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Runners to hit the streets of Irvine

Southern California Half Marathon is a warm-up for O.C. and L.A. Marathons and a fundraiser for local groups.

By SEAN EMERY
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

IRVINE – The Southern California Half Marathon and 5K race will once again wind its way through Irvine neighborhoods Saturday, as competitors gather to help support local schools and to warm up for the Los Angeles and Orange County Marathons.

The race, which begins in front of the Woodbridge Center, is expected to attract more than 5,000 runners, and will force the temporary closure of several nearby roads.

The Southern California Half Marathon originally evolved from the Woodbridge High School Cross Country Classic. The event has grown substantially during its 18-year history, from 950 runners its first year to more than 4,500 runners last year.

The race raises funds for the Woodbridge High athletics program, as well as other schools in the Irvine Unified School District, and local charities. This year's run is sponsored by Kaiser Permanente, which opened a new hospital in Irvine last year.

After two years of benefiting Families Forward, portions of this year's race proceeds will go toward the Kevin Armstrong Foundation. Created in honor of the former orthopedic surgeon who served as Woodbridge's first student body president and track captain, the foundation provides free physicals and encourages kids to get involved in sports.

"We're trying to create grass-roots support for running," said George Varvas, the Woodbridge track and cross country coach who serves as race director.

Varvas expects about 1,000 more participants than last year, when racers braved rainy weather.

"If the weather people know what they are talking about, we should have the ideal day for a run," Varvas said of this year's race.

The Southern California Half Marathon also provides racers with a chance to warm up for several upcoming runs, including the Surf City Marathon in February and the O.C. and L.A. Marathons in May.

The Half Marathon and 5K races begin at 8 a.m., with a kids run following at 10 a.m. The top five male and female finishers will receive plaques, with custom medals going to the top three men and women in each age bracket and plaques going to the top three teams.

Organizers are also putting \$5,000 in prize money up for grabs, including \$1,300 each for the top male and female finishers in the Half Marathon, and \$300 each for the top finishers in the 5K.

"It will be the largest and most competitive race we have had," Varvas said.

Among the male competitors, two-year champion Mohammed Trafeh, who holds the course record, will return to defend his title. His toughest competition is expected to be Christian Hesch, who was champion for three years running before getting injured two years ago, preventing him from getting a chance to defend his title.

Among the female runners, last year's champion, Mary Akor, will return to defend her title against a crop of challengers including Silvia Masqueda, a three-time race champion and record holder who opted out of last year's race to prepare for the Olympic trials.

Irvine residents should be on the lookout for several road closures during the race, primarily on Barranca between Creek and Lake, which will be closed from 5 a.m. to noon, and Valley Oak from Irvine Center Drive to Barranca from 8:05 to 11:30 a.m.

A number of other Woodbridge intersections will be temporarily closed by officers as racers come through, likely slowing down traffic through the area during the race hours.

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Runners take off from the start of the 2007 Southern California Half Marathon Saturday, which starts and ends in Woodbridge.

JEFFREY ANTENORE, REGISTER FILE PHOTO/POSTED BY SEAN EMERY

Thousands of runners await the start of the 2007 Southern California Half Marathon Saturday, which starts and ends in Woodbridge.

JEFFREY ANTENORE,
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