

Tahoe MedWAR Challenge tests wilderness skills

By Molly Hucklebridge Coolidge

When Krysinthia White's team, 20 Percent Survival, completed the MedWAR Tahoe Challenge at the Taylor Creek Sno-Park, they knew it was not a first place finish. Yet they were still smiling after six flat tires, a bee sting, and multiple wrong turns.

"From our perspective, last place was the best place," says White. "We had the entire lake [Fallen Leaf] to ourselves and pretty much the entire trail."

20 Percent Survival is one of 10 teams of wilderness enthusiasts and medical responders who participated in the inaugural MedWAR Tahoe Challenge last month.

MedWAR, which stands for Medical Wilderness Adventure Race, is an all-day competition. In teams of four, racers navigate through various physical activities and complete wilderness medical scenarios. The winning team is determined by race time and points accumulated during the scenarios. For the Tahoe Challenge, teams could also earn extra points for collecting trash and showing their respect for the sensitive ecosystem where the event occurred.

The race is designed for participants with or without a medical background. For the Tahoe Challenge, participants varied from military personnel from Travis Air Force Base to medical staff from Arizona.

"We had an amazing team from all different backgrounds and with different skill sets which made our team whole," says White. She says her team, who came from Reno and Carson Valley, drew from their experience in the outdoors as well as

their varied medical experience as emergency and trauma nurses, ski patrollers, and as a summer camp medic.

Team EPI, from South Tahoe and Reno, received first place for their fast finish of five and a half hours and how well they responded to the medical scenarios. The team was comprised of Jeff Meagher, a building contractor; T.J. Middlemis-Clark, a water engineer; Greg Koeck, a paramedic; and Jeff Koeck, a pharmacist.

This is the first MedWAR to take place in the Lake Tahoe area. After a running start from the sno-park off Highway 89 in South Lake Tahoe, teams kayaked on Fallen Leaf Lake, mountain biked up and down Tahoe Mountain, and trekked through public land in the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit.

Along the way, racers encountered volunteer "victims" depicting medical incidents. Victims acted out a drowning, hypothermia, an allergic reaction, and a climbing accident. Racers also encountered a mock bear mauling incident and a winter avalanche. Calling an ambulance was not an option and all teams were expected to assess, stabilize, improvise, and – when appropriate – treat the patients with the items they had available. Volunteer proctors and staff, mostly comprised physicians and staff from Barton Hospital, assessed how well each team responded.

"All scenarios resembled realistic events that could happen when you are in the backcountry and help is not immediately available," says Terry Orr of Barton Health's Tahoe Center for Orthopedics who, along with Steve Bannar and Khristy Gavigan organized the event. "It is our hope that racers and volunteers walk away with a new understanding for how to handle situations in the wilderness and how they can be more prepared."

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