

# Conquering 'THE WALL'

Students at the Academy for Academic Excellence practice for the L. A. Marathon

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The Los Angeles Marathon XXII isn't until March 4, but students at the Academy for Academic Excellence in Apple Valley have been training for the grueling race since September.

Last year, 12 students from AAE ran the marathon as members of the nonprofit program Students Run Los Angeles (SRLA).

This year's team consists of 27 students coached by 12 adults.

The student runners are:

- Sixth-grader: Haley Sutton
- Seventh-graders: Kaela Leabman, Jackie Medeiros, Hailey Unferdorfer, Zachary Woodruff
- Eighth-graders: Richard Flinchum, Heather Freed, Jessica Freed, Meagan Rankin
- Ninth-graders: Sara Bridges, Jacob Carr, Aidan Fahnestock, Adam Ingersoll, Brett Kobold, Marta Polovin, Matt Rankin, David Riddle, Paige Sutton, Kaitlin Unferdorfer, Alexis Vazquez, Andrew Woodruff
- 10th graders: Johnathan Campbell, Eric Leatham, Christian Sanchez
- 11th graders: Emily Reed, Chris Riddle, Heidi Torres

This will be the second L.A. marathon for Carr, Aidan Fahnestock, Leatham, Marta Polovin, Sanchez, Paige Sutton and Kaitlin Unferdorfer; the third for Brett Kobold and Vazquez; and the fourth for Campbell.

The adults running with them are Lydia Hudson (team leader), Karen Bridges, Zabelle Crosson, Pete Fahnestock,

Dan Freed, Rebecca Kobold, Jennifer Medeiros, Vesna Polovin, Tim Rankin, Nancy Reed, Linda Riddle and Colleen Williams.

Also running — but not as an official member of Students Run Los Angeles, since he only just turned 11 — is Crosson's son Kevin, a fifthgrader.

According to its mission statement, SRLA, which is supported entirely by donations from corporations and private individuals, was founded in the early 1990s in order to challenge "at-risk" secondary students in the Los Angeles Unified School District "to experience the benefits of goal-setting, character development, adult mentoring and improved health by providing them with a truly life-changing experience."

It appears to be working, for more than 97 percent of SRLA students finish the 26.2-mile race, and of the high-school seniors who complete the marathon more than 90 percent graduate from high school (compared with LAUSD's typical graduation rate of 65 percent).

AAE is one of only three participating schools that aren't within the LAUSD (Banning High School and Palm Desert Community School are the other two).

"Our students face a whole different ball game than students in the Los Angeles Unified School District," Hudson

said before practice on Feb. 15. "But teenagers are always at risk just because they are teenagers."

Hudson, who teaches eighth-grade English at AAE, said that being in SRLA gives her a chance to discuss

with students such issues as nutrition, dating, peer pressure, tobacco and drugs:

“This is an opportunity to spend more time with them and in a different setting. I’m not their mother, and I’m a fellow runner. Maybe they’ll listen to me.”

Zabelle Crosson said that SRLA “helps kids overcome perceived barriers,” one of which is The Wall, a notorious loss of energy and selfconfidence that strikes marathon runners, often around mile 20.

“The Wall is different for everybody. For me it is mile 13,” Kaitlin Unferdorfer said.

“We tell the students that because of their youth, they are far stronger physically than adults,” Hudson said. “But The Wall is a mental breakdown, and adults can encourage them through it.”

Jennifer Medeiros, who’s running in the marathon for the first time this year, said, “A lot of people say that if you can run 13 miles, the cheering of the crowds will carry you on for the other 13.”

The race course, which follows a new route this year, begins on Ventura Boulevard near Universal Studios and ends on Flower Street in downtown L.A.

“Physically, it’s harder on your lungs to run uphill, but it’s harder on your legs running downhill,” Medeiros said. On the day before the race, all SRLA runners will pick up packets that include their timing chip, a goodie bag, a T-shirt, and a bib with their name and number on it. “We’ll also wear black running shorts and tennis shoes supplied by Saucony,” Adam Ingersoll said. “A few elite runners run barefoot,” Jennifer Medeiros said. “And because the marathon takes place rain or shine, some people bring trash bags to wear as raincoats.” The AAE team will spend the previous night at the Marriott Hotel, near the finish line, and in the morning take the Metro to the starting line.

They’ll eat high-carb dinners the night before the race and bananas on the big day. “It’s the night before the night-before that it’s important to get a good night’s sleep,” Linda Riddle said. According to Zabelle Crosson, to make the start as smooth as possible, runners are assigned to corrals according to their estimated speeds. Elite runners finish the marathon in about two hours. Last year, Christian Sanchez of AAE finished in 3 hours and 48 minutes. “At first you move as a mob, shoulder-to shoulder,” Hudson said. “It’s worse than a bad day at Disneyland. “You may walk the whole course if you want: A finish is a finish.

“But kids must maintain a 16-minute-mile pace — the speed of a casual adult walk — or be accompanied by an adult. This is so no kid is left on the course after a certain time. And mile 22 goes through Skid Row.”

On Feb. 15, a Thursday, they would run 4 miles down Riverside Drive, but during weekend practices they run 10, 12 or even 15 miles.

Participants in SRLA are also expected to attend monthly community races involving all 2,200 students, including the 18-mile Friendship Run held Feb. 4 at Hansen Dam Park.

Even after the marathon, SRLA will host community runs in April and June.

Hudson has chaperoned AAE’s student runners for three years but has never attempted a marathon herself.

“I’ve never even run in my life!” she said. “But it’s not about winning. It’s fun and a way to see the sights in a different way.”

*Kevin Crosson makes his way down Riverside Drive in Apple Valley during a four mile training run as he prepares for the Los Angeles Marathon.*



*Kaitlin Unferdorfer and Sara Bridges make the final turn back towards the Lewis Center for Educational Research as they finish a training run in Apple Valley. More than 25 students from the Academy for Academic Excellence will be running in the Los Angeles Marathon.*





Eric Leatham leaves the Lewis Center for Educational Research in Apple Valley as he starts a four-mile training run for the Los Angeles Marathon.

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*Students at the Academy for Academic Excellence stretch as they prepare for a four-mile training run out of the Lewis Center for Educational Research. While the Los Angeles Marathon they are training for is considerably longer, most runners will only train half the distance they want to complete in the actual race.*

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