

50 Mile National Champion Calls Mountainback “Relentless”; Record 58 Relay Teams Take to Rothrock Forest Roads

On Saturday, October 2, 2004, the 5th annual Tussey Mountainback 50 Mile Relay and Ultramarathon hosted a record number of ultramarathoners and relay teams and witnessed the unceremonious felling of several course records. Ultramarathoners from around the country and Canada turned out at Tussey Mountain Ski Area near Boalsburg, PA for the 2004 USA 50 Mile Road National Championships. The Mountainback was tapped by USA Track & Field to host the national competition. The single-loop course's 11 transition zones through Central Pennsylvania's scenic Rothrock State Forest double as handoff points for the relay and aid stations for the ultramarathon.

Ultra Bliss

An early morning breeze knocked temperatures into the fifties as the ultra event started at 7 a.m. Twenty-four men and nine women completed the ultramarathon. Colorado's Chad Ricklefs powered to victory in the men's open division in a blazing 5:53:37, calling the course “relentless.”

“I thought it was a great course, very challenging, very indicative of what a national championship should be,” said Ricklefs. “The second half is tough. Starting at about mile 37 – 37 to 45 is about the toughest part of the course. When I went through the first 25 in 2:40, that's a 5:20 pace, I was like, wow, this could be a really, really good run, but as you see I slowed down the second half, and the course was a big part of that.”

Credit the stunning scenery, perhaps - Ricklefs even scored a PR by seven minutes as he peeled an impressive 90 minutes from the previous course record set by Steve Thorne in 2002, which still stands as the fastest master's time.

“It's ideal for national championships,” Ricklefs said of the course. “The World 100K championships in Japan next year are on very similar type conditions, very hilly. This is a good test. Comrades, in South Africa, is like this as well. Those are on my plate for next June, so this was a great test to see where I am.”

In his first effort at the distance, Downingtown, PA's Andrew McDowell motored to second place in 6:43:06.

In the men's masters division Lou D'Angelo of Allison Park, PA held off challenger Mike Price of Landisburg, PA for first place by just 45 seconds.

The women's open ultramarathon was a back-and-forth battle. Course record holder and two-time winner Morgan Windram, of nearby Boalsburg, took the early lead, with Ontario's Jenn Dick and New Jersey's Jody-Lynn Reicher in close pursuit. After the course took a steep uphill climb, Dick led the women's division with Windram on her heels. At about mile 8, Reicher took over with Windram behind her and Dick in third. By mile 12, Laura Nelson of Virginia had

Reicher in her sights and put the pedal to the metal. Nelson passed Reicher at mile 13 and continued to pull away from the other front runners. The battle for 2nd and 3rd would continue to the 49th mile. Windram pursued then appeared to drop back by mile 22. Near mile 25, Windram had to call it a day, and Dick was now in 2nd with Laurel Valley of Maine in tow. By mile 26, Dick led Valley by 15 seconds with Reicher just 45 seconds back. By mile 32, 2nd and 3rd position changed again. Reicher caught up to Valley by mile 29 and then to Dick near mile 32. Nelson, by this point, was approximately 20 minutes ahead, and went on to win the women's open championship in a course record 7:06:20.

“This is a very, very hilly road course,” said Nelson moments after finishing. “It's the hardest road course I've run for a championship so far. I enjoyed the hills in the beginning, but in the second half I got tired.”

In the women's open contest for second place, for the next 16 miles Dick pursued Reicher, finally edging her out for second.

The women's masters division was won in record time by Susan Weightman, of Greensburg, PA, in 8:42:45. Also noteworthy among the master's women was Patricia Klaus, of Cincinnati, in her unparalleled fourth consecutive solo Mountainback.

Relay Results

The relay teams took to the course in waves at 8 and 9 a.m. For the relay, teams of 2-8 runners select a rotation order that they then follow and repeat over the course's 12 segments. Because the segments vary considerably in length and level of difficulty, strategy and planning play a key role.

In the overall relay results, the men's foursome of Quadraphenia took first place in 5:14:36, fast but more than 20 minutes slower than the course record set in 2002 by a foursome that included members of this team. “We ran hard,” said Sean Ion, seen pedaling these roads on two wheels the very next day. Second overall and just six minutes back were the Burninators, a men's team of five, and the men's sextet PHLB Worrrrrd took third.

In division results by team size, supra (2-person) teams War Lizards and AR.CO.ZA took the respective men's and mixed titles.

Despite a modest supra turnout this year, smaller teams are clearly catching on at this event. In the tri/quad division, which featured an unprecedented 12 teams, Quadraphenia won the men's contest with a comfortable margin over the Rothrock Warriors. Rose between Two Thorns took the mixed open title, and Wonder Women earned the women's title just 6 minutes shy of the women's tri/quad record.

In the standard division, where a record 21 teams toed the line, Mom-Strong - a team of unfettered road mothers - stole the headlines, shattering the previous women's record by more than 16 minutes. The men's title went to the Burninators, and the mixed open victory belonged to the J.V. Striding Ridge Runners. The men's student category went to Springfield Stampede,

the mixed student title to PSU Seniors, and the men's organization victory belonged to Raging Storm, less than a minute short of setting a course record. The mixed organization win went to JB's Harriers, just four minutes shy of the mark they had set two years ago. In this inaugural year for master's teams, The Old Fartleks wasted no time laying down a respectable time, turning the course around in just under six hours.

Twenty-three teams loaded the mega division contest. The overall victory went to Runnin' On Empty, a mixed master's team, stamping a hot master's record of 5:34:05 and exemplifying the two-fisted power of gender mixing and experience. This time was less than five minutes off the mixed open course record. The men's open title went to the Amazing Kush-Berrys, aptly reflecting in name the dead-heat status of the two presidential candidates in the run up to election day. Hayden Runners, in their third trip out from Columbus, Ohio, shaved more than 5 minutes off their fastest previous mark.

A women's open record was certain as the Creamery Ice Team scooped this virgin category. It was high time to see an all-women's team in the mega division. Top honors in the mixed open category went to the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, who nevertheless came off as quite nice folks in person. The mixed student title went to Penn State Navy ROTC, who nicked 3 seconds off their own mark from last year. The first men's student team was Navy ROTC, and the first women's student team was Paws of Pride. The mixed organization contest was won by Megahurts, whose shared pain put them about 8 minutes under the team's 2002 mark.

The Lure of the Mountainback

Last September, Rebecca Jacobs had no plans to run in a 50 mile relay. The Altoona native and several friends run together for recreation, but one day things took an exciting turn. Jacobs' friend, Hully Hoover, of Hollidaysburg, had received a phone call from someone asking if she'd join a relay team to run in the Mountainback, an event that was just a few weeks away. When the running friends started talking, a different idea surfaced. "Why don't we form our own team?" Jacobs remembers.

Soon Jacobs, Hoover, Debra Solomon, Rebecca Herman and one male runner, Richard Parker, had formed a team called "4 Girls and a Guy" and submitted their team entry the day before the deadline. Jacobs and her teammates had been running for 5 years or more, Jacobs having started the most recently. "We tried to divide up the legs of the course to best match each person on the team," she said. "I like running hills, so I had one section with a huge hill."

"We had fun," she recalls. "We didn't know what to expect. There were teams with clever names, and with their names decorated on their team vans. We'd do it again." Jacobs said she's sure the team got in a good workout at the relay. "We were all sore the next day."

Sponsors of the 2004 Mountainback 50 include the Central Pennsylvania Convention and Visitors Bureau at the platinum level; Centre Medical and Surgical Associates at the gold level; silver sponsors Aikey's Tree Service, Anthony G. De Boef, Nittany Powerizer, PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Rapid Transit Sports, The Sign Stop and Tussey Mountain Ski and Family Fun Center; and bronze sponsors Appalachian Outdoors, The

Autoport, B&E Cycles, CCDA Waters, McClarren Financial Advisors, Nittany Mountain Trail Rides, Nittany Valley Running Club and Runner's World.

Proceeds from the 2004 event support the programs and services of the Centre Hall Area Branch Library in nearby Centre Hall, PA.

The 6th Tussey Mountainback 50 Mile Relay and Ultramarathon will be held on Saturday, October 15, 2005. For more information visit the race site at www.tusseymountainback.com.