

# Our view: End of Edmund Fitz race adds to memorial of honored name

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It's a little odd, yet still bittersweet, to lament an event that has met its end, named for a boat that, too, is no more, named for a man who also has gone on.

The name Edmund Fitzgerald, belonging to an insurance company executive who died in 1986, is best known for the mammoth ore carrier bearing his name that sank in Lake Superior in 1975, taking with it the lives of 29 crew members. It became a household word when Gordon Lightfoot immortalized the disaster in song.

But it was also the fitting name of another giant: the ultramarathon along the shores of the lake where iron men — and women — of a different nature embedded their mark in history and folklore.

"The 1990 World Championship at the Edmund Fitz is still considered the greatest 100K road race in history," Bill Wenmark, the event's founder and race director, told the News Tribune's editorial page staff yesterday. While his claim may sound like bravado, he qualified it with citations from the racing world.

"It was just like the Olympics," he said. "It was truly remarkable to be in the presence of all these people that you normally only read about in books. And there they were, sitting in front of you at the DECC in Duluth."

Another memorable moment came in 1984, when 47-year-old Sandra Kiddy beat all racers of both genders to become the first woman ever to win an ultramarathon overall. One of those she bested was the Duluth local favorite.

"She passed Harry Sloan about 100 meters from the finish line," Wenmark recalled. "He was just staggering. His legs looked like Gumby. And you could see Sandra coming and coming and coming and Harry struggling."

So what happened to the race more recently? In a way, it may have imploded from its own popularity, attracting fewer Harry Sloans and far more entrants from the Twin Cities. The cost for relay teams could reach \$2,500, Wenmark said, to cover driving, lodging and transporting entrants to their various starting points.

Yet the race may not be over for good. Among ideas Wenmark is exploring is hosting a reunion race some year, or transferring administration to the Duluth Family YMCA, which has expressed an interest, or bringing it to the Twin Cities "where the customers are," he said.

To that, he was asked to entertain a fourth choice: Hosting a truly ultra, ultra marathon 140 miles from Duluth to the Cities.

"You'd have to be certifiable to do that," he laughed.

But that well may have been what onlookers initially thought of the 62-mile racers a quarter century ago. As for the runners of that day and all who came after, we'll cherish the memories, just as we do the song, the insurance executive, and the valiant men of the fated boat, all part of the Edmund Fitzgerald.