

Wasatch Back more than just a run

Wasatch Back is for good time or good cause

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Thousands of runners will hit the trails, roads and lonely stretches of Northern Utah scenery this weekend in what has become the largest running event in the state and one of the biggest in the country.

The Ragnar Relay Wasatch Back race begins Friday in Cache Valley and will not stop for anything, not even the darkness of night, as teams of as many as 12 runners traverse the Utah back country on a two-day adventure that will test the physical and mental limits of those hoping to complete the race in Park City.

The relay for most participants is a matter of completion rather than competition.

Although some teams are definitely in it to win it, the majority are racing either for a good time or a good cause.

"Anyone who has run the Wasatch Back knows that it's not just about the run, its about the experience," said Tanner Bell, co-founder of the Ragnar Relay series. "There is something incredible about being stuck in a stinky van for 24 hours with your teammates."

The race was born in 2004 with just 22 teams.

Now, the 188-mile journey from Logan to Park City is nothing short of a phenomenon, with similar events popping up across the country.

The Ragnar Relay has grown from 22 teams in Utah to a 10-event organization with a race in Utah and similar events from Florida to Washington, Arizona to Massachusetts and points in between.

This year, more than 9,000 people will run — and that's just in Utah.

"We have the best participants in the world," said co-founder Dan Hill. "Each of them has a different story, a different background, a different running skill level, and a different personality. When you put each of those people in a van together for 24 hours, the most amazing, wacky and inspiring things happen."

Equal parts party and physical challenge, the relay race has ultra-competitive teams made of former college runners trying to beat each other for victory and rag-tag teams of friends, family members and co-workers running for the fun of it.

"It's invigorating to have 11 teammates cheer you on in the middle of the night as you struggle to conquer your second leg," Bell said. "And it's nothing short of incredible to cross the finish line with 11 teammates knowing you accomplished something together that you never could have done on your own."

Registration for the race was once easy. You asked friends and signed up, hoping someone would supply a support vehicle to carry the tired runners from one checkpoint to the next.

Now, if you snooze, you lose. Registration opens months before the event and sells out quickly.

Waiting lists for future races fill fast and 42 states are represented in this year's Utah version of the race.

As the event grew, it took on a variety of objectives. Raising funds to support charities is important to the directors of the races, and this year, Operation Kids will distribute donations to the Best Buddies program, which pairs developmentally delayed persons with friends and mentors.

The races also have numerous behind-the-scenes stories of inspiration to go along with the perspiration.

TEAM TUMOR

While training to compete in a Half Ironman race a year, Dov Siporin was diagnosed with colon cancer.

Months of radiation, chemotherapy and rehab from surgery awaited Siporin and the triathlon — which would require extensive training on a bike and in the water — was out of the question. But running, though still difficult, was something he could do.

And so he joined a team, trained and just seven weeks following surgery on his cancer, he ran the Wasatch Back.

This year, Siporin will again hit the trails between Logan and Park City.

During continued treatment for yet another cancer diagnosis — this time in the liver — Siporin met other cancer patients at the Huntsman Cancer Institute and formed Team Tumor.

The team of cancer survivors and patients — three team members are in the midst of chemotherapy treatments — will run in an effort to raise funds to fight the disease.

TEAM LIVE WELLE

An unimaginable tragedy is the motivation behind some team's existence. For Team Live wElle, the tragedy came when Kristen Hullinger accidentally backed her vehicle over her 15-month-old daughter almost three years ago.

"Words simply cannot express the pain, sorrow, and guilt I feel even today," Hullinger said. "I don't understand why this had to happen, but I have faith that someday I will. I have tried to go on with my life the best that I can. I want to make her proud. Be strong for her, for my husband and for our children."

The devastation of that loss, though painful and heartbreaking, did not prevent a forward vision.

Hullinger's neighbors, friends and family reached out and, a few days after the death, surprised her with hundreds of pink and white balloons to release into the air as a memorial and show of support during such a trying personal ordeal.

"An overwhelming feeling of love washed over me and I felt peace," she said. "Our family stayed outside for hours and eventually released the balloons heavenward."

In 2007, the Hullinger family established a scholarship fund to remember their daughter. And this year, Team Live wElle — with Kristen running portions of the race — will participate in the Ragnar Relay raising funds for the scholarship.

RUNNING FREE

Running, it seems, has always been a part of Erik Peterson's life.

The 2009 Bingham High graduate was on the cross-country and track and field teams. But his love of running was almost taken away from him by a painful blood circulation problem in his lower legs.

During his junior year at Bingham, Peterson was diagnosed with Popliteal Entrapment — a problem that prevented normal blood flow below his knees and that worsened during exercise such as running.

Several surgeries later, Peterson is still running and running well.

He was part of Bingham's 4x400 relay state championship team and placed sixth in the individual 400-meter race.

This weekend, he'll join friends on the Wasatch Back and celebrate the fact he is able to do that which is among his favorite things to do — run.

DOWN, BUT NOT OUT

As part of the 2008 Ragnar Relay support staff, Christian Nielsen helped runners navigate the long trails of the Wasatch backcountry.

This year, there will be runners hitting those trails with him in mind.

Nielsen and his wife, Stephanie, were involved in a plane crash just two months after last year's race, and both suffered significant injuries — Stephanie was burned on more than 80 percent of her body — and the family has seen upheaval since the accident.

In order to better combine rehabilitation and family life, the Niensens sold their Arizona home and moved to Utah, where aunts, uncles and other family members were on hand to assist with the couple's children.

Team Run for Nie, along with the family's journey through rehab, is being chronicled at nieniedialogues.blogspot.com.

FOUR-LEAF RUNNERS

The four-leaf clover is a simple of hope, optimism and good luck for many. Few have used the charm quite like Jared Willis, though.

Willis was diagnosed with a brain tumor at the age of 14. Thought to be inoperable, the tumor was a part of Willis' life for more than four years, as he underwent various treatments to slow the growth of the disease.

Despite the tumor, Willis registered as part of a team to run in this year's Ragnar Relay. But when the tumor took a rapid growth spurt early this year, the laminated clovers Willis gave to other patients as a symbol of hope were needed in his own behalf.

A risky operation was recommended and the tumor was carefully removed.

His hopes to run along the Wasatch Back, however, were put on hold. Still, Team J.A.R.E.D. lives on and friends will run in his honor as he recovers.

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Ragnar Relay Wasatch Back

June 19-20

Starting Line: Merlin Olsen Park, Logan

Finish Line: Quinn's Recreation Complex, Park City

Distance: 188 miles

Info: RagnarRelay.com