

Black, Strickland win third straight men's titles in Labor Day road race

By Jennifer Wielgus
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Perfect barbecue weather? Not exactly.

But Monday morning's light drizzle-turned-steady rain did make for a pretty comfortable Labor Day Road Race.

"I loved it," said Marietta's Michael Strickland of the wet conditions. "It was overcast and drizzling, but it made it cooler. (Heat) was a lot worse last year."

Neither temperature nor precipitation seem to effect Strickland's running, though. The 34-year-old elementary school teacher captured his third consecutive trophy in the men's 5K race on Monday, turning in a near-personal best time of 15

DIVISION WINNERS

- **Men's 10K:** Alan Black, 30:55.
- **Men's 5K:** Michael Strickland, 15:06.
- **Women's 10K:** Michelle LaFleur, 35:15.
- **Women's 5K:** Amy Smith Boyer, 18:29.

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minutes, six seconds for the 3.1-miles. The 1,200-plus entrants made it the largest 5K-field in race history.

Strickland, a member of the Atlanta Track Club, was one of two men to celebrate a three-peat as Macon's holiday race celebrated its 25th Anniversary. Two women became first-time winners.

Alan Black, an Eatonton native and a crowd favorite, set a new personal record of 30:55 and won the men's 10K for the third consecutive year. The 27-year-old Georgia Power employee crossed the finish line at Central City Park to the sound of spectators shouting his name intermittently, with a smile on his face and his body upright, breathing normally.

"If I had any competition, I would've run better," said Black, who plans to run his first marathon in a few weeks.

Like Black, Forsyth's Amy Smith Boyer is a veteran of Macon's holiday race. She just isn't used to standing out in the mass of runners.

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RACE

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But the 29-year-old attorney and two-time marathon competitor saw how far her off-season track training had taken her on Monday. She handily won the women's 5K with a time of 18:29.

"I've run this race seven or eight times, and I've never won," Smith Boyer said. "I was very surprised (to win)."

Allison Rogers, a sophomore at Stratford, came in just behind Smith Boyer in the 5K. The petite 15-year-old — the youngest runner to place in either race — locked her eyes, literally, on No. 1 and pushed herself.

"Someone ahead of me yelled, 'First girl!' and pointed at (Smith Boyer)," said Rogers, who ran in the race to gauge her readiness for the upcoming cross country season. "And I was like, 'O.K., I'll just try

and keep her in sight.'"

New York native Michelle LaFleur, who moved to Savannah last year to train for the Olympic Trials and competes in races all along the East Coast, ran in her first Labor Day Road Race Monday and came away with the women's 10K crown (35:15).

LaFleur, a health educator who prescribes exercise programs for a living, passed up the chance to run in a 20K in Connecticut to come to Macon.

"I wanted to do something quick this weekend," she explained.

So did Strickland. He used to compete in Macon's 10K and even won that race in 1995, but lately he's felt in better shape to tackle the shorter route.

For the past few years on the weekend before Labor Day, Strickland has run in a grueling mountain relay race on the West Coast that covers 195 miles between 12 men.

His legs get "pretty beaten

up" out there. But he still keeps coming down to Macon for the holiday, and doesn't plan to stop.

"For Labor Day, there aren't a lot of races in Georgia," he said. "There's one in Atlanta, but that one doesn't really appeal to me. It's like they're trying too hard to be something they're not. This one has the tradition."

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