

Duathlon run-ski event challenges fitness buffs

Turnout to Island Lake brings varied age and talent levels

BY JASON DEEGAN
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Mike Muha begins to bark out instructions as the 22 duathlon racers gather around the starting line. Running five kilometers on hilly backwoods trails, then rollerskiing five more on paved paths is certainly tough enough, but Muha warns of other obstacles the racers might face on a recent Sunday morning at Island Lake Recreation Area.

"There will be one road crossing. Look out for cars," Muha says. "Be aware, there are hunters out there. If you get shot by a gun you get a minute off your time. If it's an arrow, it's 30 seconds."

Jokes aside, Muha explains that the race is a low-key training exercise. Yet a number of overanxious runners take off in a false start. They are itching to beat the times they set one month ago.

The race is the highlight of the month for Team Nordic Ski Racer, a group of avid rollerskiers/fitness buffs who meet weekly at Island Lake and Kensington Metro Park to work out on skis.

Muha, who lives in Wixom and works in Ann Arbor, founded the "team" three years ago to bring the rollerskiers together.

"Kensington Metropark and Island Lake have been a hotbed for rollerskiing for the last 20 years, but we didn't organize until recently," Muha said. "When we started the Web site (www.NordicSkiRacer.com), we set up a common time to meet, and we started getting more and more people show up."

As word of mouth has spread, as many as 15-20 avid skiers will show up for the 9 a.m. Saturday morning fall workouts at Kensington, or the Thursday night speed training sessions at Island Lake. During cool fall weather, the group really gets going, training hard for the upcoming ski season. Workouts can be as short as eight miles or as long as 32 miles.

"For those of us who like to ski in the winter, rollerskiing replicates the motion on really hard snow called asphalt," Muha said. "Snow skiing requires a lot of upper body strength. It is hard to get in the summer time. Rollerskiing allows you to work on the upper and lower body. Biking and running, you're not working your upper body."

The group attracts people across southeast Michigan who vary widely in age and fitness levels.

Julie Houle, a Brighton resident who's a school social worker at Lindbom and Hawkins elementary schools in Brighton, got interested in rollerskiing through a friend, and now loves the workout the sport provides. Houle said the group is very welcoming "considering I was a woman joining a group of men."

"They are a great group of people," she said. "It is nice to be around other people who are fit, kind and healthy. They are very patient and supportive if you want to learn."

Pinckney's Bill Kaltz, 57, who works for the Washtenaw County Parks Department, said the team provides great support for the days he doesn't feel like working hard. He's been rollerskiing to prepare for downhill skiing for at least a decade.



PHOTOS ABOVE AND BELOW: JASON DEEGAN, THE LIVINGSTON COMMUNITY NEWS;

PHOTO AT RIGHT COURTESY MIKE MUHA

The duathlon begins with a 5-kilometer run on trails, as shown above by Mike Heidinger of Plymouth, then roller-skiing another 5K on paved paths, as Steve Kuhl of Wixom does at right. Below, Rob Fairman of Ann Arbor finishes his run and puts on his roller skis. The men are members of Team Nordic Ski Racer, a group of avid roller skiers and fitness buffs who meet weekly at Island Lake State Recreation Area and Kensington Metropark to work out.



Race draws double last year's participants

"The support you get is a good thing," he said. "Some days you don't feel like pushing. The group is there to do that."

Race director Dan Motowski, who lives in Wixom, dreamed up the duathlon last year to add some competition to the workouts and foster team camaraderie. He said he got the idea from a popular race in Wisconsin called the Summer Cross-Country Ski Championships.

"We are about double the numbers (of participants) from last year," Motowski said. "People really like it. As the word spreads, more people come out (and race). Crazy people like me."

As racers finish the run, they quickly scramble to their cars in the transition area and hurry to

put on their rollerskis. It's not an easy thing to do and they huff to catch a breath.

With his gear in order, Rob Fairman of Ann Arbor pumps his poles hard to climb the first uphill leg of the rollerski path.

Steve Kuhl, who was married the week before, celebrates by finishing in 32 minutes, 55 seconds, more than one minute below his previous course record time.

The team, which is always looking for more members, welcomes beginners who have never tried rollerskiing before. Some racers even in-line skate the ski portion of the race.

The sport isn't cheap, however, and equipment is hard to find. Muha said only two stores in the lower peninsula – in

Grayling and Traverse City – sell the gear. Getting all the equipment – rollerskis, bindings, poles, a bike helmet and ski boots – can cost from \$500 to \$1,000, depending on the quality.

But to those who love the workout in this peaceful outdoor setting, the price is a small one to pay. The next race is scheduled for Dec. 12, provided there's no snow on the ground.

"I love (rollerskiing). It's the best exercise for total fitness I've ever done," Houle said. "It uses your back and stomach. It is gentle on the joints. It keeps you trimmer."

For those interesting in joining the team, which costs \$10, contact Muha at (248) 960-9446 or visit the Web site www.NordicSkiRacer.com.