



New challenge tests racers in trek's 12th year

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Sarah Bickerstaff trudged up 20 flights of stairs and doubt crept into her head. She wondered why, once again, she signed herself up to climb the stairs of the city's tallest building.

But by the time she had all 40 flights under her sneakers, it was all worth it.

Bickerstaff was one of about 2,000 people who climbed the First National Tower's 870 steps during Trek Up the Tower. Now in its 12th year, the event is a fundraiser for Wellcom, a nonprofit dedicated to improving work site wellness. Organizers estimated that the event would raise \$50,000.

Bickerstaff, of Omaha, was the first woman up the stairs and had the fastest female time. Her goal was to finish in less than 6 minutes. She squeaked by with a time of 5 minutes, 55 seconds.

"In the stairwell, you don't really know what's going on," Bickerstaff said. "You reach the top and it's like, OK. You can breathe now."

This was Bickerstaff's eighth year competing in

the stair climb. She's already planning to be back next year and hopes to be a little faster.

The competition featured a mix of average athletes and elite climbers. New this year was a vertical mile challenge. The 40 people registered for it would stomp up the tower a total of 10 and 1/3 times.

The race kicked off after a bagpipe performance from Stephen Coyne. Coyne, a Chicago police officer, planned to tackle the vertical mile challenge. First to ascend the tower were members of the Omaha Police Department, and firefighters from the Bellevue; Bennington; Los Angeles County, California; Lincoln; Omaha; Papillion; and Waterloo departments.

Runners started their climbs as soon as first responders were through. A new wave of climbers was sent in every 5 to 6 seconds to avoid clogging the stairwells. Average finishing time was about 12 minutes, organizers said.

With a time of 4 minutes, 43 seconds, Ivan Marsh again was first to cross the threshold of the 40th floor. Marsh, 43, has won the com-

petition every year.

This year Marsh, of Lincoln, didn't train for the trek. He was suffering from injuries, including plantar fasciitis. At the end of his climb, he felt great about his time.

"I think muscle memory kicked in," Marsh said. "I just started running in the stairwell."

Last year, Marsh was undecided on whether he'd return for another try. But it's the only stair climb he participates in and the only chance to see some fellow competitors. Marsh said he'll likely be back next year.

"It's a fun event. It's a once-a-year deal," Marsh said. "You've got to give it your all."

The event draws a lot of repeat climbers, said race director Justin Holes. The energy and camaraderie keep participants coming back.

This was the fifth year Sean Mullen, 61, has tackled the winter workout. He climbed alongside his personal trainer, Tom Roth, 60.

"There's a little guy in your brain that says, 'You're tired. Stop.' You've got to break through that," Mullen

said.

Climbers used the elevator to return to the building's lobby. Vertical mile climbers tried to stay energized and keep moving, even on their rides back to the start.

Andy Hanson had three climbs under his belt by about 8 a.m. In his second year at the event, the Wauconda, Illinois, man hoped to make it up a total of 15 times. Hanson made it up the tower 14 times, tying the record set last year by Lincoln man Ned Green.

"Getting up to the top of the building once is great," said Hanson, 46. "It's just a matter of finding a pace."

Kim Morse sat on the plastic-covered carpet of the 40th floor stretching after her climb. The Topeka, Kansas, woman joined her boyfriend Travis Mood at the event. Mood, of Omaha, was attempting the vertical mile challenge.

"I could do it again, just not right now," Morse said. "It got harder as I went up, but I figured if Travis can do this 10 and 1/3 times, I can do it once."

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CHRIS MACHIAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Omaha police officers, from left, Malcolm Flight, Ryne Sell and Nate Keenan take a breather Saturday during Trek Up the Tower. At top, Ivan Marsh finished first. He has won the race every year.