

GEARING UP FOR THE EMPEROR'S CHALLENGE

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Spring is here, and it's time for runners and walkers to start thinking about northern BC's premier mountain running event. The twelfth annual Emperor's Challenge Mountain Run will take place on Saturday August 7th, thirty-five kilometres south of Tumbler Ridge. Hosted by the Wolverine Nordic and Mountain Society, and billed as the toughest and most beautiful half marathon in the world, it has been attracting increasing numbers of athletes from across western Canada, and as far away as the USA and England. There was a record field of close on 500 in 2009.

After ten years on Roman Mountain, the course moved in 2009 to neighboring Babcock Mountain, after the race in a sense became a victim of its own success, as increasing numbers made for a bottleneck in the scenic but technically challenging Matthews Gully.

The brand new Babcock course received rave reviews, and has even finer features than its predecessor. The distance is the same, and the hub of the race and start/finish area remain the same at the Core Lodge, but the new route has very different attractions. It passes through entrancing rocky scenery, right over the mountain summit and through the valley that bisects the mountain top, past alpine tarns, with glorious views of Roman Mountain and the northern Rockies on a fine day. The elevation gain of 2000 feet is not quite as formidable as on Roman Mountain, and the incline not as steep, but this translates into a constant uphill battle for the first sixty percent of the race. In 2010 there will be further modifications and improvements to the course, with a challenging new kilometer of technical running in the rocky wilderness through exhilarating scenery.

Kris Swanson had entrenched himself as Emperor of Roman Mountain, winning the first eight runs. In 2007, in a veritable Battle of the Titans, Canadian Marathon Champion Steve Osaduk nipped ahead of Swanson to win a nail-biting race, claiming the title in a new record time of 1:28:45. In 2008 Swanson reclaimed his title in a blistering race, and exacted his revenge on Osaduk in 2009 in another closely contested race and a new record time. Stephanie Mills of Victoria set the women's record in 2004 on the old route, blazing the route in 1:48:12. The women's record on the Babcock Mountain route was set last year by Krista Mitchell of Grande Prairie in 1:44:48.

Although the event is an ultra-tough race for these outstanding competitors, it is simply a challenge and a test of endurance for most ordinary mortals. The youngest participant for the full distance has been ten, and the oldest eighty-two. Forty-four adults and ten kids have received their coveted "in perpetuity" numbers for completing five Emperor's Challenges. Another 22 adults and 4 kids are eligible to receive this honour in 2009.

Participants have five hours in which to run or walk to complete the event. Times are generally slightly faster on the new route, making it easier for walkers to come in under the five hour limit. Gold finisher's medals are presented to those finishing in under two hours, silver for those in under three hours, and bronze medals for the rest of the finishers. This year there will once again be age-group awards: 18 and under, 19-34, 35-49, 50-64, 65 and over, with a special award for the oldest finisher.

Kids are catered to through tough races of their own, of exactly one fifth or one tenth the adult distance (4 or 2 kms). A festive atmosphere prevails at the Core Lodge, which is the hub of the race, with a marquis, massages, refreshments, awards ceremony and much more. The event is spectator friendly, and telescopes are trained on the upper reaches of the mountain to see who emerges first.

All indications are that another record field can be expected in 2010 for what has become one of Tumbler Ridge's premier events. There is nothing else quite like this... anywhere. Whether running, walking or watching, RISE TO THE CHALLENGE.... the Emperor's Challenge! For further information visit www.emperorschallenge.com .