

Trail runner races mountain bikers to help conserve rhino

KwaZulu-Natal trail runner Tracy Zunckel competed against, and beat, mountain bikers in the recent FedGroup Berg & Bush near Winterton to raise funds for protecting rhino and other species in the Spioenkop Game Reserve.

Zunckel, who is part of the local Bergville farming community, ran the mountain bike stage race trails to collect donations towards replacing the damaged game fence surrounding the cash-strapped reserve.

She was approached by race organiser Gary Green following her participation in last year's event, in which they raised R25 000 for the Bergville Orphan Fund.

According to the five-time Mont-aux-Sources Challenge champion, she immediately jumped at the opportunity to run for a cause and withdrew from another trail run in which she had been scheduled to compete.

"It's awesome to be able to use my God-given talent to help out in our community. It's my privilege to run this race and to live in this spectacular part of our country.

We have a responsibility

"We as a community have a responsibility to preserve and improve it for generations to come."

Zunckel, who races for sponsor Wedgewood, said it would cost an estimated R20 000 per kilometre to replace the fencing. The organisers opened the fund with a R25 000 donation.

"Spioenkop has giraffe, zebra, rhino, eland and a multitude of other animals. It provides recreation for a lot of locals and visitors to the Ukahlamba Drakensberg area."

The 38-year-old ran the final days of both the three-day Descent and Original two-day events, finishing last in the former and beating more than 80 social riders in the latter.

"The cyclists were really friendly and encouraging, although you don't chat too much because everyone's puffing and panting. The bet was that for every one I beat they owed me R1000, but we don't hold anyone to that."

Zunckel, who is also a two-time winner of the Rhodes Trail Run and Mutter Mountain Mania Ultra Trail Run, started at the back of the field and finished the 50km stage in four hours and 17 minutes.

"The end was awesome - all the cyclists who had already come in were there to welcome me home. It really doesn't matter

how many others I beat at the end of the day as the aim was to create awareness and I think we achieved that."

Previous conservation efforts

She said that the event, which is now in its seventh year, had already had good success in terms of its previous conservation efforts.

"Gary originally started raising funds for the red-billed oxpecker, because these birds were then under threat. Since then, their numbers have really increased in the area."

The mother of three said the race had inspired her to take up the more time-consuming sport of mountain biking once her children reached school-going age.

"You don't need to do great things to help other people. Just get out there."

Donations can be made to: Berg & Bush, Standard Bank Ladysmith, branch code 057725, account number 060 191 570.

For more information, go to www.bergandbush.co.za or find the event on www.facebook.com/bergandbush.

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