

Long way to the top for Valley to Peak

Hill-climbing race sees 145 trail runners tackle gruelling course

Vince Shuley / Whistler Question

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Runners race up Whistler Mountain as part of the inaugural Valley to Peak race on Saturday (Sept. 5). Photo by Vince Shuley

Officially announced just eight weeks ago, organizers for the inaugural Salomon Valley to Peak race weren't expecting a massive turnout for the trail running race this past Saturday (Sept. 5), but cool weather brought some last-minute runners out of the woodwork with 145 bodies crowding around the starting arch in Whistler Village.

"Everybody made the cut off (at the Roundhouse), which I was really excited about," said Seb Fremont, events manager for Whistler Blackcomb. "For an event that started getting promoted eight weeks ago, I'm totally ecstatic with the turnout. It was a beautiful way to showcase trail running."

Fremont noted that with the choice of course and the logistics put in place, the event could handle as many as 400 runners easily, leaving plenty of room to grow next year.

The fastest runner on course on Saturday was Victoria's Shaun Stephens-Whale, finishing the 20-km, 1,609-m elevation gain course in just two hours, seven minutes, 28 seconds (2:07:28), just over a minute ahead of Squamish's Eric Carter (2:08:33).

"Sixteen hundred metres is a lot of elevation (gain)," said Stephens-Whale. "I was really happy I was able to hold it together. The course was amazing; they were able to incorporate a lot of singletrack into it, which I really enjoyed."

Stephens-Whale actually took a wrong turn on the course between the Raven's Nest and the Roundhouse, costing him about 10 minutes and putting Carter well ahead in first place. But Carter had to stop due to a cramp near the final climb

to the peak, allowing the young Victoria resident a clear road to victory.

“It was a really exciting finish for the both of us,” said Stephens-Whale. “I think I gained on him a lot on the downhills, but Eric is a really strong climber.”

Locals managed some podiums as well. Vincent “Winnie” Pagot (2:28:19) was in his element with the high elevation gain on home soil taking third place in the Men’s 30 to 49 year-old category and eight-fastest time overall and John Blok (3:04:58) took third place in the Men’s 50 and Up category.

The six relay teams were mostly made up of locals as well, each with three members tackling one leg.

“We couldn’t have asked for a better day,” said Marissa Szajcz, who ran the final portion from the Roundhouse to Whistler Peak and managing second place in the female relay with teammates Nina Arnold and Steph Ball. “It was a nice little tester. Now I know I can do it so next year I might do the full thing. It was a great challenge to run High Note Trail backwards and all the hikers coming the opposite way were really nice and moving to the side as we ran past.”

Will McKechnie — who trail runs often on trails around his home in Squamish — liked the course, but thought the first section could have used a bit more technical singletrack rather than the smooth sections of Easy Does It.

“There could have been a different route up that would have avoided some of that and made it a bit more of a trail race on the lower mountain,” said McKechnie. “But when I popped up into the alpine, I was asking myself, ‘Why am I not running here more often? Why don’t I come explore this terrain more frequently?’ There are beautiful trails and the scenery here is second to none, it’s world class. Now that I’ve made a benchmark time, I’ll be doing it next year for sure.”

For full results head to whistlerblackcomb.com/events.

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