

## MERRIMACK RIVER 10M TRAIL RACE 2006

Merrimack is the type of trail race that does not always get the respect it deserves. Trail races in New England are likely to become well known for their rugged nature, and most people don't think of Merrimack as rugged. However, if you come back enough times, you'll see just about everything. While most of the race is extremely runnable, the short, steep power line hills in the middle miles never cease to elicit colorful commentary after the race. For those unfamiliar with the course, it consists of three fast and mostly flat miles along the river and two miles with some short, steep hills. You hit five miles, turn around, and run right back at all the people you beat to the turnaround; and it's all tight single track.

When I first moved to the Boston area to go to school, Merrimack was one of the first trail races I did. It's also one of the races that been on my schedule every single year. With it being so early in the year (some years later than others due to piles of snow), it's always a good test of fitness after snowshoe season. Before I get to the historic 2006 race, I'd like to initiate my case for the importance of this overlooked gem of New England trail running with a few personal historical anecdotes.

As I mentioned previously, on average, Merrimack can almost be described as a road race on dirt. Perhaps the greatest divergence from this comment occurred in 2001. That winter we had a great deal of snow, and the river was very, very high. Most directors would have called the race off, but not Steve Peterson and Dave Dunham. They decided to go for it, and it ended up being far from the typical Merrimack experience. In addition to several areas of sloppy, slippery mud that was unavoidable due to the narrowness of the trail, two extended sections were underwater. I'm not talking deep puddles, I'm talking the river overflowing its banking and drowning the trail for 100 meters in waist deep water that was barely warm enough to be in liquid form. We hit the worst area around 2.5 miles into the race, and it took me a full minute of hard running to warm my legs up to point where I could feel them. You know how when you run into the ocean, you eventually fall when the water gets to mid-thigh depth? Although I managed to stay upright, many runners were fully submerged by the time they realized how deep the water was. I ended up winning by about 4 minutes, and my time had nothing to do with trying to run a fast time; I was just trying to warm up!



In 2005, the course was in pretty good shape, with the exception of one very bad turn. In one particularly shaded section, a large patch of ice was hanging on into the spring warmth. To make matters worse, it was covered by a thin layer of mud. About a third of the field ended up going down on that icy turn, none harder than the winner, Paul Low. Paul is quite skilled on the trail, and rarely goes down. In 2005, he went down so hard he thought he broke his arm. This is a perfect example of how even though the course is not technical; the speed you can attain can turn a minor stumble into a major crash.

My third anecdote doesn't involve a specific race; it concerns the competitive nature of the field year after year. This aspect of the race is especially relevant to my own experience. Merrimack was one of the first races that forced me to come to the realization that I was meant to be a trail runner. In 2000, I ran 58:31 to beat Dave Dunham by three seconds. At that point, Dave was running about 50 minutes for 10 miles on the roads, and my PR was 56:30. You can say Dave is not a trail runner, but he is the only runner to break 57 minutes twice at Merrimack. The next year, I managed to hold off Richard Bolt by 20 seconds, who also crushes me on the roads by several minutes. When Paul Low started winning the race in 2003, I was second to his 57:32 by 10 seconds. In his four wins, no else has been within a minute of him at the finish. While Paul is doing his best to win Merrimack by a mile, overall, there are still many close races throughout the field.

## MERRIMACK RIVER 10M TRAIL RACE 2006

This was certainly the case for myself in 2006. After the hectic dash into the woods, I settled into 4<sup>th</sup> place



behind Paul, Kevin Tilton, and Greg Hammett. All three in front of me had beaten me at Snowshoe Nationals, and although Paul and Kevin seemed to be at a higher fitness level, I was hoping to move up to third and join my CMS teammates as the race progressed. Paul and Kevin moved away from Greg and I, and the two groups passed the mile in about 5:05 and 5:10. This is conservative for the furious first mile of this course, but I was in no hurry to push the pace. Greg seemed to moving well, and I was content to follow for a while. Nothing much happened until the 4<sup>th</sup> mile. Paul proceeded to crank up the pace over the hand-over-foot steep power line hills, and Greg seemed to struggle a bit. Paul put distance on Kevin, and I ended up passing Greg to reach the turnaround in about 29:40. I was later told that it took Paul only 12 minutes to run miles 4-6. In comparison, Greg and I ran about 14 minutes for that section.

Greg was right behind me keeping the pace honest as we made our way through the 190 people in back of us. I managed to steer clear of collisions, but he was on the receiving end of a solid shoulder check. At just past 7 miles, he mentioned that Kevin was fading. We hadn't seen Kevin since 5 miles, and it was easy to see we were gaining ground every minute. Just past 8 miles, Greg passed me and went for Kevin. I didn't feel strong enough to stay with him, but I tried to minimize the gap. Kevin seemed to pick up the pace when Greg appeared on his shoulder, and it seemed as though I was out of the race for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. By the time we got to 9 miles, it seemed as though a gap had opened up between Kevin and Greg. At first I thought Kevin had accelerated, but soon realized that Greg was struggling. Although he still had about 10 seconds on me, I thought I had a chance at catching him before the finish. I was practically hyperventilating the entire last mile, and pulled to within a few seconds of Greg at the final turn, but he saw how close I was and blasted away to finish a few seconds behind Kevin.

All four of us ran under an hour, with Paul breaking Dave Dunham's old course record from 1999 by 12 seconds with a 56:30. Kevin ran 59:35, Greg 59:40 and I came in at 59:44. It was interesting to note that 4 out of the top five were wearing the exact same pair of Inov-8 Mudroc 280's, even though we are all from different parts of New England. There were plenty of other close races throughout the rest of the field of almost 200 runners, including a 2 second gap between Steve Peterson and Dave Dunham. Merrimack River is no 7 Sisters, but 7 Sisters is no Merrimack River. Long live the Rivah!

*Ben Nephew*



*Photos –*

*Ben Nephew Merrimack River 2001 / Courtesy Dave Dunham*

*Kevin Tilton Merrimack River 2006 / Courtesy Dave Dunham*

*Ben Nephew Breakneck 2002 / Courtesy Farmer Ed*