

Chicot County Spectator, 4/15/15 , Lake Village, Arkansas

Cross country team of runners visits Chicot County

By Robert Jackson

Chicot County was a stop along a 3,080-mile journey from southern California to Washington, D.C. for seven runners and a support team that is called Race Across USA.

The journey began in January in Huntington Beach, Ca., and continued through the southwestern states of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. A short trek through Louisiana led the group of long distance runners into Arkansas.

Beginning in Magnolia, the troupe ran the rural roads of southern Arkansas until they came to Ashley County.

They reached Ashley County last week, ran through Crossett and stayed two nights in Hamburg at the middle school gymnasium before moving down Highway 82 to Chicot County and Lake Chicot State Park.

Lake Chicot State park officials welcomed the participants and they stayed two days to get ready for a long trek through the Delta and into Alabama.

On April 10, the runners and their support team moved into Greenville, Ms., and ran eastward to Indianola as they looked forward to Alabama and the journey to the nation's capital.

Sandy Van Soye is the

race director. She handles the logistics and oversees the event or journey. She said she drives one of the four support vehicles that accompany the seven runners that include her husband Darren Van Soye, the co-organizer of the long-dis-

tance running event.

Van Soye said organizers could not use Race Across America because it is the legally owned name of a bike race patterned after the Tour de France.

Therefore, she explained, organizers chose Race

Across USA as its title and www.raceacrossusa.org as its website domain.

The purpose of the event, Van Soye said, was to raise money for programs designed to help America's youth become active in school and throughout the year.

The web site clearly outlines the purpose of the event, "According to the CDC, childhood obesity has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the past 30 years. At the present time, 12.5 million children, ages 6-19 in the United States are obese."

Solving that issue by drawing attention to it and by raising money to support programs that will get youngsters physically active is the purpose behind the project.

"We want to encourage children to exercise, and we want to have our runners visit schools as they pass through communities," Van Soye said. "We really are doing this to promote fitness, especially for the children."

The seven runners have a goal of running a marathon each day by managing 26.2 miles of roadside running per day.

The individuals participating alongside Darren Van Soye are 73-year-old Newton Baker of Vermont, Robert Young of England, Alex

Ramsey, Bryce Carlton Carlson, Nancy Bennett and Linda Mazenko.

Baker has already run across the state of Vermont and in about 150 marathons. Young is looking to set a record for the most marathons within a 365-day period. If he completes the 26.2-mile distance in a day that is considered a marathon run; and Van Soye said he has now gone over the 300 mark - about 320 - and is closing in on the record.

Ramsey likes to run barefoot if the conditions allow him to do that, and he has run between 20 and 25 percent of the distance from California to southeastern Arkansas without shoes or specialized running footwear.

A high school and college track and field runner, Ramsey has found a special feeling by running barefoot.

"By being barefoot he listened to the ground. The sound it made told him to run," according to a press release from Race Across USA.

Bennett is a retired teacher from California. In 1998, Bennett completed a cross-country bicycle trip to raise money for the American Lung Association. She has also run in more than 60 marathons.

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Darren Van Soye runs along a stretch of road during the Race Across USA.

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Race

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Carlson is a professor at Purdue University and competes in long-distance ultra running events.

Darren Van Soye has completed both a half-triathlon as well as the more prestigious Ironman Triathlon. In 2010, he completed an ultra marathon.

Mazenko, the mother of 23 and 25 year old sons, said she enjoys fitness activities including running.

The seven runners started in a group of 12. Van Soye said two left for personal reasons, one suffered an injury and two others left to run on their own. Van Soye said the two that left to run on their

own wanted a tougher challenge and longer runs each day.

Three runners from Little Rock that wanted to show their support by running across southern Arkansas joined the remaining core runners in Magnolia.

The trio includes Lisa Luyett, Yoni Johnson and Andi Stracner.

The support team drives two SUVs, a pick-up truck and a car.

Van Soye said the race has been planned to continue through the South until runners reach Georgia.

Once in Georgia they will go to the easternmost part of the state and then up the

southern Atlantic coast to Washington D.C. Van Soye said her team's goal is to reach the nation's capital by June 2.

The biggest hurdle the runners faced was not the altitude, but a winter storm.

Van Soye said the southern route was taken to reduce the amount of high altitude running that happens in the mountains in Colorado and other states.

She said that when they left Phoenix and went up 2,000 to 3,000 feet in altitude on several days, "we were very fortunate with the weather."

Yet, they were hit with a winter storm of snow and ice

in Roswell, N.M., and that was among the toughest running they faced.

Van Soye talked about running on ice and in windy, cold weather that dropped below freezing temperatures.

Van Soye said as April turns into May running across the south is going to be challenging because of the heat.

The trek has received plenty of local media attention from newspapers and television stations; however, on April 1 the national media (NPR) discovered the runners as they moved from north Louisiana into Arkansas.

The group spent about six days running in Arkansas.