



LOOK! LIKE FIVE WOMEN!
AT A FLYFISHING EVENT!

The Flyathlon

Run, fish, drink: **What's not to like?** BY STEPHEN GRACE

LAST SUMMER, I was on the phone with my buddy, Joe, trying to get him to fill the final race slot in the inaugural Flyathlon, a competitive flyfishing and running event being held in Saguache, Colorado. Joe was worried he wouldn't do well. "The third event is *beer*," I said. "You'll be fine."

Initially, competitive flyfishing made about as much sense to me as meditating at a Metallica concert. But Andrew Todd, the fish biologist who dreamed up the event, has done so much to protect coldwater fisheries and native trout in Colorado, that I eventually ran out of excuses.

There is nothing exceptional about the Middle Creek fishery—no gold medal designation, no Wild and Scenic status. But it holds a lot of small brookies and browns, with some cutthroat near the top, above the barrier of a waterfall. Like many other small streams in Colorado, it spills through a place of stunning beauty that few anglers ever get to see.

The starting gun misfired, and then fired, and then something like the fog of war set in. The uber athletes sprinted ahead on the trail. The more sedate participants set out on a brisk walk. Most of us jogged along in a scrum and jostled for position. With rods in hand or strapped to our packs, and with race bibs with rulers printed on them, we dodged tree roots and boulders and splashed through a bog. We suffered our way up switchbacks, eyeing the riffles and pools of Middle Creek as we went. The Flyathlon, it turns out, is part endurance race, part chess match—and part beer, of course. But that comes later.

The first person across the finish line didn't win. The catch-

and-release of a native Rio Grande cutthroat trout earned the second-fastest finisher a larger time bonus, shaving off enough seconds for him to taste the sweet microbrew of victory. Around the campfire that evening, we all agreed that Middle Creek was one of the finest places in the state. Maybe it was the adrenaline of the event that made the seven-inch brookie I caught so memorable, but it was one of my favorite fish of the summer.

For me, fishing small streams has always been as much about finding solitude as about catching trout. But there is something to be said for finding a community of people who care about a resource as much as you do. While I drank a ridiculously good local brew, and swapped stories about past wilderness adventures, I decided that competition and flyfishing can get along just fine.

The course was designed both to create a challenge for experienced anglers and to maximize chances for newbies to catch fish. Some competitors stopped on their way to the finish line to coach those who were still fishless. Cutthroat don't lend themselves to cutthroat competition. The underlying current of the Flyathlon was respect for the fish that evolved in the cold waters of Colorado. The event raised \$6,600 for Colorado Trout Unlimited; most of the money will be spent on projects that benefit native trout.

It is true that 33 people descended on a small stream on a single Saturday morning. But most of those people stopped running just long enough to make a few casts, catch one trout, and release it. Then they were on their way, taking with them an appreciation for the Middle Creek fishery and leaving only prints from their running shoes in the streamside singletrack.

The Second Annual Flyathlon will take place August 15, 2015. For more info, go to flyathlon.com 🐾

TREVOR BROWN