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Race Chock Full Of Challenges

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BETHLEHEM, N.H. - Amid a field of 30 teams competing in a 60-hour endurance race that began Thursday, a local team jumped out to an early lead.

Team Littleton Bike and Fitness, made up of team captain Dave Stiles, Jamie Myers, Jennifer Johnson and Melanie Brown, was some 15 minutes ahead of its closest competitor in the first few hours of the Untamed New England race.

By day's end Saturday, the teams will have pedaled, paddled, run and rock climbed their way through challenges testing their stamina and fitness.

PHOTOS BY LORNA COLQUHOUN

Connecticut-based Berlin Bike was the first team to ford the Gale River in Franconia Thursday on the first leg of a 60-hour endurance race. Inset: Team Littleton Bike and Fitness jumped out to an early lead over 29 other teams through parts of Vermont and northern New Hampshire. One of the first challenges Thursday was stacking 200 pieces of wood at the Rocks Estate in Bethlehem.

For the past 18 months, Grant Killian and his wife, Littleton native Jill Peloquin, of Untamed New England, have routed an endurance course for racers from as far away as Canada and California. It began Thursday in Franconia, took them through a remote slice of Vermont Thursday night and continues today through Lancaster and Whitefield.

The first teams are expected to finish the race Saturday back in Franconia.

"Some of the racers are good, are fit," Killian said. "Some, not so much, but they're in it for the fun. This is designed to be a challenge."

During the course of 60 hours, which began at noon Thursday, teams of three and four will bicycle, canoe, run, and rock climb. By sunup today, they'll have made their way through the bugs and bogs at Victory Basin and will head to Lancaster and Whitefield for much of the rest of the day.

The teams have no support staff. They cannot receive direction or help from friends. They carry their food, although some have been known to stop for a bite at local restaurants. There are no specified times of rest. Each team member paid \$400 to be so challenged.

Some of the team names are straightforward - Team Summit Achievement, Running Free, Team ABC, which has Tamela Lynch of Littleton as a member. Others are more humorous - Running With Scissors, Wishful Thinking Fools, Team Pain Syndicate and, boasting Massachusetts membership, Team Wicked Pissah.

"The common thread through all the racers is that they're hard to kill," Killian said.

In one of the more unusual aspects of the course, the racers Thursday had the task of stacking next winter's cord wood at The Rocks Estate in Bethlehem.

"We try to get a conservation challenge in each race, to give something back to the community," said Killian, who's been organizing these sort of races for the past four years in Virginia.

The teams will return to The Rocks at about 7 a.m. Saturday for another conservation challenge - brush clearing. The route and the challenges are not known to the racers ahead of time, but one course volunteer predicted, "They're not going to be happy to have to do yard work at that point."

The race kicked off in Franconia just after noon Thursday and from there, the course included the woodstacking, trading their bikes for a hike through the woods from Littleton to Moore reservoir, where they paddled across to Vermont.

From there, they resumed biking to one of the remotest checkpoints, Victory Basin. The course itinerary assured that "the sunrise will be amazing" there.

Early this morning, teams were due in Lancaster for a paddle on the Israel River, but they would not be allowed on the river until 4 a.m., which would give early birds a chance to rest. There are no specified rest times throughout the course.

At about 8 a.m. today, the first teams will begin a three-hour orienteering course along Stag Hollow Road in Whitefield, take another four-hour bike leg and return for a 10-hour orienteering challenge.

By 2 a.m. Saturday, some teams will be back in Lancaster for another paddle, this time on the Connecticut River. At around 6 a.m., they'll be back on Moore reservoir and will bike back to the Rocks.

Sometime around noon, the teams will do an ascent and descent with ropes of Artist Bluff in Franconia Notch and then hike up the Kinsman Ridge Trail. Around 5 p.m., the winning team will cross the finish line at the Franconia Inn on Route 116.

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