that streak to 30 on Saturday.

"The hair on the back of my neck stands up when they sing that national anthem," she said. "It means a lot to me."

Yet the women in the inaugural Freihofer's really had no idea what they were starting.

Cindy Kelly, 58, of Albany said she entered the first one partly because it was close to her home.

"I think I just was probably captured by the fact that it was a women's race," she said.

Those were few and far between as American women were just starting to see the benefits of Title IX, a federal law that required schools to provide equal athletic opportunities to members of both sexes.

Herman had run for SUNY Cortland before graduating in 1977.

"Exercise for women was just coming into vogue," she recalled. "I think a lot of people were (at the first Freihofer's) just to see if they could finish three miles. Now, 3,000 women later, it's amazing."

Herman won the 5k title in 1984 and 1987.

Certainly, the technology is much more sophisticated these days. Each runner is issued an electronic chip that records the exact time she takes to cross the finish line.

It was a little more primitive when Ellen Picotte of Albany finished the first Freihofer's, which was her first race of any kind.

"I was handed an index card with a handwritten number," she recalled. "I had no clue what it meant. I found out later it was my finish, something like 52nd."

Picotte said it was a spur-of-the-moment decision to run that day because she lived two blocks away and wanted to run with a couple of friends from her softball team.

Her appearance was much different than those of today's competitors, with their state-of-the-art sneakers and sleek running gear.

Picotte recalled wearing heavy sweatpants, rundown sneakers and a ratty wool cap.

Karin Von Berg, then a junior at Middlebury College, won that inaugural Freihofer's with a time of 34:26. She didn't get any prize money. Saturday's winner will receive \$10,000.

The competition just keeps getting fiercer. Olympians Benita Johnson, Lynn Jennings and Marla Runyan have all won multiple Freihofer's titles.

But they owe a debt to a group of intrepid women who first took the course in 1979.

"I think it was a novel idea," said Picotte, one of five women to run every Freihofer's. "Women were really getting into running. I think it's obvious that it's taken off every year and gotten bigger and better."

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