

Last year's race winner Demarest drops out of Pancake race

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Special to the Leader & Times

It's a good news-bad news situation for 2013 Liberal Pancake Race winner Caitlin Demarest, who had planned to run again this year but has now dropped out of the race.

Demarest, assistant women's basketball coach at Seward County Community College/Area Technical School, saw her Lady Saints win handily, 90-36, over the Neosho County Panthers in the opening game of the Region VI Tournament Saturday. That's the good news.

The bad news is that due to travel time and practice needs for the team's next game, Demarest has withdrawn from the International Pancake Race. The Lady Saints will play Barton County in Wichita on Wednesday, and Demarest feared her coaching duties would prevent her from staying through to the end of all Pancake Day events on Tuesday, were she to win. The race winner each year attends the shriving service, followed by a live web chat with the Olney winner, and is then the guest of honor in the parade.

Does this development give Olney an edge to continue its two-year streak, or will one of Liberal's nine racers rise to the challenge and claim the International title for Liberal this year?

The 65th International Pancake Day Race between the women of Liberal, Kans., and Olney, England, at 11:55 a.m. Tuesday will answer that question.

Olney's Devon Byrne won the 2013 International title, besting Liberal winner Caitlin Demarest and setting a new record time. Byrne finished in 56 seconds flat to win over Demarest's time of 64.3 seconds.

Byrne broke the previous record of 57.5 set by Tasha Gallegos of Liberal in 2009. Last year marked Byrne's second win. If she wins this year, she will retire from the Pancake Race, according to the rules.

Finish times were a bit slower 65 years ago. The winner in the first match-up between Olney and Liberal in 1950 was Olney runner Florence Callow, who finished with a time of 1:10.4, beating Liberal's first winner Billie Warden's time of 1:18 by almost a full eight seconds.

Liberal's first International victory came in 1952, when Joan Zimmerman finished in the race in 1:08.

It was 1970 before a racer on either side broke the one-minute barrier. That year, Liberal's Kathleen West won the International title with a time of 59.1 seconds.

The overall race record now stands at 36 wins for Liberal and 27 wins for Olney. (In 1980 the score didn't count as a media truck blocked the finish line in Olney.)

The start of the International Race centered around a 1950 magazine photo of the Olney women racing. After seeing the photo, Liberal Jaycee President R.J. Leete contacted the Rev. Ronald Collins, Vicar of St. Peter and St. Paul's church in Olney, challenging their women to race against women of Liberal, and a tradition was born.

In Olney, the Pancake Race tradition dates back more than 500 years to 1445. A woman engrossed in using up cooking fats (forbidden during Lent) was making pancakes. Hearing the church bells ring calling everyone to the shriving service, she grabbed her head scarf (required in church) and ran to the church, skillet and pancake in hand and still apron-clad. In following

years, neighbors got into the act and it became a race to see who could reach the church first and collect a "Kiss of Peace" from the verger (bell-ringer.) The kiss is still the traditional prize in both races.

Racers must still wear a head scarf and apron as they run the 451-yard S-shaped course, and the runner must flip her pancake at the starting signal, and again after crossing the finish line, to prove she still has her pancake.

No matter which town wins the overall title, the race has grown into something much larger than a minute-long dash. The International Pancake Day Race between the two cities is the only event of its kind, garnering national and international publicity. Liberal and Olney residents enjoy the bonds they have formed with each other as a result of the race, and to grow up in Liberal means to grow up celebrating Pancake Day.

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