

Committed to being drug-free

Written by Dick Mason, The Observer October 01, 2012 04:26 pm

Relay raises money for drug and alcohol prevention programs

Members of the La Grande High School cross country team give their coach Talia Welch some helping hands during the Drug Free Relay Saturday at La Grande High School. Team members ran 92.25 miles on the LHS track to win the annual relay. BRAD MOSHER - The Observer

Saturday's Drug Free Relay wasn't all work and no play. Running under the LHS Cross Country Team banner, 11 La Grande School District students and two of their parents spent much of Saturday playing cards, talking with friends and feasting on good food.

Still, the day was not one of total relaxation for the group — not even close.

The day, in fact, was downright exhausting. The team's members ran 92.25 miles on the LHS track to win the 15th annual Drug Free Relay, finishing ahead of 17 other teams. The squad's members ran hard on the track and had fun off it between their relay legs.

"After we collapsed from exhaustion (following some legs) we started playing cards," said LHS senior Becca Schoenfelder.

The card games were competitive.

"We are intense when we are running and we are intense when we are doing everything else," the LHS senior said.

Schoenfelder was one of seven members of the LHS girls' cross country team on the squad. They were joined by three runners from the boys' cross country team, a La Grande Middle School student and the two parents.

"I'm very proud of them. They were driven and determined that they were going to win," said the LHS cross country coach, Talia Welch, a parent of team member Amanda Welch and a runner on the Drug Free Relay team.

The LHS cross country drug relay team started out running three-mile legs. They were then reduced to two-mile legs and finally to quarter mile legs. The runners spoke like they almost had as much fun on the track as they did off it.

"We all love running," said Hayley Crews, a sentiment echoed by fellow LHS cross country runner Delaney Wood: "It is a stress reliever."

All members of the winning team enjoyed peach and cherry cobbler made at the track with a Dutch oven by parent and team member Jeff Crews.

The Union County Sheriff's Department team placed second with 74.5 miles. The La Grande High School boys' soccer team also turned in a noteworthy performance, running 44.75 miles in the last 3 1/2 miles of the relay. The team arrived late after playing a game in Baker City against Baker High School. The soccer team players, who had only one member on the track at a time, ran 400-meter legs throughout the 3 1/2 hours they participated.

An outstanding performance was also turned in by Community Creating Change, which won the relay's most inspirational award. The event's volleyball tournament was won by the Union County Sheriff's Department, all of whose players were also on its relay team.

Many of the Drug Free Relay runners and walkers were individuals who had participated before.

“It is neat. It always gives you a sense of community,” said Damon Sexton of La Grande, a member of the La Grande Nazarene Church team.

LHS sophomore Lauren March, when asked what is best about the event, made it like the camaraderie can not be beat.

“I like being able to hang out with the same people for 12 hours,” said March.

Candy Blackman of La Grande, a member of the Nazarene Church team and a parent and youth leader, was excited to see bonds formed and strengthened.

“It is great to see the youth pull together,” Blackman said.

The 12-hour relay is conducted annually to raise money for Union County programs that promote drug and alcohol prevention and to heighten awareness of issues related to this. The relay was conducted by the Union County Safe Communities Coalition. Volunteer groups who assisted with the relay included the EOU softball, track and field and women’s basketball teams.

Nigel Wrangham of Eugene, a certified drug and alcohol counselor and prevention specialist, spoke of the importance of the relay in a keynote address just before the event started. He said that the relay is critical in a real and figurative sense since it is a team endeavor.

“Prevention is a relay,” Wrangham said. “It is a joint effort.”

Wrangham sees the batons carried by the runners and walkers as symbols of hope, optimism and inspiration. He believes it is the responsibility of those in the community to build momentum for all three.

“Take care of the baton, so that when you pass it on it can go where it needs to go,” Wrangham said.

The relay concluded 12 hours later with a memory lap. Participants walked one lap silently with light sticks to salute those who have succumbed to drug and alcohol abuse or are fighting it.

La Grande Mayor Dan Pokorney provided concluding remarks for the relay, stressing the sincerity of the community’s commitment to becoming drug free.

“This is not the end, only the beginning. This community cares and is not going to stop working until it is drug free.”