

[On The Run with John Stifler: It's officially Tuesday race season in Northampton](#)

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That hill in the third mile is a little toughie. You've been pacing yourself around the large field next to the Mill River, keeping mind, lungs and legs together, and ahead lurks the abrupt turn into the woods where the trail rises gradually, then steeply, with roots and rocks underfoot in the final 15 yards before the top. Then you reach open meadow again, and the path still goes slightly uphill for another half mile before a stretch of more woods followed by the long kick to the finish.

Anyone who has run the Tuesday night Northampton Cross-Country Race recognizes this scene. That in-your-face uphill is the most memorable feature of the 5-kilometer race course, which begins in the parking lot next to the Community Gardens on Burt's Pit Road and makes two loops on trails maintained by Smith Vocational. The hill is one of many reasons why for 36 years, these races have been the finest midweek social and athletic event in Northampton. The series' 37th year began this week, and races continue every Tuesday, rain or shine, through Aug. 27.

One change this year is that Don and Susan Grant, the creators and perennial directors of these races, have retired from that role. They expect to be on hand for every race this year, cheering for every runner, but they've handed the directorship over to Kathie and Brian Williams of Hatfield and Tom Davidson of Florence, all members of Sugarloaf, the running club that sponsors the races.

In the 1980s, as the running-boom population swelled in the Valley, Don Grant often ran on these trails with fellow Sugarloaf member Michel George. "Michel said this would be a good place for a race," Don recalled this week, "and he was right."

Now living in Portland, Oregon, Michel elaborated: "I'd been running, walking, and cross-country skiing these trails for years. I loved the variety of hills, flora and fauna, stream-side, woods, open meadow, soft but sure footing, and mix of sun and shade. I'd found the (trails) easily adaptable to all levels of runners."

The Grants were already admired in the running community for their work directing or assisting at road races, so when the new race series was announced, turnout was enthusiastic. The numbers grew. Two dozen runners one week, 40 another, sometimes over 100, for an overall average of 70. These runners have ranged in speed from Kenyan visitor Philemon Terer, who ran a scorching 14 minutes, 45 seconds in 2014, and Amherst College coach Sarah Hann, who set the women's course record of 16:48 in 2002, to those of us who finish happily in just under an hour.

If you've ever run this race, Susan Grant has kept a 4x6 card with your name, date and finishing time for each race you've run, plus times you've won an age-group prize. "I have eight boxes of cards," said Susan this week. "Perhaps five thousand cards."

One card shows that Kimberly Beaver holds the course record for 5-year-old girls, at 29:30; another is for Reed O'Connor, who holds the boys' record for that age, 31:25. **Oldest finisher of record is longtime Mohawk Trail Regional coach Ray Willis, who clocked 53:18 at age 88.** Janit Romayko last year claimed the oldest age record for women, 43:33, at 78.

Veteran runner Jim Reis of Northampton has observed, "What I remember every time I run this race is not so much the actual race – except of course that steep hill on the last mile – but how (the Grants) encouraged everyone no matter how fast or slow you were. I bet no other race in the whole wide world has what they did."

The entry fee is \$5, but entry is free for anyone under 18. Post-race refreshments are bananas, oranges, cookies and water, plus sometimes watermelon, brownies or cider. Prizes are in the form of Race Bucks – coupons good for free entry in a subsequent race, each decorated with the face of a runner who has made a significant mark on the event. One of these is Sidney Letendre, who holds 16 single-year age-group records on the course; another is Jim Farrick, who holds the record for most races run, at 694. There are also prizes for runners who most accurately predict their finishing times.

Always, the best part is the camaraderie. Besides testing yourself on a splendid course that challenges all levels of ability, the atmosphere of the event makes it an excellent way to make friends and to catch up on what's happening in local running. Starting time is 6:30 p.m.

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