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## Holiday races burn calories and exercise the holiday spirit

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MANATEE — It may have been the crack of dawn Thanksgiving Day, when cooks nationwide were slaving in the kitchen, but locally, more than 350 people took time out to do a 5-mile “Turkey Trot” road race sponsored by the Bradenton Runner’s Club.

“We have more people every year,” explained Steve Litschauer, president of the club. “We started 11 years ago with 11 people, and now, it’s almost 350, give or take.”

The Nov. 27 race at DeSoto National Memorial is among a bevy of road races and walks during the holidays that have become increasingly popular with the public.

At many holiday races, the emphasis is more on fun, frivolity and family and less upon athletic ability. Some “races” even lack a timer, so gabby participants just cover the course in their own sweet time, many tinkling with bells, wearing strings of holiday lights, or parading dogs glammed up in Santa hats.

“What we’re seeing all around, too, is more people are walking/running for fitness and exercise,” said Litschauer. “We’re in the mode of people trying to be more health-conscious and fit.”

From a business perspective, with the economy in a slump, people are looking for fun alternatives to expensive trips during the holidays, he added.

“They’re finding something fun locally they can do with their family,” said Litschauer. “They’re basically in the Christmas spirit and it’s a good way to combine a love of a sport, exercise and the spirit of the Christmas season,” he said of the Thanksgiving and Christmas races that have proliferated on the calendar.

Not only are the holiday runs great exercise and fun, many also raise funds for worthy charitable causes, such as the Bradenton Chapter of the Arthritis Foundation.

The foundation was expecting a record number of nearly 1,500 participants at its Dec. 11 “Jingle Bell Run/Walk” at Old Main Street in Bradenton.

Last year, the race raised \$32,000 for research and community programs, such as aquatics and self-help classes for those suffering from arthritis, said Lee Lewis, the foundation’s community development coordinator.

“It’s an evening race, we’ve got people ringing bells, a drum line plays half-way through, it’s a lot of fun along the course,” said Lewis. The fire marshal leads off those who are walking with an old-time fire engine, playing Christmas music from the fire truck, not to mention the live band and Dee-jay also on tap at the race, she added.

The granddaddy of holiday races in the Tampa Bay area probably is the annual St. Petersburg Times’ Turkey Trot, which this year took place in Clearwater on Nov. 27 and attracted 14,910 participants. The race offered various distances, complete with timers, water stations, bands along the course and food afterward.

A less serious athletic holiday race is the the Boley Center’s Jingle Bell Fun Run, which this year took place Dec. 10 at the St. Petersburg Pier.

It features carolers, food, thousands of participants, many dressed in wild costumes, who don’t seem to mind the absence of a timer.

Afterward, they drink beer and hang out at The Pier, overlooking a glistening Tampa Bay.

A frequent participant in holiday races is Bert Panganiban, a former president of the Lakewood Ranch Running Club.

“First of all, they’re really festive,” he said. “It’s an opportunity to see friends, a lot of people run with family as well. People are also into health and fitness at a time when we stack on calories at holiday parties. This is a way to offset that, not to mention a lot of people have training as part of their everyday life, and they have the ability to do that with the holidays, continue their normal health and fitness routines.”

Panganiban, 48, of Lakewood Ranch, also recommends holiday races for more serious runners, such as marathoners, since the shorter distances provide an opportunity for them to fine-tune for longer races.

Panganiban also appreciates the philanthropic joys of the season.

“Many of these events focus on benefits for those in need, those who are jobless, have no food, and so these programs are somewhat missions of some very well-intended groups,” he said. “By organizing these races, they bring awareness, bring some immediate help to those most in need, especially during this time of year, the season of giving.”

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