

MY FAVORITE TRAIL (RACE, TOO)

BY PHILLIP GARY SMITH™

Remember the song by ‘Three Dog Night’ (think bearded ‘Back Street Boys’ with 70’s attitudes) where they harmonize:

‘One is the loneliest number that you’ll ever do;

One is the loneliest number that you’ll ever know’

I would now argue that ‘First’ is the loneliest ‘number’ because it can only happen, well, . . . once.

That’s why my favorite trail race is my ‘First’ Ultra – The Superior Trail 50 Mile. The run, in conjunction with a marathon and a 100 mile ultra, is in Northern Minnesota and encompasses trails in and around mountains that separately make up the Superior National Forest and other state and county forests, along with some private land crossed with cooperative landowners.

Superior Trail Runs have both a Spring and Fall version. The earlier one has a 25k and a 50k trail both starting and ending at the Caribou Resort, Lutsen, Minnesota, which, during the winter, acts as the state’s version of the Rocky Mountain ski areas. The 50k starts during breakfast with the 25k following in a couple of hours. Since both use the same out-and-back track, there are plenty of people passing in both directions. With 100’s of rivers running rapidly (love those ‘R’s), feeding Lake Superior, largest of the inland freshwater oceans, there tends to be plenty of wet paths and slosh at that time of the year.

The Superior Hiking Trail Association is the organization which spearheaded the effort to build the Superior Hiking Trail. Currently the rugged way exceeds 240 miles in length and is growing, essentially traveling North and South on the West side of Lake Superior. So running up and down these mountains, you regularly come across rivers feeding Lake Superior with names like ‘Temperance,’ ‘Caribou’ and ‘Poplar’ along with the ever-favorite ‘Gooseberry Falls.’ If I ever owned a brewery, I think I could name all of my brands after these waterways.

The Superior Trail Races in September have a marathon where you are bussed down Highway #61, the paved auto trail that separates the lake and the mountains, the distance to complete a run back to Caribou Resort. The 100 Milers started at 8:00AM the day before at Gooseberry Falls State Park, further South on Bob Dylan’s Highway #61, and meander on the trail until they, too, finish at Caribou.

The 50 mile Ultra starts at the Resort and runs to where the marathoners ‘start,’ turning for the trip back (there’s a loop the marathon runners complete so their distance equals 26.2). There are a lot of runners on the challenging trail to keep one’s interest, the aid stations are staffed by people who epitomize the phrase ‘Minnesota Nice,’ and the management of these events is comprised of the region’s top race directors assisting Larry & Colleen Pederson, who must have decided they weren’t aging rapidly enough when they agreed to become the Race Directors.

I’m very proud that I finished the 50 miler. The way the trip on the trail occurred, the many experiences I had, and the people I ‘met’ (I didn’t know many of the names until after the event) had a profound effect on me. Still does.

Briefly, here are a few more:

1. Everyone involved has a ‘finish’ ethic – they want you to complete the course if you are able and, even though these are rugged paths, will work with you and encourage you to do so.
2. These forests and Lake Superior are immortalized in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s 1855 ‘Song of Hiawatha.’ You literally feel, as you make way, his writings:
“Dark behind it rose the forest/ Rose the dark and gloomy pine-trees/ Rose the firs with cones upon them/ Bright before it beat the water/ Beat the clear and sunny water/ Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water.”
Maybe you remember his verse “By the shores of Gitche Gumee?” That’s it, that’s Lake Superior. You’re traveling right along the water much of the time and views, like at Britton Peak, can really lift a depleted runner’s spirit.
3. There is enough time allocated to finish so the elite can have their day but those of us who don’t fall into that bracket can attempt a challenge that stacks up with just about any.
4. One cannot get their experiences in these mountains out of their head. Although I’m training for the 100 Mile Superior Ultra this Fall and its many unique challenges, the 50 miler will always reside as the first, the ‘One.’
5. Oh, and lest I forget, when you are in any of these events you will have an opportunity to run by Maynard. Everybody needs a Maynard in their life to cheer them on and for these events, all of them, Maynard is there to do that just for you. I wrote of him and many other experiences and visions on these trails in my book “Ultra Superior,” which is the first book ever written about the Superior Ultras. Since the trail gave me the ‘story,’ all royalties from the sales go to the Superior Hiking Trail Association as a donation for improving and building trail. Go to www.ultrasuperior.com for links to the Superior Trail Runs, The Superior Hiking Trail Association and information on the book.

Be sure to schedule an ultra superior experience at the Superior Ultra Trail Runs, and certainly, “Have an Ultra Superior Day.”