

Women on fast track to fitness

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When women ran through New York's Central Park in 1972 in one of the first women-only road races, the 10K run was named after a skirt (the New York Mini) and Playboy bunnies promoted the event.

In 2011, more women than men run road races nationally (53 percent, according to the nonprofit Running USA). But women-only events are popping up again, with more than 200 nationwide -- some even run in flirty skirts.

In 1972, the interest was in marketing (pink shaving cream then). Today, marketing is often still a factor: Some races are sponsored by athletic apparel companies such as Athleta and Skirt Sports.

Others are run for charities. The Komen Race for the Cure, for example, says it's the world's largest series of 5K runs/fitness walks, and raises funds for breast cancer awareness and research.

Most races share a mission of providing a comfortable way for newcomers to test their athleticism.

In the Twin Cities, several women-centric and

women-only races dot the racing calendar.

At Friday's debut Skirt Chaser Dash bike ride at Gear West in Long Lake, women will start first -- many wearing Skirt Sports' signature athletic skirts -- and men will take off several minutes later in pursuit.

"We wanted to include men, but we wanted it to be all about the women," said Nicole DeBoom, founder of Skirt Sports.

The event, which benefits the Home Free Women's Shelter, is followed by others that have popped up in the past few years: the YWCA women's triathlon is in its fourth year, the Iron Girl duathlon in its sixth, and Women Run the Cities in St. Paul is celebrating its fifth anniversary.

Organizers say they're creating a comfortable environment and finding women eager to participate.

"Successful races have a nurturing feel; it's about creating an opportunity for women to get together with other women and share and unburden themselves from their regular responsibilities," DeBoom said. "It's not about the feminist movement."

Mary Anderson, owner of Anderson Race Management, which organizes Women Run the Cities, says the focus on women helps draw participants. People laughed when race founder Meghan Huber said she hoped to get 1,000 competitors -- but it reached that goal in the first

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year and has grown to 2,200 now.

"It's all about having a niche nowadays -- what makes your race special?" Anderson said. "Women are less intimidated without guys around. We tend to have more newbies, people trying something for the first time. Which I think is even greater, because we're touching the right people."

Vendors and sponsors are women-focused. Door prizes include manicures, pedicures and haircuts -- more fluff, Anderson said. Proceeds go to the Ann Bancroft Dare to Dream MicroGrants and CREW Foundation Scholarship program.

Huber sees success in more than numbers: She recently talked to a woman who walked her first 5K at the event, ran it the next year and is planning on running the 10-mile this year.

"It's fun to see everyone grow and encourage each other," she said.

Sheila Mulrooney Eldred is a Twin Cities-based freelance writer.



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