The Pacesetter

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Former BHS standout captures Black Hills 100 crown

By Dave Graves
Newsletter editor

Ellie (Abraham) Willkie hoists her prize for winning the Black Hills 100-Mile Run. A local artist hand paints a buffalo skull that is given to the top three men and women in the race. A buffalo skull also is the symbol for the markers along the Centennial Trail, where the race was held.

Ellie (Abraham) Willkie's collection of medals earned on the track and cross country courses could fill a treasure chest. As a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and an active service member, adversity has been a frequent visitor.

However, she said that neither graduating from Annapolis nor winning four straight individual Eastern South Dakota Conference cross country titles for the Brookings Bobcats prepared her to attempt a 100-mile run. But that combination of perseverance and past success might have given her enough confidence to sign up for the Black Hills 100-Mile Run June 26-27.

It was her first attempt at any race farther than a 50K, which she had run only once, just this spring.

At the Black Hills 100, she battled a thunderstorm, mud, blisters, sleeplessness, and a missed turn sign, in addition to 100 miles of putting one foot in front of the other. But 27 hours, 46 minutes, and 39 seconds after leaving the Sturgis City Park headed for the Centennial Trail, she was back at the park being celebrated as the first-place female.

Willkie, 24, finished more than two hours ahead of the second-place female and placed 10th overall.

She was the leading female from start to finish, but there was nothing easy about it, she said.

A storied BHS, Navy career

Ellie said the most challenging part was from miles 66 to 74 between 2 and 4 a.m. June 27. A big thunderstorm had come through an hour or two earlier. "I already had to slog through five miles of super, super muddy road. About 16 miles of the Centennial trail is also an ATV track. The road on the ATV portion was full of gigantic rocks, puddles that went across the road, and thick mud that would cake my shoes and add like five pounds to each leg.

"It was so thick you couldn't scrape it off. I couldn't run at all. After about five miles of that, I got to an aid station, and my Dad paced me through the toughest section, which was about six miles uphill, slogging through that mud."

Ellie, the daughter of Ross and Julie Abraham of Brookings, is a 2020 Brookings High School graduate who also ran Division 1 track and cross country at the U.S. Naval Academy. She won the individual state cross country championship for the Bobcats in 2015 and 2017, as well as winning the 800-meter race and leading the medley relay team to state titles in 2017 and 2018.

She capped off her collegiate career by winning the 3,000m steeplechase for the third straight year at the Patriot League Championship with a program record time of 10:10.03. Willkie, who married fellow midshipman Nathan Willkie on July 5, 2025, also was Navy's top cross country runner her senior season and was first-team all-Patriot League for both her junior and senior years.

Waiting on Ellie hand and foot

Ross Abraham said he could have kept running with his daughter after pacing her through that tough early morning section, "but her biggest need was to get dry socks and shoes." So he handed her his GPS watch (Ellie's had run out of battery) and headed back to the car. By the time Ellie reached the aid station at mile 87.5, Abraham was there with dry footwear, a chair, and Vaseline for her toes after she had run roughly 40 miles with wet feet.

Crewing for an ultramarathoner and even watching an ultramarathon is an

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Bob Bartling to be honored

The children of the late Bob Bartling, Jane Christensen, of Haskell, Oklahoma, and Dave Bartling, of Brookings, pose on a bench outside of Briggs Library on the SDSU campus. The bench bears a plaque honoring Bartling, who died Feb. 24, 2024, at age 97. His 100th birthday would have been Aug. 26. The day will be marked with a dedication, refreshments and the playing of a podcast that was recorded six days before Bartling passed.

The dedication is at 5:30 p.m. on the south side of Briggs Library at the bench area. Reminiscing and watching the podcast will be in the archives section of the library on the second floor until 6 p.m. There is no charge for parking on campus after 4:30 p.m.

experience all its own.

"I've never been to a trail run of that length. It's a little bit crazy," Abraham said, noting how the race quickly turns into a remote experience. "I have so much respect for anyone at the start line. This year there was a 40% completion rate; typically it's 50%. The mud had a lot to do with it. At this distance, it's not so much running; it's more like speed hiking. You've got to keep your heart rate low."

Ellie said that family friend Chris Riley, a veteran ultra-marathoner and Black Hills Run Club vice president, advised her that every hill has to be taken as if you've already run 70 miles.

Ellie did run sections of the uphills during the first half of the race, but she added "I played it really conservative." During the second half of the course, which is more downhill, Ellie ran all the downhill portions but was shocked at how, at that stage of the race with battered legs in their own world of pain, her pace did not seem to indicate her efforts. She said, "I did not know I could run that slow (15-minute miles)."

Ross: Hurry up and wait

Abraham added, "It's crazy watching how the body reacts. With 17.5 miles left, Ellie said she couldn't take solid food any more." So she resorted to drinking flat Coca-Cola and Tailwinds, a powdered endurance mixture provided by the race.

Crewing a runner in the Black Hills has its own challenges, Abraham noted. "There is no way to track your runner. Usually we didn't have internet for tracking. The most nerve-wracking part of the whole race was waiting for her arrival at the various aid stations. At one point she did take a wrong turn, and I'm waiting and waiting. I'm thinking 'I'm sure she's alright but . . . '"

Ellie explained, "The trail runs into a road for a mile, and I didn't see the turn-off sign. Finally, I noticed there weren't any tracks, so I turned around, but it cost me 45 minutes. On the way back, the wrong-way sign was obvious." But at 6 a.m., after having run for 20 hours, obvious can be a relative term.

Ellie: pain a constant companion

Reflecting on the race, Willkie said, "It wasn't as mentally challenging as I expected, but it was physically challenging. I expected the opposite. But there was never a point where I wanted to quit. Running felt better than walking. My running gait was smoother than when I was walking. My left hip flexor was killing me.

"In the first 40 miles, I got used to a normal level of pain. My body hurt, but I knew I wasn't injured. About Mile 70 I got out of that mud. The next 14 miles the pain increased and I continued to barely hobble out of each aid station, taking a half mile each time to loosen up into a trot. I told myself I couldn't say that (I've almost made it) until I got to the last aid station," which was at Mile 98.

Ellie (Abraham) Willkie (134) is all smiles as she runs with a group shortly after the start of the Black Hills 100-Mile Run in Sturgis. Group running didn't last long, however, as the field of 130 narrowed to 59 finishers with times from 22 to 36 hours.

Aid station workers kept her informed that she was the leading female, which she never expected. "I had no idea what to put for my goal. I was just going to be happy to finish."

When she did finish at 1:46 p.m. on Saturday, "Chris (Riley) and Dad were at the finish line. It was amazing. It was pretty exciting."

Another 100-miler? — not any time soon

Abraham noted, "There were about 50 people camped at finish line cheering people on, including Riley, who had to drop from the race because of cramping."

Abraham said, "I felt very joyous and extremely proud and a big sense of relief, as well, to see she was still running and running fairly smoothly. I'm still smiling when I think about it." Abraham, a math professor at South Dakota State University and a distance runner himself, noted they have done other father-daughter bonding adventures, but "This was the most extreme and tight bonding experience that we've ever had. I'm pretty happy to have done it."

As for another 100-miler, Willkie said, "I had a great time, but not a time I would like to repeat any time soon."

Editor's note: *Willkie said it took her three days to feel recovered and pain-free, and she gave herself three weeks before returning to running for good measure. At this point, she is signed up to race the Jacksonville Half Marathon for the second year in a row in December.*

Reflections on Grandma's 50th

Editor's note: *Grandma's Marathon, one of the nation's most iconic marathons, observed its 50th running June 20. Three Brookings women were part of the field of 9,603 marathoners while the fourth member of their group ran the half marathon.*

Angie Thompson, 52, finished in 3:42.03 to place 11th out of 233 in F50-54 division and 566 out of 4,036 women with an average pace 8:29. Susan Robertson, 51, finished in 5:05:19 and Rebecca Biteler, 49, finished in 5:17:48. Abbi Davelaar, 38, ran the Garry Bjorklund Half Marathon in 2:15:08.

The Pacesetter asked the runners to share their memories. The thoughts of Angie Thompson and Susan Robertson follow.

Lessons learned at Grandma's Marathon

By Angie Thompson

Running the 50th anniversary of Grandma's Marathon along the shores of Lake Superior was an experience I will always remember. Every mile celebrated five decades of tradition, determination and community. The course was beautiful, winding along the lake with its scenic views and rolling hills that challenged and rewarded runners every step of the way.

One of the most inspiring moments of the weekend was hearing of a gentleman who had run every single Grandma's Marathon for all 50 years. His dedication and lifelong commitment to the race reminded me that running isn't just about one finish line, it's about showing up year after year and embracing the journey.

Another highlight was listening to Des Linden and Kara Goucher share their experiences and love for the sport, and hearing Dakotah Popehn talk about her dream of winning her hometown race, which she did...again. Their stories were inspiring and reinforced that running is about chasing goals and believing in yourself.

Facing the reality of the conditions

Going into race day, I had trained for a 3:35 marathon. My training had gone well and I felt prepared. But marathons have a way of reminding you that race day comes with countless variables you can't control. Heat and humidity the final six miles became a true mental and physical test. I knew I had to adjust my pace, even though it meant letting go of

Angie Thompson shows off her Grandma's Marathon medal.

the time I had originally set out to run.

During those difficult miles, I kept asking myself one simple question: "Are you doing the very best you can?" Every single time, my answer was yes. That became enough. Instead of focusing on what I couldn't control, I focused on giving everything I had in the moment.

When I crossed the finish line, I felt proud. I earned a Boston Qualifying time, but more importantly, I proved to myself that I could adapt, persevere and keep moving forward when things didn't go exactly as planned . I was pleased with where my training had taken me and with how I finished.

'The greatest finish line of all'

I've come to believe that the training is what truly makes you a marathoner, not the race itself. The countless early mornings, long runs, workouts, sacrifices and moments of self-discipline are what

Posing in front of Lake Superior are, from left, Becky Biteler, Angie Thompson, Susan Holt and Abbi Davelaar. Biteler, Thompson and Holt all ran in the 50th Grandma's Marathon June 20 while Davelaar ran in the 36th annual Garry Bjorklund Half Marathon.

build the marathoner. Race day simply reveals the work you've already done while introducing variables no one can predict.

Every race leaves me with something different. I always take home a lesson learned, a new tool to help me grow and a special memory that stays with me long after the finish line.

Grandma's Marathon gave me all of that: the beauty of Lake Superior, the challenge of the rolling hills, the inspiration of remarkable runners, the honor of celebrating the race's 50th anniversary, the achievement of earning my Boston Qualifier and the reminder that success isn't always measured by the clock.

Sometimes it's measured by answering "yes" when you ask yourself if you gave everything you had. That lesson may be the greatest finish line of all.

Grandma's memories focus on togetherness

By Susan Holt

A chance at a 2026 girls running trip led us to a decision to participate in Grandma's Marathon 50th anniversary celebration in Duluth in June.

Angie Thompson, Becky Biteler, Abbi Davelaar and I all logged onto the Grandma's website at 7 p.m. Oct. 1, 2025, waiting for the registration page to populate with no guarantee all of us would get in. The marathon sold out in a record 12 hours and the Garry Bjorkland Half Marathon sold out in 75 minutes with a total of 19,000 entries with the 5k selling out overnight.

Cheers in our group chat — "We all got in!"

We hopped in the cars on Thursday, June 18, and headed to Duluth and

Posing outside the Duluth Playhouse Theatre are Brookings runners, from left, Susan Holt, Angie Thompson, Abbi Davelaar and Becky Biteler. They were there to listen to the Des Linden and Kara Goucher podcast "Nobody Asked Us" in advance of the 50th running of the Grandma's Marathon.

checked into the Spirit Mountain Ski Cabins (highly recommended) that looked like treehouses, super cute and fun, especially for kids.

After check-in we headed to the race expo to collect our bibs and take in the booths and sponsors. We found our names on the Toyota vehicles that listed participants in every distance. My favorite booth was the 'Save The Boundary Waters' group. From there we headed to Grandma's Saloon and Grill for a bite. We had a few minutes so we checked out the Great Lakes Aquarium, all located in Canal Park.

Linden, Goucher, Beardsley, Tollefson and more

Abbi was able to get us some tickets to the Des Linden and Kara Goucher podcast show, "Nobody Asked Us," on Thursday night so off to the cute little theater we go. They had Dakotah Popehn, which I found out was a rival of Des Linden so it was a great podcast show with the banter back and forth. They did

a great job and the podcast episode is on Amazon Music.

On Friday we toured the Glensheen Mansion (highly recommended) in the morning before Becky and I had to be back to the expo to run the 5k at 1 p.m. We had signed up for the Grandma's challenge. Our cheerleaders Angie and Abbi were at the finish line to gather us up so we could head to the Dick Beardsley and Carrie Tollefson Show for a Q & A with a panel of guest speakers.

The guest speakers were great! They were all previous women winners of Grandma's Marathon, Janis Klecker (1987), Lorraine Moller (1979-1981), and Jenny Spangler (1983). The history reflected from this panel spanning from entry, shoes, myths about women running distances back in the day was all very inspiring. I had such a feeling of heartfelt gratitude for all they endured and accomplished to get women a place in the running community.

Beardsley and Tollefson truly put together a fantastic show. It was a tie with the podcast show of favorite events during this trip.

Alarm rings at 4 a.m.

After the event we headed to Michelina's all-you-can-eat-spaghetti dinner (highly recommended), which is one of Grandma's hallmark traditions. There were many kids and families with their runners taking in the dinner. Definitely one of the most organized meal turn-arounds.

After finishing up with the meal we headed back to the treehouse to get a little sleep before the 4 a.m. alarm to get ready to leave for the bus to take us to our respective start lines.

Angie, Becky and I were dropped off at the marathon start line and Abbi was on the bus to the half marathon start line.

Grandma's will not disappoint

We may all start in different corrals and distances but we all end at the same point with a collection of different conversations, perspectives, challenges and experiences. The time spent together on these trips is always the point of all the training in the heat and cold, and logging early mornings and late evening miles.

We know that someday slower days will come but no matter how fast or slow, these trips will continue to be a yearly tradition with each other and anyone we can persuade along the way.

Grandma's Marathon in Duluth Minnesota will not disappoint and is a highly recommended adventure if a full/half marathon is in your future.

Aurora runner honors vets in coast-to-coast relay

By Gavin Struve | The Brookings Register

The call to be a part of history came with little time to make a decision. Elias McElroy still jumped at the opportunity.

On June 13, just a few days after being asked to do so, he flew halfway across the country to San Francisco in preparation to run to the other side of the country as part of the Relay for America, the first mass-participation flag relay across the country.

The Aurora native completed the feat July 3, arriving in Washington D.C. and returning to Brookings a few days later.

"It's kind of just a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be a part of something so big and be part of the first round of it, the initial run," McElroy said. "I couldn't say no to it. There's so much opportunities that could come from it and already have started coming from it."

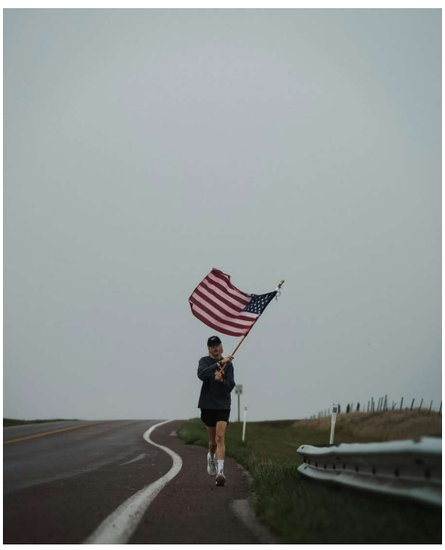
The cause was also appealing. The Relay for America is billed as a "3,000-mile coast-to-coast relay honoring 3,000 veterans for America's 250th birthday."

Each mile was dedicated to a veteran, and McElroy's grandfather (Sgt. Maj. Darald McElroy) and great uncle (Lt. Col. Ronald Green) were among those honored. The former served in the South Dakota Army National Guard and the latter in the U.S. Air Force.

Team of 18 take on coast to coast challenge

McElroy was invited to partake in the event by one of the founders, running influencer Wyatt Moss, whom he'd met while running a marathon in Las Vegas last year. McElroy and a team of 17 others took off from San Francisco on June 14 and were joined by over a thousand others intermittently in their stops along the way.

McElroy ran roughly five percent of the distance from San Francisco to the endpoint of Washington D.C., but someone (whether a Relay for America crew member or someone running a segment when the crew passed through their city) carried the flag the entire way.



Elias McElroy carries the American flag during the Relay for America.

The crew split up into three groups taking eight-hour shifts each day. McElroy was on the "red eye" crew from 2 a.m. to 10 a.m. Whether or not it was during his shift, he also made sure to run mile 444 (dedicated to his grandfather) and mile 1,530 (great uncle).

"It means a lot," McElroy said. "Just being able to say on this great journey, out of all the nominated veterans, just having my family, people that mean a lot to me and that did serve for this country and did a lot for us, just being able to find a way to honor them, even if it is just like a one-mile stretch, I got to run both their stretches. Just ran the mile, did it for them, called them out there.

"It's something that's small, but it means a lot in the grand scheme of things to them and to me. So it was nice. At some points being out there, you know, you're just like, 'what am I doing?' or 'why am I running? I could be sitting in the car.' But then when you think about it, you're running for a veteran every mile. It made it definitely easier to crank out miles."

Hadn't trained for 70-mile week

Leading up to the Relay for America, McElroy had been running 20-30 miles per week just to maintain a baseline level of fitness since he wasn't specifically training for anything.

The 2023 Brookings High School graduate had run as many as 60 miles a week for marathon training last year, but the ramp up to the 70 miles he completed in the first week of the Relay for America was a shock to the system. In his three-week odyssey, McElroy accumulated roughly 150 miles.

The altitude in the first week, traveling through high-elevation states like California, Nevada, Utah and Colorado, was also a humbling experience for McElroy. He'd never been to most of the states he passed through over the past month.

The elevation in the first week gave way to intolerable heat in the final week. At 80 degrees with max humidity, McElroy cited the RealFeel temperature as being around 100 degrees during the Ohio, Pennsylvania and Washington D.C. segments.

That meant they had to watch out for heat stroke. Still, the turnout made that the most enjoyable stretch.

Favorite state: Ohio

"Definitely, surprisingly, Ohio [was my favorite]," McElroy said. "Ohio was kind of the first state where we were finally getting into a more civilized area.

"We weren't going to be in like a long stretch of desert like Utah and Nevada or big mountains like Colorado, and so it was really cool to finally get to an area where it's populated, and it would be four in the morning, and we'd be going through a small town with a police escort, and there'd be people like it was like their mini Hobo Day, coming out to watch us just run by with the flag.

"So Ohio definitely had like the biggest show out, if anything, besides the final part in D.C."

McElroy plans to partake in other forthcoming Relay for America events, but more immediately, he plans to run a 24-hour race in Virginia in September, the Kansas City Marathon in October and the Last Man Standing Race in Austin in December.

Early registration deadline nears for Jack 15

The days to cash in on early registration rates for the Jack 15 road race are shrinking.

Current rates are $30 for relay participation and $40 for individual runners. Prices increase $5 for relay runners and $15 for individual runners on Sept. 1. Prices increase another $5 for entries received in person Sept. 18-19. (Prices are unchanged from 2025.) The 64th running of the oldest road race in the Midwest is Saturday, Sept. 19.

Packet pickup is 4 to 7 p.m. Sept. 18 at South Dakota Art Museum on Medary Avenue.

Runners completing the full 15.2 miles from White to the Campanile will receive a Campanile-inspired medal. Relay and individual runners will receive a long-sleeve, tri-blend shirt.

For more information on the race as well as accessing online registration, go to www.prairiestriders.net/jack-15.

In case you missed it:

From Race Raves — June 25, 2026

After completing its second successful evaluation in May, the Sanlam Cape Town Marathon was officially introduced as the eighth member of the Abbott World Marathon Majors and Africa's first World Marathon Major.

+ From big to biggest: The TCS London Marathon made it official with the announcement that, for one year only in 2027, the event will be staged over two days to allow a record 100,000 runners to participate.

+ Whether you're an ultrarunner or simply seeking the benefits of heat acclimation, Coach Jason Koop's Ultrarunners' Heat Acclimation Cheat Sheet can help prepare your body for the unique demands of racing in hot weather.

+ Urban am-badass-ador: Congrats to Joabe Barbosa who became the first person known to run every street in Chicago, a journey of 4,000+ miles in 680 days.

October racing begins with 57th Brookings Marathon

The 57th running of the Brookings Marathon will again be clad in fall colors.

After being a spring marathon for many years (with two notable exceptions), the Brookings Marathon was moved to a fall event in 2025. Those exceptions were in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the race to be postponed to September, and in 2022, when a derecho struck Brookings in May and pushed the race back until October.

Holding the event on Oct. 3 has several advantages according to Matt Buenger, who is directing the race for the first time after serving on the marathon committee for three years.

"By holding our races in the fall, we have better volunteer availability, more dependable weather and a better window for runners to get in their long training runs," Buenger said. "Well over 350 volunteers are needed to make the race happen each year. A fall race allows us to bolster the many dedicated volunteer groups that already assist and SDSU students on race day."

Activities are headquartered at Pioneer Park with the marathon, half marathon and marathon relay beginning at 8 a.m. The Scotty Roberts 5K will start at 6 p.m. Friday, Oct. 2.

Opportunities to volunteer,

register and celebrate the day can all be found at the race website brookingsmarathon.com or by contacting run@brookingsmarathon.com.

Member Spotlight

Name: Chuck Harming
Age: 52
Residence: Elkton, SD
Occupation: Telecom technician
Years as a Prairie Strider member: I am not sure

Why you're a member:
I love running and enjoy the Prairie Striders' events.

What you enjoy about running:
Many things: recreation, competition, being outdoors, health benefits, etc

Favorite running memory:
At my first 5k, tired and near the end, I tried to pick up my pace and finish hard only to find out that the finish line (at the old Sexauer Field track) was after a lap around the track, this resulted in probably the ugliest 400 I ever ran and those in attendance ever witnessed.

Your favorite Prairie Striders race:
Jack 15

Favorite workout:
Distance runs of an hour or more

Your running goal:
To be able to keep running as I get older

Thoreson named national assistant coach of year

Brandon Valley Track & Field and Cross Country coach Tony Thoreson was named the National High School Athletic Coaches Association's National Girls Assistant Coach of the Year in June during the association's national conference in Coralville Iowa, on the campus of the University of Iowa.

"What makes this recognition even more remarkable is that Tony was selected as the National Girls Assistant Coach of the Year across all high school sports—not just track & field or cross country. To be recognized on a national stage among assistant coaches from every sport in the United States is an extraordinary achievement and a testament to the impact Tony has made throughout his career," Troy Sturgeon, Brandon Valley's head track and field coach announced on Facebook.

"It is a well-deserved honor for someone who has dedicated so much of his life to serving student-athletes. The list of Tony's accomplishments is nothing short of incredible," Sturgeon said.

Those accomplishments include:

- A total of 55 seasons as an assistant track & field and/or cross country coach,
- USTFCCCA Girls Cross Country Coach of the Year,
- Nine-time South Dakota Cross Country and Track & Field Coaches Association Assistant Coach of the Year,

- Recipient of the prestigious Eastern South Dakota Conference Award of Merit,
- An invaluable part of three state track and field championships and two state cross country championships, and
- Coaching countless all-conference and all-state athletes.

Sturgeon continued, "As impressive as those accomplishments are, they don't begin to tell the whole story.

Awards recognize success, but they don't measure the countless early mornings, late evenings, encouraging conversations, quiet acts of kindness or the unwavering belief Tony has shown in every athlete who has worn the Lynx uniform.

"They don't capture the relationships he has built over three decades, the positive influence he has had on generations of young people, or the respect he has earned from fellow coaches across South Dakota and around the country.

"For those of us fortunate enough to coach alongside Tony, we know that his greatest legacy won't be found in trophies, championships or plaques. It will be found in the lives he has changed, the confidence he has instilled in young people and the friendships he has built that last far beyond the finish line.

"Tony has been an incredible mentor, a trusted friend and one of the finest coaches/people I have ever had the privilege to work alongside. Brandon Valley is better because of him and I know I am a better coach because of his example."

Editor's note: *A Brandon Valley coach since 1991, Thoreson can often be seen at Prairie Striders races. In 2023, he completed his 18th Jack 15, which is fifth most in the race's 63-year history.*

Prairie Striders Fall Challenge back again

Runners who tackle all three Prairie Striders races this fall are in line to receive the Prairie Striders Fall Challenge patch at no additional cost.

Prairie Striders Running Club opted to create the patch to encourage runners to participate in all three of the club's premier races—the Jack 15 on Sept. 19, the Brookings Marathon and Half Marathon Oct. 3, and the Bob Bartling Hobo Day 5K Oct. 24. Runners who compete in the Jack 15 or marathon relays as well as the Scotty Roberts 5K Oct. 2 are also eligible.

There is no sign-up required apart from race registration.

The club hopes to be able to hand out the patch during Hobo Day 5K packet pickup. Some patches may be mailed out later.

The Jack 15 and the Hobo Day 5K are traditional fall races. When the marathon moved to fall in 2025, Prairie Striders leaders decided it was an opportune time to establish a unique incentive to run all three races.

Stevenson honored for dedication to track and field

LeRoy "Buzz" Stevenson received the John Notheis Award in recognition of his dedication and 46 years of service to track and field. He was honored July 17th at the Hillcrest Golf & Country Club in Yankton.

Presented by the Yankton College Board, the award honors a track and field coach who embodies the spirit of former Yankton College coach John Notheis and shares his passion for coaching and positively influencing student-athletes.

Stevenson, a 1965 graduate of Yankton College, earned a Master of Education degree from South Dakota State University in 1973.

He spent 14 years coaching at the high school level, including 10 years at Huron High School. Stevenson led the Huron boys' track and field team to the program's first Eastern South Dakota Conference championship before guiding the Tigers to two additional conference titles in 1977 and 1978. His 1977 boys' team finished as the state runner-up while the Huron girls' cross country team captured a state championship.

Stevenson also coached for two seasons at Yankton College before taking over the cross country and track and field programs at Dakota State, where he became a legend.

He coached the Trojans for 29 years, from 1985 to 2014. Under his leadership, Dakota State captured 14 South Dakota Intercollegiate Conference championships.

He also coached the first men's and women's individual national champions in Dakota State track and field history. Desa Rae Doyle became the school's first female national champion when she won the high jump at the 2000 NAIA Women's Indoor Track and Field Championships. Andy Coy became the Trojans' first male national champion when he won the 1,000-meter run at the 2012 NAIA Men's Indoor Track and Field Championships.

Throughout his career, Stevenson coached more than 60 NAIA All-American performances, over 100 All-Conference performances and several national runners-up.

Stevenson currently resides in Sioux Falls with his wife, Diane.