

Athletes Battle Extreme Conditions in Arrowhead 135



Jon Wheeler

The cyclists who placed first and second crossed the finish line just one second -- the width of one wheel -- apart in this year's Arrowhead 135

BARBARA KLEIN: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Barbara Klein.

STEVE EMBER: And I'm Steve Ember. This week on our program, we tell you about an extreme winter race in Minnesota. Then, we meet a Mexican-American playwright bringing immigrant stories to the stage in California. And later, we tell you the story of a comic book hero living in Texas.

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BARBARA KLEIN: The Arrowhead 135 is a race held each winter in Minnesota, a north central state on the border with Canada. For two days, the racers ski, bike or run one hundred thirty-five miles, or two hundred seventeen kilometers. They race along a trail from the Canadian border to the finish line in the small town of Tower, Minnesota.

Ten people entered the first race in two thousand five. This year was the eighth race and there were one hundred thirty-five starters.

The Arrowhead 135 is dangerous. The extreme cold often leads to frostbite injuries. At night the racers go with little or no sleep as they guide themselves through rough conditions in total darkness. But that is all part of the appeal to the men and women who enter the race.

STEVE EMBER: Last year, the temperatures at night dropped to thirty degrees below zero Celsius. That was a little warmer than the year before, when temperatures reached negative thirty-seven. One of the cyclists that year, Jason Buffington, remembers seeing a friend who had stopped.

JASON BUFFINGTON: "I came up on Charlie in the last twenty miles of the trail, standing and waving his legs back and forth trying to get circulation back to his toes."

Fifty-two year-old Charlie Farrow kept racing. He crossed the finish line about two hours later.

Mr. Buffington was at the finish line to meet him. Mr. Buffington is a doctor from Duluth, Minnesota. He quickly helped Mr. Farrow remove his boots.

JASON BUFFINGTON: "His toes were swollen and purple like a plum. He lost probably about half of the skin off his big toe about two or three months later."

CHARLIE FARROW: "My toenail never came back. So I'm a man without a toenail."

BARBARA KLEIN: This year, Jason Buffington decided to race on foot after biking the race for the past two years. As he ran he pulled a sled loaded with more than eleven kilos of survival supplies. Every racer is required to carry supplies for the extreme cold.

JASON BUFFINGTON: "You get what's called the kennel cough, where your lungs get frozen, your eyeballs, your corneas get a little frostbite, and everyone kind of walks around, and everything's real foggy, and you just have this dry coughing going the whole time."

Also, there is the lack of sleep. The people who race on foot or on skis take almost two days to finish. During that time they may only sleep for a couple of hours. The fastest bikers take nearly twenty hours and do not rest at all.

STEVE EMBER: This year was Charlie Farrow's seventh time in the Arrowhead 135. He teaches social studies in high school. He says every time he does the race, his mind gets tired and starts playing games with him. He starts to imagine himself in the movie "The Wizard of Oz."

CHARLIE FARROW: "I have a recurring hallucination regarding the Wizard of Oz. I always have this vision of the trees coming after me, and then I also have this vision of the Emerald City, but I can't ever get to it."

Being alone in the wilderness is also part of the difficulty of the race. The trail begins at International Falls, on the Canadian border. It passes through a national forest and around and over frozen lakes. Minnesota is known as the land of ten thousand lakes -- in fact, it has closer to twelve thousand of them.

Three aid stations and nine shelters are spaced along the trail. But during the race, the competitors spread out far apart, and Mr. Buffington says the biggest danger is being far from help.

JASON BUFFINGTON: "Both years that I've biked it, even though it's taken less than twenty hours, there are times where for six-and-a-half hours, in the middle of the night, twenty below [zero], you don't see a soul, and if anything happens, you're out there on your own."

BARBARA KLEIN: Jeremy Kershaw is a forty-year-old heart nurse. He has completed the race for the past three years. First he skied, then he biked, and last year he went on foot. He had about thirty-two kilometers to go when he found a racer struggling on the side of the trail.

JEREMY KERSHAW: "He was kind of frantically trying to get new clothes on and eat. It was a scary situation because I was really at the last several hours of the race, and so I was really at the end of my reserves."

Luckily, the racer had a mobile phone. Mr. Kershaw was able to call a support crew. They transported the racer to safety by snowmobile.

Mr. Kershaw says it was a good reminder of how things can go wrong.

JEREMY KERSHAW: "If you're not paying attention, things can go south very quickly, particularly when it's that cold and you're that tired."

STEVE EMBER: Every year, only about half of the racers are able to finish the Arrowhead 135. And that is partly what attracts athletes like Mr. Kershaw.

JEREMY KERSHAW: "I'm more drawn to it by the fact that there's so much carnage, that people don't finish, that it's so tough."

This year was not as bad as some years. The Celsius temperature at the start was only minus-twelve.

Casey Kruger from Minnesota broke the ski record by fourteen hours, finishing in just over twenty-two hours.

The first female biker across the finish line, Eszter Horanyi from Colorado, finished in a little over eighteen hours. She broke the woman's record by two hours. Ms. Horanyi arrived just two and a half hours behind the winning biker, Kevin Breitenbach of Alaska.

And Jason Buffington, the doctor from Duluth, set a new record for runners. He finished in just over thirty-seven hours.

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BARBARA KLEIN: Josefina Lopez is a Mexican-American playwright with her own community theater in Los Angeles. She is trying to help other Latinos bring their stories to the stage.

On this day, she is talking with actor Rene Rivera about his one-man play. The play is called "The King of the Desert." It deals with his struggles growing up in a barrio, a poor neighborhood, in Texas near the border with Mexico. Mr. Rivera has acted in films and on TV shows like "Law and Order." We [first told you](#) about his play back in two thousand ten when he performed it at a different theater in Los Angeles.

His play is exactly the kind of story that appeals to Josefina Lopez. Her theater is called Casa 0101. Casa is Spanish for home. The 0101 comes from the zeroes and ones used by computers in the language of the digital information age.

In "The King of the Desert" Mr. Rivera looks at the difficulty of navigating life between two cultures.

RENE RIVERA: "It is the life of a Hispanic family living in the United States and yet not being part of the United States, and so being sort of locked and stuck in between the two cultures, and trying to be reverent to both of them."

Ms. Lopez says there are thousands of stories like this from the Latino community and other groups just waiting to be told. She herself wrote the play "Real Women Have Curves," and co-wrote the screenplay for the successful film version ten years ago.

JOSEFINA LOPEZ: "I wrote it because I had never seen anything about people like me, women my size. So to have so many people embrace 'Real Women Have Curves' and to have a buzz and people waiting and the excitement I was like,

wow, it's speaking a truth that goes beyond being Latino or being a woman. It's about people always underestimating you."

You can watch a video about Josefina Lopez and her theater at voaspecialenglish.com

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STEVE EMBER: Marvel Comics has entertained generations of comic book readers with characters like Spider-Man, the Hulk and Captain America. These days, with competition from video games and online entertainment, comic book creators are trying to think outside the box. For example, most Marvel superheroes have been based in New York. But now the company is establishing new characters based in other cities, including Houston, the largest city in Texas.

On a recent day, comic book fans from all over the area came to the 8th Dimension Comics and Games store in Houston. They came to meet the author and artist responsible for Marvel Comics' new Scarlet Spider series.

It was a good day for the owner of 8th Dimension, Jeremy Bulloch.

JEREMY BULLOCH: "I own a comic shop, but first and foremost I am a comic book fan, so as a fan I am super-excited that this is going on."

This latest version of Scarlet Spider is Kaine, a cloned copy of Peter Parker, better known as Spider-Man. Kaine went on a dark path, but is now being given a second chance at life to fight crime in Houston.

An eighteen-year-old fan, Stephanie Burgess, recognizes some of the places in downtown Houston in the drawings.

STEPHANIE BURGESS: "Looking through this was pretty cool because I see some of the buildings, they look pretty familiar."

Debbie Cook is a comic book fan and a fourth-grade teacher. What does she think of children spending time reading comic books?

DEBBIE COOK: "Reading is reading, whatever you can do to get them to be better at reading, understanding -- I encourage them to read anything they can."

Christopher Yost is the author of the Scarlet Spider series. He points to the many popular summer movies based on characters from comic books.

CHRISTOPHER YOST: "I think comic books are the new mythology, and if you look at movies and video games, so many of the big summer blockbusters are based on comic books."

Mr. Yost sees many possibilities for storylines set in Houston.

CHRISTOPHER YOST: "Houston felt like a good place because, A, it is a place the Marvel universe have not seen before, and, B, with its proximity to Mexico and its proximity to the Gulf, it has a lot of new opportunities."

We have a video about Scarlet Spider in Houston at voaspecialenglish.com.

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BARBARA KLEIN: Our program was produced by Brianna Blake with reporting by Dan Kraker, Mike O'Sullivan and Greg Flakus. I'm Barbara Klein.

STEVE EMBER: And I'm Steve Ember. You can find English teaching activities along with program transcripts, MP3s, podcasts and PDF files for e-readers at voaspecialenglish.com. Join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.