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The 2024 Sandia Snowshoe Classic will feature 175 racers as they make their way through the Cibola National Forest and National Grasslands.

A winter Classic

Sandia snowshoe event gives competitors, spectators a chance to 'get out on the snow and have fun'

BY TRISTEN CRITCHFIELD
FOR THE JOURNAL

The impetus behind the inception of the Sandia Snowshoe Classic was pretty simple.

"It was just some locals in the East Mountains that thought it would be a good idea to get the greater Albuquerque community running around in the snow in the mountains," said Mike Madden, Friends of the Sandia Mountains (FOSM) president and current race director.

As the 20th anniversary of the race draws near, the motivation remains largely the same — and interest is higher than ever. Sign-ups for the event opened on Dec. 1 and by Christmas, had reached the 175-person limit. The race begins at the end of the Sandia Crest Scenic Highway and offers a 5K tour of the Cibola National Forest and National Grasslands. While the event was privately run in its early years, FOSM is now running the show.

"For our organization, we just want to see the community get out on the snow and have fun. In fact, we changed the name a couple of years ago," Madden said. "It used to be the 'Snowshoe Race.' Now we just call it the 'Classic' because we want to take the emphasis off of the word 'race' and have it just



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be a community outing."

All racers must come equipped with their own snowshoes, which can be smaller and lighter for faster runners and larger — and somewhat clumsier — for the less experienced. Participants range from teenagers to seniors, and the race allows for a wide variety of snowshoe aptitude. "It's not too long, but it's not too short, either," Madden said. "For those people that are a little bit out of shape, they get quite a challenge. And for those people that are in great shape, it's a long enough race that they feel like they're moving across the snow for about a half an hour. Our earliest finishers finish in about 25 or 30 minutes. And our last finisher comes in generally

in about two hours.

"A huge range between your world-class runners and your bird watchers."

Of course, there are plenty who are in it for the competition. The top male and female finishers receive \$150 apiece, and there are an array of prizes for winners in each age category. These include donated items such as tram tickets, restaurant gift cards, and various sporting goods and apparel.

According to Karl Walczak, the 2023 Classic overall winner, simply running the trail is an attraction in itself.

"The course is fun because it's at 10,000 feet, it's scenic, and it winds through trees and up and down the terrain of the crest," Walczak said. "I

especially enjoy the moments the trees are encased in ice crystals and the snow is soft and fluffy."

Meanwhile, 2023 female winner Michelle Hummel has only missed two Snowshoe Classics since 2011.

"I love endurance sports and the excitement of racing. I also love the snow and high mountains," she said. "So this race is a win-win for me. The race directors and volunteers are awesome, and the course is great."

For Hummel, the race serves a dual purpose.

"It has also been good training to prepare for future winter events," she added. "Namely, the Mount Taylor Quadrathlon — which I've done 10 times — and which includes a snowshoe portion. And National and World Snowshoe Championships, which I've competed in a number of times."

Safety is integral for those involved with organizing the event. Cibola Search and Rescue will have first-aid stations on the mountain, and a Bernalillo County EMS unit will be on hand should any medical issues arise.

"This a great event, well organized, physically-challenging and hard to imagine that it is located so close to Albuquerque," Walczak said. "Whether you are looking for a new chal-

SANDIA SNOWSHOE CLASSIC

WHEN: 11 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 20

WHERE: Race starts at the end of Sandia Crest Scenic Highway (Rt. 536)

MORE INFO:
friendsofthesandias.org;
registration is full for 2024

lenge or motivation to train or want to meet new people, or support a great organization (it's worth trying)."

While spectators are welcome, Madden says that not too many choose to brave the elements to cheer on the participants in the Classic.

"A lot of times the sun is low in the sky, it might be cloudy, it could be windy. It's not really conducive to good spectating," he said. "It's not balmy up there by any means, even on the best day. If we're fortunate, we'll get a day with no wind and sunshine and mild temperatures. But generally, I've been up there probably the last six races, and it's maybe a 15 mile-an-hour wind blowing. It could be cloudy. You want to be in your snowmobile suit when you're up there."