

Race raises money, smack-talking

By TARA THOMPSON - Independent Record - 10/30/2008

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IR photo by John Doran - Runner Tim Davis finishes stretch of Mount Ascension. Davis finished in 9:32.

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The Vigilante Runners logo contains a winged shoe, the symbol of an ancient Greek, Hermes, the Olympian god of — well, trails — and the various travelers who cross them, and one who looks after athletes.

Though it wasn't Mount Olympus, and these are not gods, there is mythical quality to a race that started here last year.

Michele Bazzanella and Eric Grove made a little bet last spring that became a much anticipated showdown between a runner and a biker, to see who could make it to the top of Mount Ascension faster. Their backers bet donations to the Prickly Pear Land Trust on who would win.

Grove won the race. The biker prevailed.

But the question was far from settled.

There would be teams of runners and bikers; men matched against men, and women pitted against women; both confident that this year the outcome would be clear.

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And it was.

For some.

The “runny people,” as cyclist Scott Herzig calls them, beat every challenger up the hill and also topped the “wheelies,” a.k.a. cyclists, in the team scoring by 2:53.

That’s pretty definitive.

For some.

One thing is clear: Helena loves its trails. The group of 14 athletes hauled in \$22,890 for the protection of land and trails around the city.

That’s a lot of cash in the name of a sporting bet.

“Anything we can do to support the PPLT is worth the effort,” cyclist Michelle Richardson said.

“The amount of money raised for the PPLT from this simple challenge is crazy! I say we are all winners to have the trails and access that we do,” said supporter Mike Jacobson.

“I don’t believe anyone would have dreamed an unusual competition like this could generate real dollars, but it happened,” Bazzanella said.

According to Aristotle, “Where talents and the needs of the world intersect, therein lies your vocation.”

The 14 runners and cyclists who gathered at the bottom of the 2006 Trail on Mount Ascension on Oct. 22, backed by cheering fans and PPLT supporters, know their calling.

Yet the mind-boggling sum of money donated to PPLT still seems crazy. Why would a little wager between friendly rivals create such a stir?

The “tipping point,” as Malcolm Gladwell explains in his book on the phenomenon, occurs with a perfect alignment of a few special people, an exciting idea and the right atmosphere. Grove and Bazzanella are what Gladwell calls “connectors” — people who can bring others together.

Combine these personalities with a race that inherently stimulates passionate responses from avid bikers and runners and you have an idea that will stick in the imaginations of those who hear about it.

In a city whose residents understand the value of public trails and access to open spaces, all these factors create the heated debate and outpouring of donations that is this new “epidemic.”

What might have been a low-key race if Harry had bet Sally instead spawned a movement in Helena: a groundswell of PPLT support, a heated, good-spirited rivalry — and the call for a rematch.

The runners proved their point in victory this year, but they didn’t quiet the debate.

The four fastest men’s and top women’s time combined for a cycling team time of 49:08 and 46:15 for the runners.

Two minutes and 53 seconds is just a small degree of separation.

“The debate of who is faster is far from over,” Herzig said.

Bazzanella would disagree. “I would argue that the debate is settled. Runners dominated this event as predicted.”

“Is The Question settled? Hardly,” Grove said. “I think The Question remains, and I for one look forward to regaining the crown in 2009.”

“They’re even after two years, one-and-one,” local runner Jeff Thomas said. “(It’s) a great, friendly rivalry, and an event that I hope continues on in just exactly the fashion it is.”

“Personally, I was under the impression that this was a one-time deal — that this was the rematch, and that the score would be settled once and for all in 2008. But then I woke up the next day to read Scotty Herzig’s pronouncement ‘We’ve got a rematch!’” runner Patrick Judge said.

Oh, the glory! The misery. Queue the “Rocky” soundtrack.

Will there be a rematch?

At the after-race party, a proposal was made that next year the wheelies should run and the runny people should bike.

Bazzanella quipped, “Exactly how much humiliation do you guys want?”

“Any objective assessment of those results would also quickly conclude that several of those (finishing) places were ‘up for grabs,’” Grove said.

“Race to the Top is a uniquely Helena race and, I think, has become one of those events that both competitors and spectators look forward to all year long,” Grove said.

All bets are on, Helena.

The smack

The e-mails prior to the race were as fiery as the competition on the hill:

“OK, as an old school, uptight roadie who might have been known to talk some trash back in the day (like when I had some legs) I’ve got some cash to throw down in the interest of The Land Trust. Pay attention and step up!

1. For every runner that beats my time to the top, I'll donate \$10 to the PPLT and I'll offer up Michelle Richardson to shovel your sidewalk after the first snowfall.
2. For every cyclist that has got the goods to best my time, I'll donate another \$10 and each will get one organic stalk of celery.
3. For every competitor who's got the PPLT logo or name on their kit, I'll pony up another \$5. ... Bring it, people!"

— Scott Herzig

"Rumor has it that Little Scotty Herzig was cornered by a runny person at Central School who proudly proclaimed the superiority of runny people over the noble, humble, generous, and kind-to-all-living-creatures cyclists. Scott handled his attacker with the gentleness that cyclists are known for, but I have seen him out on the climb, riding with a 100-pound bag of cement on each shoulder and dragging a sled filled with overweight malamutes. I think he is ready."

— Michelle Richardson, who will be shoveling the sidewalks for two runny people this winter.

"While I have always subscribed to the theory (that runners are faster), vindicating it, as you know, is another thing. But it must be done, else the sacred and ancient discipline be profaned and demeaned by the crass clanking and squeaking of modern technology."

— Jon Metropoulos

"Paid attention to the equity markets? Imagine all of the raging stress that is bottled up, waiting to explode. I'd suggest the cyclists be prepared to get out of my way."

— Michele Bazzanella, financial consultant

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