MEMBER NO. 1 AND WVJS FIRST STEPS

In September 1967, Len Edholm moved from Bakersfield to the San Jose area for his new job as manager of the Campbell Chamber of Commerce.

Len, as it turns out, liked to run. He really, really liked to run.

And so, 59 years later, here we are, “we” referring to members, friends and supporters of the West Valley Joggers & Striders. Len is member No. 1.

“I was part of a small running club back home and just had the idea to start one in my new home,” said Len, speaking on the phone from his home near Portland, Ore.

What was your plan to start a running club, Len?

“Well, I thought I’d just drive around until I found another runner and sort of start from there.”

Today, that may sound a tad quaint. Most of us can look out our window and see a runner or two or three. But late ’67 was a different time: LBJ was getting set to announce he wouldn’t seek re-election, the second Super Bowl was getting close, a small outfit called Blue Ribbon Sports had just opened its first retail store and San Jose State sprinters Tommie Smith and Lee Evans were rounding into form for the Olympics a year away.

True, SJSU already was known as “Speed City,” but this was the very earliest dawn of the running boom. The co-founder of Blue Ribbon Sports was still years away from using his waffle iron to develop a running shoe for the company renamed Nike.

“In 1967 running hadn’t become a thing yet,” Len says. “I ran in Converse shoes, very popular but not running shoes. We were all glad when (Nike) came out with those good running shoes.”

As to Len’s quest: “I was driving around and I saw this guy out running. So, I stopped the car and asked him if he was interested in starting a running club.”

Craig Windham was interested. A new high school called Westmont “had a perfect track and a good location and that’s where we set up shop,” Len recalled, running Friday evenings or Saturday mornings as a group after Len and Craig recruited two other running enthusiasts, Bob Blonder and Carl Martin (who gets a cameo later in this article).

Exactly when the four first ran as a group is lost to posterity, but Len pegs it around late ’67 or early ’68.

“The four of us were the start,” Len said. “But the club only really took off when one of the area’s top runners, Ken Napier, joined.”

Ken, who passed away in 2012, was one of the two pillars of WVJS. Len recalls the club getting another jolt when another young stud joined the group. That would be Walt Van Zant, who all of us newbies know as President For Life.

Ken was already a regular with the fledgling running club when he met Walt at a run on the Westmont track. Walt can't recall just how he heard about the Westmont group, but he and Ken became fast (pun intended) and lifetime friends.

Len remembers that Ken and Walt proved to be good recruiters.

"Walt recruited his good friend Dick Barrett, and then others and we just grew steadily." Bill Mackey is among the other early members that left an impression with Len.

Where Ken, Walt and some other members were top runners, Len said the club always welcomed middle- and back-of-the-packers.

"It was just a fun group," says Len, whose stint with the club proved limited. In 1975, Len moved to Redding to take a job managing that city's Chamber of Commerce.

By then, West Valley Joggers & Striders was the club's official name. Len thought Ken and Walt came up with the name, but Walt says it was a group effort. (Note: Among the relatively few USATF PA master's track teams, two take the name West Valley. Can we blame the West Valley Track Club for stealing the name? We cannot. It's older. But maybe that's a whole 'nother story?)

There, however, was nothing vague about a "strider" vs. "jogger." The club ordained that a strider could run a mile under 6 minutes, 7 minutes for women (thus it would seem that while all striders would become joggers, not all joggers would become striders, but we digress.)

Walt and Len say the club rotated presidents regularly at first before Walt's attention to detail – he's retired IRS, after all – more or less "won" him the permanent job.

Both Len and Walt guessed that the club became official in 1970. The guessing is done, thanks to WVJS's own Indiana Jones, Becki Kriege. She journeyed deep into her Dad's Records Man Cave, a job not for the squeamish, and unearthed … actually, quite a lot. (Maybe a whole 'nother story?)

Among the priceless artifacts is the official document from the Pacific Association of the Amateur Athletic Union (now USATF), dated April 20, 1970, to club Secretary Carl Martin. The letter informed West Valley Joggers & Striders that the PA AAU board had accepted its application. And the date the WVJS club provided PA for its official organizing? April 1, 1970. (No, we will not comment about that date.)

This jog back in time all started with an innocent email by Len inquiring after Walt. Which led to the thought that we probably should talk to Len and try to pin down some club history.

One of the early club's regular workouts, Edholm says, was the Five Cities Run, a 5-miler that began and ended at Westmont and traveled through San Jose, Saratoga, Campbell, Los Gatos and Monte Sereno. It was usually handicapped. "I remember Ken Napier passing me always on mile 4," said Len, who might be gratified to know that the club's handicapping skills haven't improved.

He also remembers the close competitions between Walt and Dave Peterson, an ex-University of South Dakota runner and local high school art teacher. "Great battles, yes," says Walt, "but Dave was faster."

And Len was a great fan of what we call the Shettler Handicap, maybe still the club's premier event and named for a former WVJSer who died way too young. Originally, though, Len says it was called the Frank Cunningham race, named for another early member.

The newly-built West Valley Community College completed its running track around 1974, and Len said the club then relocated from Westmont to the fancy new setup at the college.

Walt confirms this, making sure to point out that WVJS "got permission from the college track coach." With the college recently demolishing the track, it can be said that WVJS was there for the track's entire history.

Walt, though, can't recall exactly when he and others, including late member Rich Stiller, set up the six road courses that WVJS still runs from the college, nor just when he started keeping his now-legendary course records.

Len says that happened after he moved to Redding. He didn't run any of our courses.

Len, in any case, is gratified that club continues to roll. And, like Walt, Len has more than proved his running nerd bona fides. He founded a running club in Shasta that's still lacing 'em up. He started the Cross Country team at Lower Columbia College, in Longview, Wash., and one year won the Women's XC coach of the year for the combined Oregon/Washington Community College District. And, for a time, Len ended up in Salem, Ore., where he was assistant track coach at Chemeketa Community College.

Nowadays, Len, who turned 88 on Oct. 30, lives in the Portland, Ore., suburb of West Linn, with a son and a daughter and their families living nearby.

A final question Len: "So, do you still run."

“As a matter of fact, I’m going out for a run right now!”

- MIKE KREY