

MY FRIEND OF MISERY AND HOTTIES SINGE AFTON ULTRA

By Phillip Gary Smith™

On this auspicious date 7/7/7, Eve Rembleski could be at the Casino and pull three 7s on the slots as this was certainly her lucky day. With the performer Prince making a big splash today in the Twin Cities, Eve would be the Princess of trails, burning a new record.

The Afton Ultra is known for its attractive female runners and aid station workers. But on this, the steamiest day of the year, everybody was a hottie as temperatures soared to 100 degrees Fahrenheit with most of the 50 km competitors getting to ‘enjoy’ several hours of this particular challenge. We could have used some *Purple Rain*

Nothing seemed to bother Eve while breaking her existing record on this urban mountainous trail at the beautiful Afton State Park, Minnesota, finishing fifth overall, and just missing a negative split on the second of the two 25 km loops (first loop was approximately a 2:07). She took to heart the challenge placed by national ultra runner, Allan Holtz, that it would be unlikely (and he was correct) to see a quicker second lap on this ‘getting hotter’ day. The time, 4:18:22, beat her 2006 ‘normal weather’ record run by nearly four minutes. Ann Heaslett took second (again), winning her age group (again) and for the second year in a row finished 13th overall.

Patrick Russell broke four hours winning first overall at 3:59:43 even with a five minute wrong turn. Being particularly notable as posted results since 1994 reflect this is only the 11th time that milestone has been broken and, at least in recent history, the only time bank thermometers were registering triple digits. Who authorized this course, located on the eastern edge of the Twin Cities by the shore of the River St. Croix (pronounced 'kroy') to imitate Western States 100 heat?

Up from the capital of the World of Outlaws dirt track racing, Knoxville, Iowa, Joe Winch clinched the Senior Masters course record with a 4:47:32. He improved his 2006 time by ten minutes and "moved up a notch in the charts," as Kasey Kasem would say, to finish ninth this year. Just ahead was last year's winner, Duke Rembleski, who slowed this year with a hip challenge but like a true gamer, and a model to remember, gutted out a great eighth place finish; not what he wanted, but he completed the distance anyway.

Andy Holak won second overall with a 4:13 picking up 25 minutes over his last race here in 2005. Matt Howard was 90 seconds later for third.

The only way the bulk of the field made it to the finish line was to make an ally of the heat, or as Metallica would sing, *My Friend Of Misery*. Runners would squeeze to the edge of the trail providing a hint of cover and find themselves weaving from side to side to stay in shade as meadows meander in this part of the course known as the 'Africa Loop' (so named as the overall layout of that section resembles the shape of the continent).

The major climbs after the third aid stop include 'Mile Hill,' a dirt road that seemingly never ends; 'Scott's Revenge,' named after popular 'no whining allowed' Afton race director, Scott Wagner, this triple-pump hill leads to the campground road that sizzles with no cover; 'Meat Grinder,' a nasty surprise after a comfortable jaunt along the banks of the St. Croix River; and the finishing climb 'Meat Grinder II,' punishing the happiness right out of one, causing regret over ever having enjoyed that wonderfully long downhill start.

Most of the time runners look forward to the tree covered 'Snowshoe Loop,' as it is generally cool, completing the final 3 miles of the course. With some of the canopy lost to a Box Elder Tree program and the unrelenting heat at the end of the race, it was difficult to believe snow ever could accumulate here, though today it would have been a welcome relief.

The aid stations provided a summery version of cold, though, by having plenty of ice all day and all the way to the bitter end which for some ultra runners were nine hours of effort. It helped repeating a mantra to remind one's self that short of an injury, quitting, in the long term, would hurt more than continuing at the moment. Whether it was 'You can do this,' 'I'll feel better at the finish,' or my personal favorite, *Nothing Else Matters* (thanks again, Metallica) which means clear everything out of the head except making it to the finish line -- that's all that is important, today nothing else matters. Somehow their song titles matched the conditions of the day; perhaps because, for some, trail shoes wore like heavy metal boots.

With humidity the heat at times became stifling, particularly if you were privileged to be making a full day of it. Running along the river a cigarette boat happened by with all of its noise and circumstance. But rather than thinking 'how wasteful,' all that came to mind . . . they were enjoying the cool river air, cold water, and chilly beverages while sweat flowed down every available crevice on the runner's body. Until the finish those guys seemingly were the smarter ones. After the finish, with electrolytes falling back into balance and wearing a nice ice bag like a goon hat, one could climb back on the ultra high horse and think, 'Those cigarette boats – they'd give an aspirin a headache,' paraphrasing one of the great lines out of the movie *Layer Cake*.

The spirit of cooperation is paramount in these upper Midwest trail ultras as race directors and ultra runners from all over the region descended on Afton to volunteer and make it operate so smoothly and safely, given the conditions. These are high octane athletes who know ultra racers and how it feels to do one of these.

The aforementioned Allan Holtz commandeered aid station one and two; manning three and four included the team of Mike Perbix / Gretchen Haas, race directors of the Spring Superior Ultra Trail Race (run at a cool 45 degrees just a month and a half ago), and Wynn Davis with his new April Chippewa Moraine Ultra; At the last station were ultra runners Alicia Gordon, and on potato and orange slice detail, Jeffrey Swainhart; Plus many other volunteers, notables, and medical personnel.

The loops finish featured Donald Clark (Chief of Trails at many events and the original designer of this layout); Bohdan Stepchuk whose recent wilderness-EMT training was tested today; O. C Williams, RD of the Trail Mix Ultra; E. Fischer-Drew, a F.A.N.S. fan and accomplished ultra runner; Rick Lindquist, retired RD of the Superior Trail Races but can't get it out of his blood; and 'Dean of Trails,' Larry Pederson, of the Superior Fall 50 mile and 100 mile ultras.

I mimicked Larry as I finished saying, "Yes, you finished, and you would only have 69 more miles to go for the 100," as he likes to remind me at these 50 km performances. I couldn't go another 69 steps at that moment.

Larry then stated a truism worth remembering: "It's funny how when finishing, whether it's a ten mile or a 50 mile or a 100 mile race, you're worn out at the end. You train and prepare mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually for the time and distance of that particular event and when you're done, you're all used up no matter what its length," sounding like the ultra world's version of the goal coach, Anthony Robbins.

The annual Afton 50 km Trail Run (and its 25 km mate) has popularized this mountainous loop resulting in record turnouts for both events this year. Even with the challenges, the race had its largest finish ever with a surprising low drop/injury rate. The terrain resembles the tough events held at the Superior Trail Races and other ultra venues; but Afton is nearby, not hours away. Almost any weekend hour, day or night, there are likely to be ultra runners practicing somewhere on the course.

This is good not only for the athlete but also for Afton State Park. Besides increasing the park's usage factor, trail runners tend to be quiet, chugging gel packs versus six packs, making a minimum impact, enjoying the experience of the woods. Nothing is wrong, either, with the traditional post race river swim. Just maybe all got lucky and pulled 7/7/7 on the slots of life today, having a princely good time on trails in America.

PHILLIP GARY SMITH™ AUTHORED 'ULTRA SUPERIOR,' THE FIRST BOOK ABOUT THE SUPERIOR TRAIL RACES. PROCEEDS BENEFIT THE SUPERIOR HIKING TRAIL ASSOCIATION.