

CLUB ENDURANCE

How a running club influences generations of athletes of all ages.

BY EMILY POLACHEK

IN 1964, PRINT SHOP OWNER and runner Frank Cunningham founded the West Valley Track Club. Fifty years later the club persists as a top training resource and is Northern California's oldest running club.

It started on a high school track in a suburb of San Jose, Calif., where coach Wendell Smith agreed to help two high school boys become faster runners. They were the sons of Frank Cunningham and co-worker Bill Mackey Sr. (Kirk Cunningham is pictured bottom left and Bill Mackey Jr. top right), both of whom, with Smith's help, would later pioneer the first running club in the Bay Area.

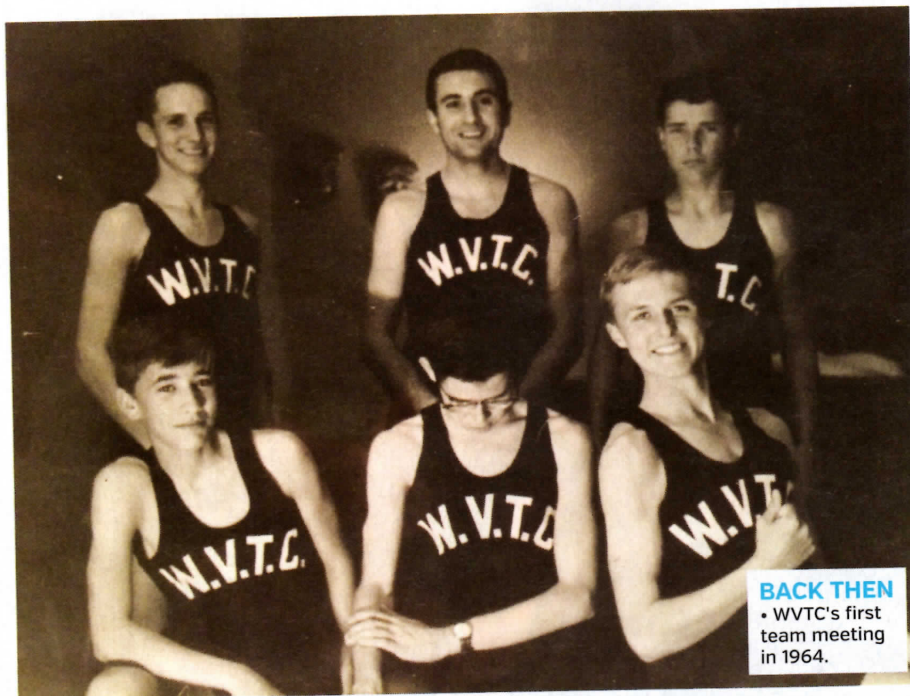
"By the second week, I began to develop workouts for the boys and, to my amazement, Frank had encouraged a couple of more boys to join our runs," Smith recalls. "We now had a nucleus of five high school boys meeting Frank, Bill Sr. and myself daily for workouts."

Those workouts eventually led to competing in several Amateur Athletic Association (AAU) sanctioned runs before WVTC became a certified track club in 1966. The following year the club won its first title in the 30K Junior National Championships. (At the time, "junior" applied to anyone who had not won a senior title.)

Word spread among the local track coaches, and the club grew within the first few years to more than 40 members.

"Frank and Bill Sr. met with many of the high school coaches explaining our objective to encourage, guide and develop young people interested in running," Smith says, "as well as encourage them to be model citizens."

Although the club originally attracted only high school athletes, WVTC accepted and appealed to runners of all ages and experiences.



BACK THEN
• WVTC's first team meeting in 1964.

"There was a real need for a club that provided a place where people could still compete."

"In college it's organized and you have a team, but when you get out of college you're on your own," says Jack Leydig, former WVTC president of 20 years. "There was a real need for a club that provided a place where people could still compete."

Leydig joined WVTC as a college graduate after witnessing the club's win at the Tiburon Run in 1967. In 1968 he became club president, modestly claiming in retrospect that no one else had wanted the position.

As club president, Leydig helped establish the club newsletter, which evolved into a local monthly magazine called the Northern California Running Review. In turn, the magazine became an instrumental funding resource for the club, selling at 25 cents per issue with 300 copies in circulation. He also founded the club's most popular event, the annual Christmas Relays at Lake Merced.

Although Leydig relinquished his duties as club president in the late 1980s, lately he's taken on the arduous task of finding

and personally calling 2,000 former club members to attend WVTC's 50th Anniversary Reunion on Sept. 6 at Saratoga Springs, Calif.

"The only thing about doing that is you figure you spend three to four minutes per person and there are a thousand people," Leydig explains. "But then you get hung up talking to people for 10 or 15 minutes. It takes a lot longer! I say, 'Well, your time limit is up! See you at the reunion!'"

Out of thousands of past members, 17 WVTC athletes have qualified or competed in the Olympics, from Alvaro Mejia, 1971 Boston Marathon champion and three-time Olympian for his native Colombia, to Mark Conover, 1988 U.S. Olympic Trials Marathon champion who is now head cross-country coach at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.

"You look at a lot of the runners then and they were not only successful on the track and road, but they also became successful people," says Dave Shrock,

**NOW**

• WVTC's women's team placed fourth at the 2014 Bay to Breakers.

president of USATF Pacific Association and past WVTC member who established the club's official Juniors Program in 1979.

Today WVTC remains both a valuable competitive and social resource for runners. Members meet up four times a week for workouts at Kezar Stadium near Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and attend WVTC-hosted parties and hangouts.

"One thing we're very focused on is supporting all of our athletes equally," says Nicole Campbell, current WVTC president. "Some running clubs will have a whole system of points for when you win races or run really fast in a race, and it means you receive more funding. That's not how we operate."

Campbell's firm belief in equality within

the club echoes Cunningham's original mission to simply guide all types of runners of all levels to become faster.

On May 27, Cunningham succumbed to a heart attack. He died on the track at the University of the Pacific, where campus police found him in a stretching position, as if warming up before a workout. He will be missed, but Cunningham's memory lives on with WVTC's legacy.

"We may not have been the first club," Leydig says. "But we were the only club that was around in 1964 and now we're still competitive 50 years later, which is kind of unusual."

For more on historic running clubs, point your browser to competitor.com/clubs.

OTHER CLUBS WITH STAYING POWER

New York Road Runners: Founded in 1958 by U.S. Olympian Ted Corbitt, NYRR is one of New York's oldest and most notable running clubs. In 1970, it organized the first New York City Marathon in Central Park. nyrr.org

Liberty Athletic Club: The oldest women's running club in the U.S. is located in Boston. Founded in 1948 during the pre-Title IX years, Liberty AC provided young women an opportunity to participate in local, regional and national track and field events. libertyac.org

Chicago Area Runner's Association: A nonprofit founded in 1978, CARA is the largest running organization in the Midwest and third largest in the nation with more than 8,600 members. cararuns.org

Atlanta Track Club: ATC is the nation's second largest running organization, founded in 1964. Today it puts on more than 25 events a year throughout the Atlanta area, including the AJC Peachtree Road Race, Atlanta 10-miler and the Atlanta Half Marathon. atlantatrackclub.org

Greater Boston Track Club: The GBTC was founded in 1973 and boasts an impressive résumé of Boston Marathon champions and Olympians, including Bill Rodgers, Greg Meyer, Pete Pfitzinger and Alberto Salazar. gbtc.org

CAUGHT ON THE RUN!

CELEBRITIES SIGN UP FOR SUMMER RACES TOO!



"Nashville" and "Without a Trace" actor Eric Close ran all-out at the Rock 'n' Roll San Diego Half Marathon on June 1. He crossed the line in 1:37:08, shaving more than 9 minutes off his 1:46:03 finish time at the La Jolla Half Marathon in April.



"Days of our Lives" actress Kate Mansi was also on hand for Rock 'n' Roll San Diego. "During my ever-evolving journey to become a runner, I've learned many things about myself," says Mansi, who finished in 2:15. "Running, for me, is about so much more than fitness. It really speaks to my spiritual well-being as well."



New York City chef, restaurateur and author Marcus Samuelsson set down his whisk and knife just long enough to clock a 22:25 at the Celebrity Chef 5K held during the Food and Wine Classic in Aspen, Colo., on June 20. He said the only place he feels slower than when running at 8,000 feet in Aspen is when he runs with his cousins in Ethiopia.