

Sweating, Splashing And Celebrating Through The Blackstone River Valley Unibank Greenway Challenge Adventure Racers Redefine ‘America’s Hardest-Working River’

Susan Spencer

Michael Urban moved with his family from the Boston area to Grafton, Mass., at the northern end of the Blackstone River Valley, a decade ago. Now the president of the Grafton Land Trust, Urban admits that until recently, he hadn’t seen much of the region between Worcester and Providence. But two years ago, he got a crash course in touring the valley when he joined the Grafton Land Trust’s relay team in the UniBank Blackstone River Valley Greenway Challenge, a bi-state adventure race.

“When I think of the past two years on the Greenway Challenge team, I think of the gorgeous little spots of the valley I’ve learned about and want to go back to visit,” Urban says. “It’s tourism, but at an extremely fast pace.”

A growing number of people have been introduced to the Blackstone River Valley through the relay race, which includes running, paddling and bicycling, since the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission launched the Greenway Challenge in 2001. The event features teams of up to nine athletes, from weekend warriors to top competitors, who cover approximately 50 miles of waterways, trails and historic byways of the Blackstone River watershed. The route changes each year, but it always starts in one state and finishes in the other. And the course remains a secret until two weeks before the event, which is held the last Saturday in September.

“The Corridor Commission staff thought of it as a great way to highlight the resources of the valley, especially the bikeway and river,” says Jan Reitsma, executive director of the Corridor Commission. “It is also just a ton of fun. Sometimes when you talk about environmental protection or preservation, it gets so stern. This is a celebration.”

Reitsma says that no matter what route the course follows, participants encounter history as well as scenic natural resources. Runners along the Blackstone River Bikeway might stream past former mills in Ashton or Uxbridge that once powered America’s industrial revolution; paddlers navigate around locks and dams on the river and canal; and bicyclists travel rolling hillsides dotted with Colonial-era farms.

While the Greenway Challenge began as a way to showcase the Blackstone, it’s become a premier competitive event. In 2010, 67 teams from throughout New England competed in divisions including championship, ironmen, ironwomen, recreational, masters (age 50 and older), corporate cup and all-women teams. “It’s still the kind of event that anybody can do, but the competition adds excitement and prestige,” Reitsma says.

The Greenway Challenge also demonstrates the enormous energy of volunteerism in the valley, with local organizations,



Greenway Challenge runners wait for the start of the race. Photo: The UniBank Blackstone River Valley Greenway Challenge.

youth groups and businesses managing transition stations between segments, planning the course and hosting a “children’s challenge” fun-and-fitness event at the finish line party.

Since 2005, Greenway Challenge organizers have recognized a nonprofit group working to preserve and promote the Blackstone by awarding each year a partnership grant. Recipients of the grant, announced in spring, help plan that year’s race and manage a transition site. Previous grants have been awarded to the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce Education Foundation’s Youth Leadership Academy, the Blackstone River Coalition, Blackstone River Bikeway Association, Waters Farm Preservation, Mohegan Council Boy Scouts of America and the Blackstone River Watershed Council.

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management’s Office of Water Resources and the Blackstone River Watershed Association in Massachusetts have lent a hand, too, raising awareness of boat washing to prevent the spread of invasive aquatic plant species including milfoil, fanwort and curly-leaved pondweed. “Some of these fragmenting species are transported by waterfowl and other natural means, but the majority is spread through human transport – getting caught on motors, kayaks and fishing gear,” says Evan Ross, an intern at RI DEM and a Greenway Challenge volunteer.

Ross says that the Blackstone River and Canal, as well as Olney Pond in Lincoln Woods State Park, host invasive aquatic species; but other waterways that might be on the

course aren't infested, and organizers want to keep it that way. This year they plan to have a boat washing station at Wallum Lake, Douglas State Forest.

Despite the challenges of restoring and protecting what was once "America's first polluted river," the Greenway Challenge reflects the growing momentum toward sustainable, recreational use of the Blackstone. "I think it's a great place to get out and exercise. There's a lot of nature and wildlife to be seen here," says Donald Martin, co-owner of Blackstone Valley Outfitters in Lincoln, R.I. and a Greenway Challenge volunteer. He's had customers from as far away as California, Europe and Japan come to fish, kayak or bike along the river.

Bringing more people to experience the beauty and adventure of the Blackstone is a hallmark of the Greenway Challenge's success. "From the Corridor Commission's perspective, it's a signature event," Reitsma says. "We want to see it continue as a signature event for the region."

Sponsors include the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, UniBank, Taco Inc./White Family Foundation, Citadel Communications and the Whitin Community Center.

Susan Spencer is a writer, editor and photographer in Whitinsville, Mass. She has participated as a Greenway Challenge volunteer and competitor for many years.



Paddlers Frank Oleksyk and Rob Knapik on "Team TMC Services" from Bellingham, MA defending their 2009 Corporate Cup Championship Title . Photo: The UniBank Blackstone River Valley Greenway Challenge.



"Team International's" Captain Flavio Salvas, rides through Douglas Common, in Douglas, MA competing in the Greenway Challenge for his sixth year. Photo: The UniBank Blackstone River Valley Greenway Challenge.



Crossing the finish line at Olney Pond in Lincoln Woods State Park in Lincoln, RI. Photo: The UniBank Blackstone River Valley Greenway Challenge.



**Are you
ready to
take the
challenge?**

The 2011 UniBank Blackstone River Valley Greenway Challenge is Sept. 24, starting in Lincoln, R.I. and finishing 56 miles later in Douglas, Mass. Here's how to join the adventure...

FORM A TEAM. Recruit co-workers, friends and anyone else over age 16 who can paddle, run or bicycle for a few miles or more. Or do it all yourself as a tri-athlete.

REGISTER BY SEPTEMBER 1. Online registration and requirements are at www.greenwaychallenge.org.

FIND THE GREENWAY CHALLENGE ON FACEBOOK.

WORK OUT TEAM LOGISTICS. Grab your maps, enlist support-vehicle drivers and plan your strategy to transport team members to and from transition sites.

ATTEND CAPTAINS MEETING. Get the nitty-gritty race details at a meeting in early September.

PICK UP RACE PACKETS. Friday, Sept. 23 at the Whitin Community Center, Whitinsville, Mass.

GIVE IT YOUR ALL ON RACE DAY. Celebrate at the finish line and enjoy the festivities.