

Freihofer's recipe for success evolving

While race officials seek top entrants, Freihofer's retains strong local flavor

By PETE IORIZZO Staff writer

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A company most notable for its cookies and doughnuts might seem an odd partner for an event that promotes wellness and fitness, but the Freihofer's baking company has become so synonymous with the Run for Women that the race is best known by the singular name, Freihofer's.

In the company's 32-year affiliation with the event, there always has existed a behind-the-scenes tension between the race's interests and the company's. But both the baking company and race promoters agree that the give-and-take has blended the Freihofer's Run for Women into an event that's uniquely local and world class.

Freihofer's, the homespun company whose bread wagons made home deliveries in early 20th-century Troy, always has pushed to preserve the race's community focus by keeping it accessible to thousands of everyday runners.

Meanwhile, the race's longtime director, George Regan, has crusaded to make the Freihofer's a destination race for the world's most elite athletes.

The company and race organizers have not only reconciled those seemingly conflicting interests, but melded them. This year's event underscores the unlikely marriage.

Saturday's race already has registered a record number of participants, the vast majority of whom are Capital Region neighborhood joggers. But at the same starting line will be some of the world's fastest women, several of whom could complete the 5-kilometer race in less than 16 minutes.

"It was always important to have those two ideas breathing simultaneously," said Al Freihofer, the former Freihofer's executive whose family founded the company.

Freihofer's support for the run dates to the event's founding. The relationship has endured through booms and recessions, through changing executives and even different ownerships.

When Freihofer's first partnered with the run, the company still was owned by the Freihofer family, which had opened a large bakery in 1913 in Troy.

The family chose Troy after their train had stopped there on a trip from Montreal to



Philadelphia. Seeing most of the women in town worked in the collar factories, the Freihofer's realized a market for commercially baked bread.

The company was sold to Philip Morris in 1987; the Troy bakery no longer exists. But the brand still conjures images of horse-drawn bread carts and the popular "Freddie Freihofer Show" of the 1950s.

That image, Freihofer's officials believe, is preserved in part by its sponsorship of the Run for Women. "We've always focused our efforts on being the local baker," said John Marcoux, Freihofer's director of marketing.

The Run for Women, too, evolved. It began as the Run for Life, named because its title sponsor at the time was a life-insurance company.

When Regan came on board as director three years after the event's inception, Freihofer's took over as title sponsor. Regan quickly steered the event toward elite running circles. The race served as the 5K and 10K national championships. In 2005, the event changed most dramatically when it opened to international runners.

The company never resisted the changes and continued to finance the evolution. But Freihofer's also provided resources for the race's most community-focused programs -- the Community Walk and the Junior Freihofer's 3K Run, among them.

Freihofer's officials declined to say how much money they commit to the Freihofer's, and Regan said only that the event costs in the mid-six figures to produce. But past and present Freihofer's officials said dropping sponsorship never has been considered.

"There was always such an anticipation of the next year and then the next year and then the year after that," said Al Freihofer, who left the company in 1993. "I couldn't imagine it being unplugged."

Indeed, the race and baking company have become almost completely symbiotic. If they parted, Freihofer's might still produce breads, cookies and cakes, but surely it would lose a slice of its homespun image. The race? That might cease to exist.

Could the Freihofer's be held without Freihofer's? Regan pondered the question and shook his head. He asked, "How could you ever reinvent something like this?"

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Freihofer's Run for Women

When: 10 a.m. Saturday

Where: Downtown Albany

More information: <http://freihofersrun.com>

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