

Hundreds of bikers to flock to Walhalla for race Saturday

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THE JOURNAL

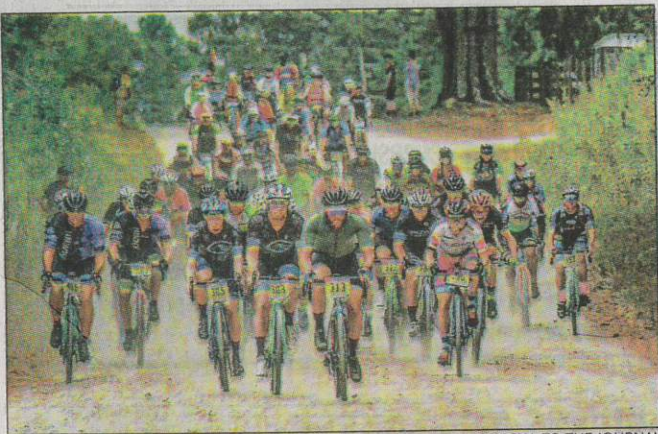
dreds of bikers from around the country will come to experience them in Southeast Gravel's Race to Valhalla.

The Race to Valhalla, the fourth stop on a six-

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WALHALLA — Oconee County is home to some of South Carolina's most majestic mountains and natural sights.

This Saturday, hun-



SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Racers take off at the start of Southeast Gravel's Greenwood Gravel and Grinder in Greenwood.

part series of unique and challenging cycling events in the Southeast, begins in Walhalla and will take riders throughout northern Oconee County and parts of northeast Georgia before finishing back in Walhalla.

The race's origins trace to Southeast Gravel cofounders Ben Renkema and Boyd Johnson coming to the area on the suggestion of Jim Phillips of Mountain Rest.

"We wanted to find some unexplored routes when Jim told us to come out to Walhalla," Renkema said. "We loved it here — it's a great town."

Renkema explained gravel cycling is a relatively new discipline that has grown in popularity,

with some cyclists feeling safer on less-traveled gravel roads. With the scenic roads of northern Oconee County, the team at Southern Gravel said it's a perfect place for a race.

"It means a lot to us," Visit Oconee SC president and CEO Ken Sloan said. "We've been trying to get this group out here for a long time."

The race, which gets its name from Valhalla, a term for the Nordic afterlife after which Walhalla is named, has two different paths, including a 69-mile long course. The long trail will take riders past the Chattooga River multiple times and into the heart of Oconee County before descending Rich Mountain Road and ending with a fast 6-mile

stretch, according to Southeast Gravel.

Those not willing to go on the long run can ride the shorter 45-mile course, which has the same start and climb as the long course, but turns off instead of heading into Georgia before reaching the same finish.

"Two distances both start right in the quaint downtown of Walhalla," the event organizers said. "(Riders will) be greeted with flat to rolling terrain before hitting the first

of many dirt sections, including some long, challenging climbs that bring you up the escarpment in the Upstate of South Carolina."

The start/finish line for the race is located at James M. Brown Elementary School, and riders will be provided with free food and beer after finishing the race.

Registration for this year's Race to Valhalla will be open until 6 p.m. Friday.

The race is set to be an annual event in Oconee County, and Sloan said he hopes it can make the county an established cycling destination after other races in the series have had similar impacts in Clinton and Greenwood.

Sloan and Renkema both mentioned there are plans in place for the race to begin on Main Street in Walhalla next year.

"We don't see any reason not to keep holding races here," Renkema said. "We are working to

have it downtown with all kinds of food vendors. We're hoping it can be a huge event."

"We have high expectations for next year," Sloan

added. "We're hoping to see 400-500 riders racing down Main Street in Walhalla."

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