

2020 NATRA LLC Annual News letter

As we get ready to say goodbye to 2020 with hope on the horizon, I am about to open registration for the October 9th 22nd running of *Soulstice* at 9 PM New Year's Eve at <https://runsignup.com/Race/AZ/Flagstaff/SoulsticeMountainTrailRun>. I am growing confident by the day that we will be able to host outdoor foot races in one way or another. Because *Soulstice* is more than 9 months away, I thought folks might want to get excited about next year's race, and the breaking news that I've decided to bring back the traditional courses.



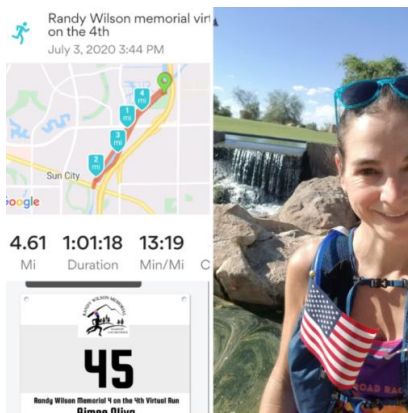
2020 started out like any other NATRA year. We hosted our New Year's Day run, mixed up the Saturday group runs between Sedona and Flagstaff, and right before the pandemic hit, we dutifully staffed the our infamous aid station with Verde Valley School teachers at the Sedona Half Marathon, and this time taking home the prize of best aid station for our hilarious *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy of Sedona, AKA, Aid Station 42*. To be honest, as I am writing this, I had completely forgotten we won that coveted award just last February. Who would have known that one of our aid station banners would be words of wisdom for what was about to turn the world upside down.

While early in the year NATRA coordinated the *Northern Arizona Racing Calendar* with its listing of 30 events, the pandemic virtually kept me awake all hours coordinating with race directors juggling to reschedule events later in the fall. As a result, I updated the online race calendar on what seemed like a daily basis. However, when the Summer Series first race, the Sacred Mountain Prayer Run canceled and the City of Flagstaff would not permit the July 4th Downtown Mile, it became clear we needed to take a new direction.

Just as I was ready to throw my hands up in the air and postpone *Soulstice* and the Series until the following year, *Run Flagstaff's timing and database guru Gail Hughes* convinced me otherwise. Gail pointed out the necessity of keeping folks engaged in running, and how virtual events offered an unforeseen opportunity to do so. Canceling such events would have been devastating to many of our non-profits that count on these fundraisers to support their missions and the social services that benefit those most in need across Northern Arizona.



Many of you first stepped into virtual racing without even realizing it when you participated in NATRA's epic free Mayan Apocalypse 5K Run to End All Runs on winter solstice 2012. We had a large local crowd running with us in Buffalo Park on that frigid day with nearly a foot of snow on the ground, but we also had another 200 when the event went viral and virtual on Facebook. So when July arrived, rather than cancel our beloved free Randy Wilson Memorial 4 on the 4th, Randy's daughter Caroline and I re-imagined it into a virtual event. Randy would have been amazed; his event which usually drew 40 race day participants and collected two boxes of canned goods for the food bank, attracted nearly 200 walkers and runners from across the country. We raised a whopping \$2200 that helped serve more than 10,000 meals!



Within a matter of days and a ton of help from Gail Hughes, we turned the Summer Series into the new virtual format that would span the end of summer and most of fall right up until Thanksgiving. The Series included 8 races, the 4 on the 4th, Machine Solutions Soldiers Trail Run, Gaspin in the Aspen, Northland Hospice Run for Life, the Loven Family Run, *Soulstice*, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Flagstaff, and finally an add on, Run Flagstaff's inaugural Campbell Scramble. Incredibly we had 174 runners in the Series, just about the same numbers as the past few years. Thanks to NATRA's pal Caleb Schiff at Pizzicetta, 80 runners who did 4 of the 8 races won a free Pizzicetta Pizza! Also thanks to Northland Hospice we awarded all participants with a beautifully designed medal. I think Abe Springer best summed up the virtual series in his hilarious column, [50 "woo-hoos"](#).

On a personal note, no one was more excited about the virtual format than me. As my 33 year professional career was winding down on the Kaibab National Forest, I no longer had to drive to Williams every day; as a result of the pandemic we were told to work from home. This gave me plenty of time in the morning to put down some base miles and the virtual races motivated me to push myself. At the same time my wife Diana surprised me by announcing that she wanted to run the Series, and that she had coaxed her twin sister in Pittsburgh to join the virtual format. As Diana beat me at almost every virtual race, I looked back on my training logs and discovered I had run more miles than I had since the height of my marathon training in 1995!

Of course at the heart of NATRA have always been the Saturday group runs. Until this year we had never cancelled one no matter how bad the weather. However, due to the nature of our free open to anyone large social group runs, I felt it was necessary to postpone them until it is safe to run in large groups again.



While I did not advertise it as usual, a small group of runners still assembled at 8:45 AM at Schultz Tank for the annual War Dog Run. We were humbled by the surprise participation by one of its legendary race founders, Dave Knutson, who made his way down to

Flagstaff to celebrate the run's 40th anniversary. It was a perfect day to hear stories about the early days of Flagstaff trail running and all of the runners made it to the top of Doyle Saddle and back.

When it was time for the virtual Soulstice race, I was well prepared to finally participate for the first time since 2001. I ran variations of the race four times. However, it was my run with Sara Wagner on the original course with its spectacular new views as a result of the Museum Fire, when I started waxing poetic about the old course. As a result I will bring the old courses back to life next fall.



On what should have been the normal race day of October 10th, Soulstice diehards independently showed up to run that day. As folks completed their race, a social distancing party ensued even later into the afternoon than the usual shenanigans of the Knights of the Soulstice Round Table post-race celebrations. David McKee's race poster was a beautiful as ever, Biff's Bagels offered runners a free bagel schmear, and while there was no shirt this year, the Virtually Soulstice Sweatvac Shapeshifter was a timely giveaway with the arrival of colder temperatures. While our fundraising efforts for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Flagstaff mentoring programs fell well short of past years, we still

raised over \$10,000 between runners who guaranteed their entry via the Arizona Tax Credit and the \$3500 from the Aspen Sports virtual raffle, so between doing nothing and something, I considered it a huge win for the community.

As far as the outlook for 2021, I am hopeful we will be back to our regular Saturday morning runs later this spring, and that our 17th annual Summer Series will kick off in June once again. You are likely to see the Series and most local races offering hybrids of in person and virtual formats. For now I'm holding off on opening the Summer Series registration until we get through the next month or two. In the meantime, Soulstice 2021 opens at 9 PM tonight, and Ian Torrence just announced the exciting return of the Flagstaff to Grand Canyon Stagecoach Line 100 mile and 55K Relay! Register today at <http://ultrasignup.com/register.aspx?did=81922> and NATRA will see you at mile 80 at historic Hull Cabin!



There was so much heartfelt support from so many of you to keep our Flagstaff races alive, so thank you back for the kind words, pats on the backs, fist and elbow bumps, and your enthusiastic acceptance of change in this extraordinary year. As 2021 marks NATRA's 20th anniversary, we have a lot to forward to.

As always, Happy Trails to the New Year and keep masking up and staying safe and hopefully we can hug each other at Soulstice on October 9th.

Neil Weintraub, Director NATRA LLC