

Parkrun, a free 5K open to the public every Saturday, launches at UWF in February

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Above: Rec Plex North Parkrun organizer Robin Foley talks about the work underway to clear the cross country path at the University of West Florida in Pensacola on Tuesday, January 22, 2019. (Photo: Gregg Pachkowski/gregg@pnj.com)

Runners, joggers, walkers and even crawlers can soon participate in Parkrun, a free, weekly 5K that's open to the public starting Saturday, Feb. 9, on the recently revamped running trail at the University of West Florida.

Popularized in the United Kingdom in the early 2000s, Parkrun is a collection of 5K runs that now take place every Saturday at over 1,400 locations in 23 countries and five continents.

Parkrun races are relaxed and all-inclusive, embracing competitive and casual runners of all ages, walkers, dog walkers, the disabled and everyone in between.

Irish-born Pensacola resident Robin Foley got into Parkrun during his last few visits to Ireland. He had the idea to bring it to Pensacola, where the retired former accountant has lived with his family since 1989.

The issue he ran into while actualizing his idea in 2017 was finding a suitable location in Pensacola.

"Parkrun has conditions for its courses, and one of them is it can't cross a street because then you run into needing a police presence, and you run into costs to shut down roads," Foley said. "We have lots of parks in Pensacola, but unfortunately, they're all very small. To get any kind of distance you'd have to do maybe 10 laps of a park or more. And people don't like doing that."

Foley considered Osceola Golf Course and the Escambia County Equestrian Center as possible locations but decided both parks would be a little too busy on Saturday mornings to support the event.

Then, at a running store in Pensacola one day, a UWF student working the register told Foley he should contact Caleb Carmichael, the UWF men's and women's cross country coach.

Foley explained the concept to Carmichael, who loved the idea.

Carmichael said that about 10 years ago, the cross-country teams ran on the Baars-Firestone Wildlife Sanctuary trail, which was in great shape. He said in recent years it hasn't been as well maintained, so Carmichael and Foley put a plan in place to clean up the trail and hold Parkrun there.

"It was runnable as-is, but now, basically, we took it to the next level," Carmichael said.

A private contractor in charge of grounds work at UWF in recent years was not required to maintain the trail, according to Carmichael, but regular trail maintenance was included into a new contract in the past year, meaning a lot of overgrown shrubs have been lopped off, and piles of leaves have been blown aside ahead of Feb. 9.

Carmichael's interest in helping make Foley's idea a reality was two-fold: He was on board with Parkrun becoming a weekly community-building event, while also looking forward to installing a better, safer place for his cross-country clubs to practice.

"Part of UWF policy is to make sure it engages with the community and has it visit the campus," Foley said. "This is a way to bring the people to the campus. It was a marriage made in heaven, really, finding UWF."

[Rec Plex North Parkrun](#), as it is officially known to reflect its specific location on UWF's campus, is volunteer driven. To participate, just register online for free, at which time you get a barcode with your number on it. When you print the barcode out and come to the trail on

Saturday mornings, you are scanned at the start and scanned as you finish so your time is recorded.

"No frills, you're just competing against your own time," Foley said. "The whole design behind it is to get people moving a bit more. So, we take runners, walkers, crawlers, even. We guarantee that no one will finish last because one of our volunteers is to be the tail walker. So that person finishes last. And that takes some of the intimidation out of it."

Though Parkrun is free for all participants, startup funds did need to be raised, Carmichael said, including costs for signage and the software that records race times.

Carmichael said the school received a grant from the Pensacola Runner's Association that knocked out most of the costs needed to launch Parkrun, with the remaining funds raised thanks to "various small local groups."

Starting on Feb. 9, the Parkrun race begins at 7:30 a.m. every Saturday morning. The trail begins near the Rec Plex North Field on UWF's campus, a location searchable through Google Maps.

The socializing doesn't end when the stopwatches do, either, Foley said. There will be a post-run hangout at the UWF Starbucks, located close to the end of the trail.

All participants receive discounted tall coffees and refills. The discount for Parkrun runners will be a weekly deal, Foley said.

"The social aspect is important to Parkrun, as well as getting out and getting moving," Foley said.

In addition to co-directing the UWF Parkrun alongside Carmichael, Foley is a volunteer. He said the race will ideally have five or six volunteers help out on a weekly basis to take care of tasks like bar code scanning, giving directions to runners mid-race, manning the computer and photographing the runs.

Visit [the Rec Plex North Facebook page to learn more about becoming a volunteer](#). To register for races, visit the [Parkrun national website at Parkrun.US/Register](#).

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