

BISHOP HIGH SIERRA ULTRA-MARATHONS, MAY 16, 2009

Another hot day in Bishop was forecast – high 90's, clear and sunny. Over 320 runners had registered for the 20 mile fun run, 50k, 50 mile and the inaugural 100k event. Many wondered if they had over estimated their ability on the hot, dry, exposed, hilly and high altitude course, and many were right! Records fell, runners fell, and the prevailing opinion from all runners was that the races were deceptively tough.

Road conditions have deteriorated in several stretches of the race, with an increased amount of sandy roads and exposed rocks, more aptly described now as “wide trail”. Causes are varied – drought conditions, very little or no road maintenance over the last few years, and increasing use of off-road recreational vehicles. Runners noticed that the sandy conditions contributing to the overall challenge of the events.

The inaugural 100k event attracted over 70 entrants, although only 45 finished. There was a 2 hour gap between first place runner, Joshua Brimhall from Henderson, NV in 10hr 35 minutes, and 2nd place finisher, Eric Gerritson. Vasque sponsored female runner, Hiroko Suzuki travelled from Japan and ran to a 5th place overall place and 1st place woman in 13hr 23 minutes. This race challenged the faster runners who were descending to the Owens Valley floor (4200') in the increasing afternoon heat. The choice of continuing over the 12 mile out and back over Tungsten Hill, or running 1.65 miles to finish for a 50 mile race instead was a challenge to mind and body. Runners who ran a slower race enjoyed the cooler evening hours, and spectacular night sky over the Hill. Reports from the Sage Summit aid station, manned by experienced crew, were of runners who were fully extended by the out and back, up and down nature of the course. Agreement among runners is “this was a serious race.”

The 50 mile event, always very popular with Bishop runners, was won by previous record holder and now 5 time winner, Jeff Kozak. He blasted across the finish line in 7hrs 6 minutes, to smash the previous record by 23 minutes. Race alumni and previous winners, Ian Torrance, and Bishop's Phill Kiddoo (now a 10 time finisher) rounded out 2nd and 3rd places. Ladies winner was Becky Flowers in a time of 9hrs 58 minutes. Of interest was the fact that 18 of the 100k entrants dropped into the 50 mile race.

The 50 k event was the most popular event for finishers, all 86 of them, although only 68 started the race. Again, the extreme afternoon heat, vertical gain, altitude and dryness of the high desert affected many runners. This was the first really hot race for many of the field, and they were thankful for the option of finishing a shorter race. Bishop runner, and 20 mile record holder, Dan Yarborough ran a 4hr 05 minute race to take 12 minutes off the existing record. Jennifer Benna, from San Francisco, was the women's winner in 5hr 39mins.

Always a popular option is the 20 mile fun run, and this year 79 runners finished this event. The distance is a valuable asset to the ultra-marathon events, as it provides an introduction for the beginning long distance runner to Bishop's heat, vertical gain, altitude and exposure. Many runners who have experienced the full onslaught of a hot Bishop day in previous years, chose the shorter option, and enjoyed the shade, cold drinks and wonderful post-race picnic as they watched runners cross the finish line all day.

This year saw the introduction of chip timing for all races. There was a learning curve both for Race Director and Timer, but with a full array of notes for next year, this will be our method of choice for timing simultaneous events. A small timing strip was attached to runner's bibs, and a UHF radio antenna recorded runners start and finish times.

The race rattle snake, Hermione, was sighted several times near the Junction aid station. Runners who caught sight of her, sunning her sinuous curves on the road, were surprised but able to stay out of her way.

Xy Weiss of Dirty Girl Gaitor fame was found asleep by the roadside on Tungsten Hill, having literally fallen in her tracks. She sported some impressive scratches on her legs from her encounters with the sage brush.

Trail sweeps on horseback brought out one runner who had come to a halt near Intake 2 - he enjoyed his horseback ride to a waiting car for return to the finish line.

One runner fell on a recently repaired femoral fracture, and visited the Emergency Room for x-rays to confirm no further damage.

Another runner was brought to the finish line for evaluation by the race physician – he was directed immediately to the ER for rehydration with IV fluids. One more runner was found “down” at the finish line, was taken to the ER and was found to have an incarcerated inguinal hernia, which fortunately was reduced under sedation.

Bishop aid stations are noted for their offerings of a unique specialty item per station – this year, runners enjoyed a selection of the usual drinks and snacks, plus chocolate dipped strawberries, fruit kabobs, blueberry pancakes, homemade cookies, homemade soups, burritos, quesadillas (the Sage Summit crew invented a quesadilla stuffed with vanilla pudding and bananas!), popsicles and potstickers. Already crews are planning another feast for runners next year, as they progress along the race route.

The now-famous post-race picnic at the Millpond was enjoyed by runners, volunteers and crews. The Salvation Army field kitchen provided a steady stream of hot and cold snacks – homemade quiches, wraps, soups, baked potatoes, fruit and cold drinks. Many runners cooled off in the cold shower, built by the Hospital Maintenance crew many years ago. Massage therapists were on hand to work on tired cramped legs and backs. Big Pine Fire Department lent their portable generator trailer, which provided enough power for a small town.

Interestingly, expenditure of \$61 per runner still allowed a very generous donation to the Northern Inyo Hospital Foundation. Over \$12,500 was raised this year, to bring the total race donation to over \$84,500. The Emergency Room and Perioperative department will be able to use these funds to provide extra equipment not included in Department budgets. With construction of the new hospital under way, and expected completion date of 2 years, we look forward to being able to finally use some of these funds.

The 17th annual Bishop High Sierra Ultra-marathons will be scheduled for May 15, 2010. Online registration through Active.com will be open in early October. Next year there will be some changes made to race registration deadlines, refunds, race entry rollovers and closing dates – with an increased level of interest in the Bishop events, last minute changes and entries have become more difficult to accommodate. The race was completely sold out again, and runners are asked to understand that managing an event of this magnitude places a huge stress on the Race Director, who has finally realized that last minute additions and changes contribute to much of that anxiety.

We look forward to welcoming runners to Bishop next year for another wonderful weekend in the Sierras.