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Marathoners go extra mile

Saturday races are an endurance test

The principle of an ultramarathon is simple: run a typical 26.2-mile marathon — a daunting task already — and then keep running.

It's the natural progression for experienced marathon runners — more distance brings on new challenges.

The inaugural Everglades Ultramarathon, to be held Saturday at the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park in Copeland, past Big Cypress National Preserve, 100 miles west of downtown Fort Lauderdale, will provide that challenge for roughly 100 runners.

The race will have an additional challenge for half-marathoners, in a 25-kilometer race (15.6 miles), and for marathoners, in a 50-kilometer (31 miles) race. Some will take on the challenge (or craziness) of a 50-mile race through the Florida swampland.

Race director Bob Becker said he believes it is the first ultramarathon to take place in the Everglades, and it was his hope that holding a race in Florida's largest state park would raise awareness for the park system.

But more than anything else, it's about running and pushing oneself to another level — on a course that adds a bit more risk than a cleared-out highway.

"I produce and direct four races and this one is pretty unique," Becker said. "Ultra runners are not typically known for their sanity ... if an alligator happens to be laying on the trail, sunning itself, rangers will be stationed to take care of it."

Runners will take in, or avoid, the local swamp residents by running on a path of trails, dirt roads and log trams. Becker would not confirm if there would be a fan boat section of the ultramarathon, though it seems to be the logical evolution.

Becker directs four ultramarathons in South Florida, bringing the running craze to this region with the Keys 100, which had its fifth anniversary in November. That's 100, as in miles. Becker said he capped the Everglades Ultra at 50 miles to make sure that participants weren't on the course overnight. After all, there are alligators in the swamps.

"Athletes are always looking for something different," Becker said. "You even have triathletes wondering what else they can do. We've seen an exponential growth in the sport."

Fort Lauderdale runner Tim O'Brien, 52, said that the key to running ultramarathons is to pace oneself. The Everglades Ultra will be O'Brien's first ultramarathon — he will be competing in the 50K event.

"You have to slow down, at least most of us mortals do," O'Brien said. "I still have trouble fathoming how some of these guys do longer than 50 miles. Then again, I never really thought I'd do a marathon, and then I never thought I would do an ultra."

"I like to look at it as if I'm going out for just a nice long hike."

Don Nelson, 61, will drive up from his home in the Keys to take part in the 25K race, the next step up from his normal half-marathon distance.

"The Everglades are a great place for a trail run," Nelson said. "Being away from an urban situation and all the cars is very alluring for me. I'd rather see an alligator than a car. I just hope that we don't run into some of the exotic snakes."

The ultramarathon festivities get under way at 6 a.m on Saturday. The Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park is accessible via I-75 north or state highway 41.

For more information, visit <http://www.evergladesultras.com/>.

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