

‘PLANKS IN CLOUDS’ RULE RUGGED SUPERIOR ULTRA

by Phillip Gary Smith TM

The parched woods of the Superior National Forest in Northern Minnesota officially began the end of its drought at 1:17 a.m. on Saturday morning, May 19. For weeks a 125 square mile fire (tagged the Ham Lake Fire) had raged further North, potentially threatening this race before spilling into Canada and finally being tamed by the brave efforts of very courageous fire fighters.

It happens that May 19 corresponds exactly with the Superior Trail Spring Races 7:00 a.m. 50 km start.

When the ‘ding ding ding’ of the hard rain striking the metal gutters outside my room served as a too early alarm clock, with its friends thunder and lightning joining the chorus, I got up to close the windows. The nice mountain breeze had turned to a big blow at the event’s host hotel, the Caribou Highlands Resort, Lutsen, Minnesota.

In the runner’s meeting Friday night, standing outside in the mountains with an 83 degree temperature, someone asked Chief of Course, Donnie Clark, about the forecast of rain. His reply is how one can take any weather forecast in this region, “Well, you know, it’s Superior.” Meaning, with Superior National Forest mountains adjoining the largest inland fresh water ocean in the world, Lake Superior, the only constant is going to be change. By the end of the race, at 3:00 p.m., temperatures were 38 degrees. Minnesota had warmer afternoons in January.

Newlyweds-to-be Gretchen Haas and Mike Perbix are the new race directors this year after training with now-retired race directors, but ever busy business people, Linda and Rick Lindquist who still worked at their 'old' event. Managing an event such as this must be a good test for marriage. Something like the lessons of wallpapering a room together: if you can do that as a couple and not drive each other batty, you're destined to a long and happy union.

Rain continued, but with diminished intensity, for about an hour into the run, time for the leaders to hit the first aid station at Oberg Mountain. Aid station volunteers this year were supplemented by a group of 20 high school members of the cross country ski team (and some parents) from Two Harbors, Minnesota, the home of the Superior Hiking Trail Association (S.H.T.A.) which builds and maintains these trails. These young women livened up the aid station with a big radio and popular music along with plenty of enthusiasm. The check-in official called the runners, sloshing past her tent, "Hon," enduring herself forever to the muddy, wet-haired group.

Another six miles through Leveaux Mountain, Angela's Mountain and Britton Peak to the Sawtooth aid station and a swarming group of workers, making one feel as if checking into the Ritz.

Finally, two more miles up the rocky, boulder laden single track to Carlton Peak, making the turnaround, a high-five with the young man officiating the site, and do it all again in reverse.

If runners on the Superior Trails are any indication, the world would be a better place if everyone ran trails. In fact maybe it should be a requirement to complete a trail event before ever issuing a drivers license to someone to drive on highways because runners on these trails are extremely courteous and nice, a trait which should carry over to screaming and honking drivers. For example, as the leaders passed me going 'in' while I was still going 'out,' each took the time to say 'good work,' 'good job,' or something to that effect. And they're leading the event, talking to a plugger like me.

Many other runners did the same, by the way. It is an individual competition and certainly people want to win and finish well, but there is this feeling on the trail that you want others to do well, too. Maybe 'Minnesota Nice' has been rediscovered in the woods.

Of the 31 miles this course covers in the out-and-back format, perhaps one mile consists of roads to and from the trail. It seems 10% of the course is covered in single track wooden planks covering wet marsh and creeks, "like a bridge over troubled waters," as Simon and Garfunkel would sing, and roaring rivers, with names like 'Onion' and 'Poplar.' With the rain, racers had to be careful with their step, these things get slick. Injury wise there were a few bumps and bruises from falls, nothing serious.

The rain started again in earnest about four hours into the race giving elite finishers a free shower as they crossed the finish line. The remainder of us managed to find more mud. Donnie Clark had said "The trail shouldn't be too muddy if you're one of the first 50 through it." Problem is, there's a 25 km companion race starting two hours after the ultra runners have left. That group, numbering 135 or so, on the same out-and-back course but turning around at the Oberg aid station, managed to make Moose Mountain and Mystery Mountain even mushier.

Moose Mountain on the inbound is a nasty ascent anyway, starting just as one crosses (J.K.?) Rollins Creek. It continues to slope upward and steeper until the runner is taking the built-in steps to finish the Led Zeppelin "Stairway to Heaven" climb.

An idea for a S.H.T.A. fund raiser is this: since the Western States 100 has a boat ride across a river in their event, why not move one of those unused ski gondolas to Moose Mountain to get the runners back to the top? I bet the fee could be steep, too, particularly on the 100 mile race, as Larry Pederson remarked to me at the finish line, "Imagine climbing Moose and Mystery after 95 miles."

Each of the mountains was covered in clouds this year so one often had the unique, surreal sensation of running on wet wood in the forest while being in a misty state. For a while, at least, one tended to forget about the challenges at hand and just glided along the planks in the clouds.

Crossing the roaring Poplar River, enjoying its power and sound, leaving the trail and beginning the last half mile of gravel and paved road to the finish line, curving behind the resort, around the pool, one can reflect on the achievement of the day – completing this rugged trail on a rainy, weather driven day. As Alicia Gordon remarked afterward, “Because we’re trail runners, that’s what we do.”

One runner was overheard to say, “That was the hardest course I’ve ever run.” Gretchen and Mike noted even with the rain, the trail was fast and “many set personal records. It was a cold day for volunteers, but the 45 degree weather was perfect for the runners.”

There are events that are pretty uptight about themselves, with their finisher medals, what constitutes finishing and so forth. Both the spring and fall ultras on the Superior Trail (covering 50 km, 50 mile, and 100 mile distances) carry the attitude that, as Donnie Clark said to me last year in the 50 mile event, “We want you to finish.” That’s their mindset here, whether it is Gretchen and Mike’s event or Larry Pederson’s Superior Trail 50 mile and Superior Sawtooth 100 mile race. So you finish over the clock, you get counted as a finisher and receive a finisher’s medallion. These events are run for the benefit of the ultra runner.

The warmth and camaraderie of the reception room after the race, with chili, chicken soup, breads by Great Harvest Bread Company and ‘special’ beverages supplied by Surly Brewing Company, continued that race attitude with the runners.

A course record for female runners was set by the ever-fast Eve Rembleski who holds that honor for the Afton Trail 50 km, the Trail Mix 50 km, and now the Superior Trail 50 km. Eve finished the run in 4:32:05, knocking 28 minutes off the previous record, and led second place winner, Cheryl Goldberg by a comfortable margin. Shari Olson, third place, trailed Cheryl by only four seconds at the finish.

Men's winner, Shawn Callahan, is a triathlete who has caught ultra trail running fever and took this event in only his second ultra effort in 4:01:01. Shawn passed mid-race leader, and second place finisher, Tall Dan Horihan, to win the battle of these mid-30 year old runners. In the latter stage of the race, Steve Schuder passed and then hung on to nip Duke Rembleski for third place by only six seconds.

Fitting in with the newlywed fever, Shawn's fiancé helped out at the finish line. Maybe that's why there are so few spectators at the finish of many ultra events . . . everyone who shows up is put to work.

*Phillip Gary Smith™ authored the first book on the Superior Races titled "Ultra Superior." www.ultrasuperior.com
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