

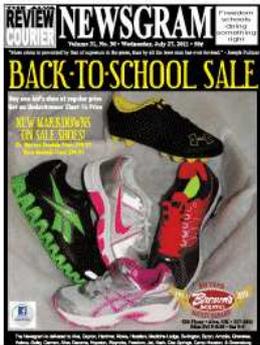


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From sea to shining sea—on foot

07/23/11
 By Roger McKenzie
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Ever heard of a race that takes more than two months to complete, covers over 3,000 miles, and goes from sea to shining sea? It's a foot race across the entire United States. It doesn't happen often, but it's happening this year and the runners passed through Alva this week on their way from Los Angeles to New York City.



G rard Bavato of France looks at the turn-off that signals the day's run is almost over. No longer an official runner because he missed a stage, he still runs for the love of running and for himself.

Sixteen competitors, almost all of which needed a passport to get here, started the race on June 19. Their common goal: to run across America to New York City in 70 days of running—from about 45 to 60 miles a day.

The runners have crossed the Mojave Desert in California and Arizona and climbed mountains in New Mexico before reaching Oklahoma. By Wednesday, just over 1,400 miles into the 3,200 mile race, only eight official runners remained. They and unofficial runners (who have missed a stage but continue to run) began the 32nd stage just outside of Buffalo. They covered a little more than 47 miles before finishing up at the campus of Northwestern Oklahoma State University in Alva. Here they rested, ate, and slept—some at a local motel and others at NWOSU's Coronado Hall, before getting up around 3:30 a.m. on Thursday to eat breakfast before starting the 33rd stage of the race. That stage took them over 50 miles to Medford.

When the race competitors first began arriving here around 2 p.m. or so, it was close to 110 degrees—not as hot as the Mojave Desert—but with a higher humidity. Some of the runners said they had been prepared for the heat of the desert, but they were caught by surprise by the ferocity of the Oklahoma temperatures.

Support people were already here making arrangements for their short stay. One of them was the race director, Laure Magnan of France. She is the person most responsible for the race. In Alva, she was busy making the logistics of the race run smoothly. She is very experienced at what she does. Her husband is the only man to have literally run around the world—a little journey he took that began in 1997 and which lasted until 2006 when he completed the journey in 551 days of running.

The first runner to make it to Alva, and get a few extra hours to rest, was the race leader. Germany's Rainer Koch finished in 7:57.21 seconds. If he keeps up the pace he has set in the first 32 stages, he'll set a record for the event.

A little more than an hour later, Patrick Malandain of France and Italo Orr  of Italy arrived. As the runners who are close to each other often do, one waits for the other and they both cross the finish line together. Both were credited with a time of 9:16:07.

Koch, who is 30, said he enjoys seeing the countryside as he runs through it. He also said he thinks a lot during each day's run. He's been running for 15 years and racing for about 12. While he admitted he didn't know it would be so hot in Oklahoma, he admitted he preferred running in hot weather to running in the

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cold.

His advice to ultra marathoners—"Keep cool and run easy." Malandain, who will be 51 this week, has been running for 25 years. Getting used to the climate is the hardest part of this kind of running, he said. Orrú is 48 and has been running for about the same amount of time.

Looking at the tape wrapped toes of one runner as he rested after the race, I asked how many pairs of shoes he had worn out. He noted that he came into Alva on his fifth pair, and he added that he had brought 10 pairs with him—which sounds about right because the race is nearing its halfway point. Because he is 70 years old, Koch's countryman Peter Bartel, no longer runs. But he is the race's lone kick biker. He doesn't look his age. And he noted that, in his category, if he finishes the race, he's guaranteed to finish in first place.

If they win, Koch and Bartel will win no money. This race, unlike the first one held in 1929, is for pride and the experience itself. When they arrive at Central Park in New York City on Aug. 27, each finisher will have a lot of experiences to recount.

None of those experiences may be more amazing than that of United Kingdom runner James Adams, The 31-year-old reached Alva with the day's fifth best time for an official runner. But before he got here, he very nearly became an unofficial runner. After eating some steak left out too long, he suffered through four days on the road with diarrhea and being unable to eat. Eventually, he was examined at a hospital and allowed to continue. Some of his fellow runners helped him get through what was a very difficult time.

It's been done before.

A transcontinental road race across America first took place in 1929. That race featured over 100 runners and was won by Oklahoma's Andy Payne. He won \$25,000 for his efforts, an enormous sum for the time. Since then, the race has been run seven more times. This year's event is the ninth, and it was organized to follow the original 1929 route as closely as possible. In all, fewer than 250 competitors have finished. Hopefully, there will be eight more on Aug. 27. Keep up with the race at www.lanyfootrace.com

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