

State of the Sport – Oklahoma LDR 2016

Long distance running (LDR) in the state of Oklahoma is growing and prospering with no end in sight. The year 2016 has seen the trend continue with more races and more runners but less participation per race. Small town races are continuing to introduce new runners to our sport with more and more events being organized by churches, schools, fitness clubs other entities with attendances typically ranging from 50 finishers to 300 finishers.

Oklahoma is also benefitting by the huge increase in Oklahoma based Indian tribes who are creating running programs such as the Cherokee Nation (Wings), Choctaw Nation (P.A.C.E.) and the Muscogee (Creek Nation) leading the way and often offering free entries to members who qualify.

A push to require races that call themselves a standard distance race, i.e. 5K, 10K, half marathon, marathon etc. to use a certified (accurately measured) course and employ the standard USATF age groups has been extremely successful as Tatur Racing has made it the number one requirement to secure race timing services. If a race does not agree to use a certified course and standard age groups, they are highly encouraged to call the event a 3 mile, 6 mile, 13 mile race etc. This idea was espoused by USATF record keeper, Joe McDaniel.

STATISTICS - The popularity of themed races such as mud runs, glow runs, color runs, etc. hit it's peak in 2013 and while still popular, the attendance for most of these events continue to decline.

Females still routinely account for at least 67% of the entrants in races up to the marathon distance. The median age for male runners in LDR (Long Distance Running) hovers at about 39 years old and 37 years old for women.

Oklahoma falls in with the rest of the nation with 5K events attracting the most participants, but the biggest growing distance in both Oklahoma and across the country is the half-marathon distance.

The weakest age range for participation in LDR events, not including themed races, is the 20-29-year age group. We believe this is due to parents raising small children and not having the time or child care to attend races with more frequency.

Trail racing and ultra marathons are booming and more with more runners each passing year thanks to increased corporate dollars spent on advertising and successful social media branding by the ambassadors and elite of the sport. In Tulsa, the hotspot is an area within the city limits called Turkey Mountain. The fastest growing distance in the Oklahoma ultra running community is the 100-mile distance.

The two busiest months for spring races are April and May and September and October are the two busiest months for not only the fall season but the entire year.

SCORING & TIMING - Race timing is now almost exclusively done by chip timing with the exception of non-championship cross country races which continue to use tear tag timing due to the higher costs associated with chip timing.

Chip timing of LDR events is continually evolving with technology that allows a runner to view his gun time, chip time, age group and overall placement immediately after crossing the finish line on laptop computers without having to wait for updates.

Also runners are given the option to have a text message, Facebook post, tweet automatically generated as the runner crosses the finish line, along with live runner tracking at split points. Even more exciting is the growing presence of GPS units embedded into the chip so that friends and family can track a runner throughout the entire race and not just at split points.

YOUTH – We are seeing more and more elementary schools organizing Jog-A-Thons and Walk-A-Thons to encourage kids to become healthier and get excited about fitness.

Also a noted increase in the amount of running programs geared towards kids are popping up in communities everywhere. Most of them will meet 1-3 times per week and pick a goal race for the kids to train for. Many of these programs have been highly successful and will continue to “feed” our sport for years to come.

EVOLUTION – Our sport of long distance running continues to change and evolve. Some aspects for the better and some for the worse.

Finishing times continue to become slower as more and more runners enter races for the camaraderie, health benefits and race bling (medals, shirts etc.) rather than the goal of setting a course record, age group record or personal record. The median finishing times in Oklahoma for a 5K is roughly 30 minutes for males and 34 minutes for females.

Not too many years ago, every kilometer of even small races was marked and had a timing clock or split caller who would yell out split times. Due to the ever increasing amount of runners who wear GPS enabled watches and smart phones, very few events do this anymore.

As little as 5 years ago, almost every race ranked all the finisher by gun time (time from the sound of the gun till crossing the finish line) As of today, more than 98% of races that use chip timing rank the finishers (other than the top 3 males and females) by chip time, the elapsed time from crossing the start line till crossing the finish line.

Paper registration forms are becoming extinct as runners are now able to sign up online before the race and on laptops set up at the registration area.

In the late 1970's and 1980's a typical runner would be seen in mid-thigh split shorts with a heavy cotton shirt, a headband and knee high socks sprinting toward the finish. Today, it is not uncommon to see a race participant wearing knee-length shorts, a dry wicking technical fabric shirt with a smart phone connected to a “selfie stick”, wireless earbuds, a GPS watch, and a head mounted Go Pro video recorder.

ADVERTISING – Today, races attract entrants by using a multitude of traditional methods including print advertising in magazines, newspapers, billboards, flyers in coffee shops and workout facilities etc. But by far the most effective way that successful events are able to increase attendance is through the use of social media. Facebook still leads the way for spreading the word about LDR events, but more and more apps such as Snapchat, Instagram, You Tube and Twitter have also been

effective tools to learn about upcoming endurance events.

Branding an event is even more critical today as more and more runners post group pictures of themselves under the start and/or finish structure or strategically places signage along the course to social media. Many events will heavily advertise the swag the participants will get upon signing up or finishing the race. These popular “swag” items include finisher medals, age group award medals, race shirts, finisher shirts, hats, finisher printouts that include time and placement with a branded logo in the corner.

CONCLUSION – Long distance running in Oklahoma is not only keeping up with the times, often we are setting the trends as we were one of the first states to embrace the themed races craze. We continue to lead the nation in certified courses and record keeping and we have an enormous and varied selection of races for both the competitive and casual runners.

We also have one the largest running communities per capita in the nation thanks to the state’s incredible and ever-growing paved and dirt running trails, corporate emphasis on fitness, and the multitude of running programs we are blessed with.

The running specialty stores in the state continue to prosper and inspire formerly inactive individual to begin running and participate in events on a daily basis.

With regards to competitive events as varied as road running, trail running, ultra running, cross country, triathlons, duathlons, jog-a-thons, to casual running and training, I believe we are in the middle of a long distance running boom that should continue for many years to come.

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