

Grey Rock runners turn die-hard trail blazers

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YAKIMA, Wash. — As he routinely does before each Grey Rock 50K Trail Run, race director Gailon Gentry gave his cautionary forest-fire talk to the assembled competitors before Saturday's fifth annual run through the Ahtanum State Forest.



Volunteers from the All Wheelers Off-Road Club, running an aid station for Grey Rock 50K Trail Run competitors in the Ahtanum State Forest on Saturday, had this view of the forest fire — and the air support team fighting it — that unnerved race organizers but didn't seem to bother the runners. (Photo by CLAY GRAHAM/All Wheelers Off Road Club)

Little did anyone know how prophetic Gentry's words would be, when a forest fire broke out only a few miles northwest of the race course, which follows the ultra-rugged Grey Rock Trail north from the Tree Phones campground over a couple of major ridges and then back again.

"The racers kind of joked about it," Gentry said. "They didn't think I was overboard on my prerace presentation, but they always think, 'A forest fire, what are you talking about?' Then they crossed the first ridge, and it was 'Oh my gosh, that's what you're talking about.'"

The lightning-triggered fire near Green Lake, southwest of Divide Ridge, ultimately blew up to 300 acres and forced the closure and evacuation of the North and Middle Fork roads and several campgrounds in the area, including Tree Phones. But because the wind was in the runners' favor, blowing away from the race course, the Grey Rock run wasn't really affected. Race winner Chris Twardzik didn't know anything about it until he was on the way back from the mid-race turnaround point and he paused for refreshment at a race aid station.

"I heard from a couple volunteers saying, kind of joking, 'Hey, you might want to run faster because there's a fire on the hill above us,'" recalled Twardzik, a 34-year-old from Snoqualmie. "I thought, OK, maybe I will step it up."

But because the wind was carrying smoke in the opposite direction, Twardzik said, it didn't affect the runners at all. "If nobody said anything and you didn't look up," he said, "you wouldn't have had any idea (the fire) was even going on."

Some of the runners, though, did look up.

"During the afternoon when the 50K racers were finishing, a spotter plane was overhead, and water bombers were flying, and there was this huge column of smoke," Gentry said. "Some racers said when they looked over on the ridge they could see flames — not close to the race route, but because of the visibility on the high ridges, they were able to see some pretty amazing stuff.

"We were in constant communication with the West Valley Fire Department, obviously, and at first it was 'Oh, it's an acre, no big deal.' Then it was, 'Now it's 30 acres and 'Oh, now it's 200.' But the wind was blowing to the north, away from the race route, so even though this thing started growing by leaps and bounds, it was moving away from our area."

A year ago, the Grey Rock 50K was in doubt right up until the day before the race while firefighters fought a wildfire further to the east that was close to the main road leading to the campground.

"We come so close to biting the bullet every year before the race, but this is the first time we've actually had a fire during the race," said Gentry, who always warns the runners that, in the case of a fire near the course, to move off the course to a forest road where race-support vehicles can evacuate them from the area.

This year's 94-runner field was by far the largest in the race's five-year history, nearly doubling the number of 2008 competitors. Part of that was because Grey Rock is now the sixth of eight races in the Washington Trail Ultramarathon Series, and Twardzik's Saturday victory in four hours, 34 minutes and 56 seconds puts him in a good position to capture the men's series title. Twardzik's coach and training partner, Jim Kerby of Carnation, was third behind Seattle's Miles Ohlrich. Eva Lust-Wright of Yakima was the second female finisher in 5:41:59.

The last two races in the ultra trail series are the White River 50K on July 25 and the Cle Elum Ridge 50K on Sept. 19.

The surge in Grey Rock participation could also be attributed to the continuing expansion of the race, which now includes 25K and 12K races. The 25K run was won in 2:03:29 by Mark Currell, a former Selah track and cross-country standout. The 12K was dominated by women, with Yakima's Elisabeth Tutsch and Donna Nettleship of Selah placing 1-2 in leading women to six of the top seven places.

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