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MOAB AREA

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For the LOVE of RUNNING

Growing popularity of the sport draws national attention to the region

Written By Sharon Sullivan | Photography by Murice D. Miller

Avid long-distance runner Matt Olding remembers when there were few running competitions in Utah and no such thing as a “trail running shoe.” These days, in Moab alone, there are 15 running race events that take place each year, plus there’s a running club in town, a tour company specializing in the sport, and two camps for runners. There’s even a Moab-based website dedicated to running.

Bryon Powell and Meghan Hicks own *irunfar.com*, where they post runner profiles, articles on ultramarathon training, a section titled “Running on Science,” articles on first-aid, and a “Trail Running 101” feature. The website also publishes reviews of gear, including shoes and apparel, as well as a compilation of destination dirt trail guides from around the world. “On the global scale, they’re ‘it’ for understanding trail running, and why the sport has blossomed,” says Olding, a local freelance computer designer and drafter. “We’re lucky to have them in our town.”

In January, Olding, 54, and his wife Andrea, 46, were busy training for February’s Moab Red Hot 33K, organized by Grassroots Events. When they’re not training, the couple typically runs three to five times a week during the winter. The Moab Red Hot (which also includes a 55K race) typically kicks off the trail race season, Olding says. In April, Grassroots sponsors the Amasa Run, which includes a 10.5K, 15K, and 25K.

A division of Moab’s Canyon Voyages Adventure Company, Grassroots Events offers running tours for both beginners and ultrarun-

ners alike. Professional running guides, who are certified as Wilderness First Responders, lead participants on various courses. “We get people, families, from all over the country,” co-owner and president Brian Roe says. “We also do a river rafting and running event, where you run in the morning and raft in the afternoon,” Roe says. “We’re looking at formulating a race that incorporates mountain biking, running, and rafting.”

While Moab is famous for its mountain biking culture, trail running has also captured national





attention. In 2017, Denise and Justin Ricks bought the Canyonlands Half Marathon from longtime owner and race director Ranna Biescheke. "The Canyonlands Half Marathon was named one of the top 50 races in the world by *Runner's World UK* magazine in July 2018," Denise says. "That's a really big honor, (considering how) many races are held all over the world. So, we've gained some notoriety." The race draws participants from across the country, as well as overseas.

The Ricks met each other while running cross-country at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs. Their two teenagers run cross-country at Grand County High School. "Justin and I have been runners our whole lives," Denise says. "It was important that our kids like the sport that is important to us. We took them everywhere. Justin would go for a run and the

kids and I would hike, run, eat snacks, enjoying being outside. They took to it."

Still, both Denise and Justin gained weight with parenthood, she says. Once their children were older, they began running more often, until eventually they were back to running nearly every day. "We lost over 100 pounds between the two of us," Denise says. "Justin went from being overweight to winning the Eugene Marathon (2 hours and 22 minutes) in 2011. He won the 100K National Trail Championship in Texas, in 2017."

After the Eugene Marathon, Justin decided he wanted to start hosting races, beginning with the "Behind the Rock Ultra" – a Moab race in its sixth year that takes place the week after Canyonlands Half Marathon. The Ricks founded Mad Moose Events, which organizes three trail runs and four road races each year in Moab.

Running retreats

As former editor of *Trail Runner Magazine*, Elinor Fish, of Carbondale, Colorado, visited a lot of trail running destinations, including Moab. In 2010, she founded "Run Wild Retreats and Wellness" a travel tour operation specializing in trips for runners. Several of Fish's Run Wild retreats – for women 21 and older – have been held in Moab.

"It'll be our fifth year bringing runners to Moab; a lot of them haven't been there before – it's a new experience running in desert." Fish said. Based out of Red Cliffs Lodge, there are two four-day retreats, scheduled for the spring – March 28-31, and April 4-7. Run Wild retreats typically attract 14-18 women, ranging in ages from early 20s to mid-60s. "We combine guided trail runs with mindfulness coaching," Fish said.



Top: In a previous Canyonlands Half Marathon, runners are greeted by the drumming of Moab Taiko Dan. Bottom left: A competitor in the 2017 Moab Red Hot Race. [Courtesy Moab Red Hot / Crossroads Events] Bottom right: Grand County High School's Kaylah Ricks. Opposite page: Danelle Ballengee and Lucy running up the steep and rocky Dave's Trail above Moab.



Participants learn to reduce stress by using mindfulness techniques, and by letting go of stress, can relax and enjoy the running more, she says.

Fish credits Moab's mountain biking community and other non-runners for building many of the great trail systems in the area. "There are so many places in Moab with beautiful vistas, whether you're overlooking the Colorado River valley or running below the cliffs, or viewing the La Sal mountains. It's such a big open landscape, with a glimpse of grandeur. And it's so accessible."

The *Washington Post* published a story about Run Wild Retreats in 2017, creating more national exposure to the region's running culture. The article ran in newspapers nationwide.

Longtime trail runner and race organizer Danelle Ballengee drew international attention after an accident while running solo in Moab's backcountry where she tumbled 60 feet, and was forced to spend two nights outside in freezing temperatures. She was rescued after her dog Taz led rescuers to where she lay injured. The incident was featured on a half-dozen national television programs, and is still



available on Netflix's "I Shouldn't Be Alive" series.

Ballengee continues to organize the Moab Trail Marathon and the Moab Spring Trail Run, plus a duathlon — a combined running and mountain biking event. She says her running accident made her realize how much she loved running, and how it was her motivation for getting better. "I like the simplicity of it — being able to explore, go places. You can stay in shape, get healthy. All you need is a pair of shoes," Ballengee says. "I go out on the trail, my dog and I, we get away from it all. It's my time to meditate and think. It's therapeutic for me. That's why I run."

Starting young

In 2018, Justin and Denise Ricks' daughter Kaylah won the 3A State cross-country championship for Grand County High School. In 2007 and 2008, the high school's Dayna VanArsdol won back-to-back state championships — which earned her a running scholarship to Southern Utah University in Cedar City.

"The sport builds mental toughness that will benefit them for the rest of their lives," GCHS

track and cross-country coach Randy Martin says. "At the high school level, we try and work with them and develop life skills, and that success requires hard work and practice every day."

Several years ago, Martin, and his assistant Trish Hedin formed a running club to encourage year-round distance running for students in grades six through twelve. The club currently has 10 girls and a dozen boys. During winter's off-season, students run from 4-5:30 p.m., two days a week, and Saturday mornings, 8-9:30 a.m. In the summer, students rise early three days a week to run for an hour-and-a-half, starting at 6 a.m. Students meet at a variety of running locations — Lion's Park, the Moab Golf Course, Rotary Park, the Sand Flats trails, and the Mill Creek Pathway.

"The wonderful thing about Moab is these different venues. Kids don't get bored," Martin says.

Neither do adults become tired of all the places to run around Moab. "One of the reasons I moved to Moab (18 years ago) was for the great trails," Olding says. "[It's the] variety of trail systems." ■



Top left: Tommy Barts runs along Jackson's Trail overlooking the Colorado River during a Moab Mindful Running Retreat. (Photo courtesy of Elmer Fish/Run Wild Retreats + Wellness)
 Top right: Grand County High School's Running Club coordinator Trish Hedin, second from left, and students (from left) Jonathan Martineau, Bella Welch, Jessie Anderson, Jamison Hawks, pause for a photo during a run along Moab's Mill Creek Pathway.
 Bottom: Anara and Matt Olding running up the Moab Rim Trail in January 2019.