

Clifton Wins Superior Trail 100 in Superb Time

After reading about last year's inaugural running of the Superior 100, four of us flew out together to try the 1992 edition. The weather was dry and cool, in the 50s and 60s. Earlier rains, however, left many muddy patches to negotiate.

At the pre-run dinner, Race Director Harry Sloan's briefing was a model of brevity. The next morning, after an early pancake breakfast, we gathered in Silver Bay for a chilly 5:00 a.m. start. In less than a mile we were on the Superior Hiking Trail, which comprised more than 85 percent of the course.

The first half was more runnable than I had expected. My friends and I, though separated, cruised comfortably at sub-24-hour paces. The soft surface soaked up much of the earlier rain and carried us around some spectacular vistas blazing with orange, red, and gold autumn colors. At about 48 miles came a stand of birch trees, their white shafts densely packed between a light canopy of leaves overhead and a lush, green ground cover. Breathtaking — like a fairy tale.

The second half was a different story. The trail got tougher, muddier, and harder to see in the dark. Our paces dropped dramatically, and I could do little more than walk it in. Though I usually run conservatively, on this course you can make a case for spending a bit more early and getting in as much running as possible before dark. The trail was so well marked that I found it difficult to maintain my streak of getting lost on every 100-mile course I've run.

The field of 53 starters had many strong runners, and the clear favorite was Eric Clifton. He lived up to his billing, charging to the front from the start and leading wire to wire, shattering the course record by nearly six hours. It was a superb performance. After the run, Eric said he's been training by running 20 miles a day (in one to four workouts), with part of that distance each day at full effort. He earned his win.

The good conditions and strong field produced many excellent times. Dave Drach charged from the start and held a firm second place the entire run. The next eight finishers exchanged places several times during the run. Last year only one of the 47 starters was sub-24. This year on the same course ten people earned 24-hour buckles, including two Washington friends who were running their first 100-mile races. Susan Gimbel successfully defended her women's title and lowered her course record.

Don't let the fast times fool you. This is a tough course. It is about equivalent to (though very different from) Angeles Crest. Harry Sloan said that next year the course will be changed so that an easy seven-mile

road section is replaced with trail. He may also change the silver buckle to a 25-hour limit to reflect the increase in difficulty. I hope they don't make the course much harder, though. There are already enough courses, such as Wasatch, Hardrock, and Barkley that threaten to turn middle-of-the-pack ultrarunners into zombies.

The course runs parallel to Highway 61, which borders Lake Superior. This arrangement means easy crew access to many checkpoints. The 20 aid stations were well spaced and had adequate supplies, though I don't know whether medical care was readily available at them or at the end.

Personally, I didn't have a good day. But my friends (Mark Bodamer, Kent Ross, and Steve Varga) all had excellent runs and felt great about their experience. After finishing, I told them I was retiring from ultras. I think this is the 15th time I've retired.

But the person who had maybe the most reason to feel tired was the fifth Washington runner, Gary Wright, who came across the line four hours after me. He had done Wasatch the week before. Sleep well, Gary.

David Lygre

Stan Wagon adds:

More than a decade of involvement with trail ultras has surely put me in a complacent mood. After all, so many people finish 100-mile trail runs each year that it can't be so hard. Wrong. It is very hard, and my heartiest congratulations go to all the finishers of this year's ST100. Eric Clifton's remarkable time notwithstanding, it is by no means an easy thing to finish such a course in the allotted time. I was fortunate enough to do so last year, but this year I have only a 72-mile training run to show for my ST efforts despite the generally superior conditions. What happened? I don't know. And I probably never will know exactly. But here are some thoughts.

First of all, everything must go right to have a successful 100. Of course training, both physical and mental are necessary. Mental preparation is especially important when one is all too familiar with the pain of the last third of the race. But a myriad of other details must be attended to perfectly. My flashlight bulb burned out on me. Sure, I had a spare. But it was in the car, not in my pack! Well, my pacer graciously gave me his light and returned the short distance to the aid station with the help of another runner's backup light. I was lucky that I wasn't forced out of the race right there.

I suppose my training was adequate (more on that later), but I never counted on loneliness being a factor. My splits were pretty much identical to last year's, when I

found lots of people on the course to run with. This year I saw only two other runners between miles 38 and 72. Generally, people were running a lot faster this year. So what? We've all put in a lot of miles alone on trails. Yes, but I think there is a psychological benefit to be gained from seeing how others are doing, and the lack of that information might have played on my motivation somehow. For me, the sight of a runner up ahead that I might catch, run with a while, and then leave behind is very motivating. This is a race, after all. But I saw almost no one.

A few small blisters and tired muscles slowed me down after midnight and my last splits were so discouraging that I quit at 2 a.m. with 72 miles done. My one consolation after dropping out was that the dark ride to the motel was interrupted by the sight of a wolf on the highway! Might this have been the infamous wolf depicted on the buckles, symbolic of the time limit chasing the runners? I don't know, but if he was, he caught a couple.

One thing that surprised me was that I woke at 8:30 the next morning feeling hardly tired. Surely this means that my training was adequate. Last year, after the 100, I could hardly move for a few days. This year I was back to my six-mile noon run on Monday, if at a slow pace. So I assume that my muscles had what it would have taken to struggle on to 90 or 100. But, as Peter and Fred pointed out in a recent "Chatter," it is very hard to go through the difficult last stages when you have already done them once and your only reward will be a slower time.

But more than mental issues are at work here, I think. My training was in Colorado on extremely dry, often steep trails and gentle jeep roads. That is *not* the kind of terrain offered at ST. What is needed is the ability to cruise along at a good clip when the trails are good — many sections are very, very good: not steep, dry, smooth — and to not get too slowed down by the muddy or otherwise unrunnable sections. The key, and this has been pointed out many times, is specificity. Had my training been on similar trails, I think I would have been better prepared for issues such as the importance of dry feet in avoiding blisters and other aspects specific to the Superior Trail.

Some comments for the organizers. First, my congratulations on the excellent course markings. They were impeccable. I know you are looking forward to the opportunity to "upgrade" the course by replacing seven or more miles of road with tough, steep trail. But I wonder if it is wise to make the course more difficult. Sure, this comment comes from a wimpy nonfinisher. But do trail ultrarunners really want to spend 34 or more hours on a course? I think that is too long, especially in September, when there is less daylight than in July or August. There is a place for races such as the Hardrock and Wasatch, but shouldn't the ST, which uses runnable trails to pass through beautiful and

varied terrain at a great time of the year, be opened to a wider trail-running audience? Maybe put on a concurrent 50-miler. Maybe, somehow, eliminate the Route 61 highway section in a way that does not make the course harder. But I think that if the course is made more difficult, then the field will remain small, which will, in the long run, make it difficult to justify the work in marking a 100-mile point-to-point course and organizing the other details that go into a successful race.

But whatever is done in the future, I encourage experienced runners to give the course a try. Hey, if Eric Clifton can do it in under 18 hours, how hard can it be?

Eric Clifton adds:

The Superior Trail 100 certainly lived up to its name as it was a truly superior event. Its name is not a bit of arrogance on the part of race director Harry Sloan, but derives from the Superior Hiking Trail which sort of parallels Lake Superior in rural northern Minnesota. This year's race was run, point-to-point, on the Superior Hiking Trail, which is the longest well-maintained trail I've been on.

The really neat thing about this race is that it is a true trail race. With the exception of a seven-mile paved road section early in the race (which the RD hopes to eliminate next year) and a four-mile dirt road section late in the race, the course is on mostly narrow trail, occasionally rocky, rooty and marshy. It is this varied terrain and the amount of running after dark that makes this a "slow" trail run.

As a rule the course is up and down, but the hills are short enough that they can be cruised right over (although some downhills must be approached carefully). Also, the ST100 has the highest number of cliff traverses, river cascades, and waterfalls of any race I have seen, with incredible views everywhere. For me, this year, the course was 99.75 percent runnable. The changeable nature of the course kept my interest up and, unfortunately, prevented me from sightseeing as much as I wanted, since I had to concentrate on my footing. Even though I was racing, I stopped several times just to look around and appreciate the fall splendor of the beautiful area. The only spots where I was forced to walk were on a few short (50-foot drops, maximum) steep downhill, over some rocks on one uphill (maybe 30 feet), and across one blowdown field at night where I had to go from ribbon to ribbon for about 100 yards. There are miles of good fast trail throughout. Comparing this race with the others I have started, I'd say it is a little slower than Western States and Arkan-



Eugene Curnow (#16) and his pacer get a legal ride at the 73-mile crossing of a beaver pond, courtesy of paddlers Erik Gibson (left) and Dennis Sherman.

sas, a lot slower than Old Dominion and Vermont, a lot quicker than Wasatch, and by far the prettiest 100-mile of all. This race is perfect for real trail runners who desire a challenging though doable event with a feel of scenic remoteness. It is almost 100 percent guaranteed to be a cool-weather event.

The race organization, volunteers, and aid stations are great. The local people are definitely among the friendliest I have encountered (reminds me of Vermont) and the aid-station people are always encouraging, supportive, and helpful while their aid stations are fully stocked with a great variety of stuff. It is obvious Harry puts a whole lot of effort into this race and he has made it a class event comparable to Western and Vermont. Imagine the difficulty of marking 89 miles of trail where no motorcycles or mountain bikes are allowed. That those markers stay up even with the high hiker traffic between 40 and 60 miles just amazed me as well as the extreme courtesy all these hikers extended to me. An extra treat was the short trail briefing and rapid awards. No multi-hour extravaganza here.

To sum up: the ST100 is a beautiful course on which runners can go fast or slow depending on their competitive orientation and all can enjoy a class event where they will be cared for and looked after well. The race has the atmosphere of a fun run but the attentiveness to detail for which only Western States is known. Harry puts on this race like 500 of the most elite runners in the world will show up instead of the 50-plus starters he had this year.

This race is a gem and deserves much more growth than it is experiencing.

Superior Trail 100 Mile

Silver Bay to Grand Marais, Minn.

Sept. 19, 1992

14,000' climb; 13 mi on road, rest on trail

1. Eric Clifton	17:21:42
2. David Drach	19:16:15
3. Lance Davis	21:50:21
4. Odin Christensen	22:34:15
5. Bob Stavig	22:34:30
6. Mark Bodamer	22:57:04
7. David Wrolstad	23:05:01
8. David Innes	23:06:48
9. Kent Ross	23:12:23
10. Regis Shivers	23:12:24
11. Steve Varga	25:12:23
12. Richard Letourneau	25:26:37
13. Eugene Curnow	26:44:49
14. <u>Susan Gimbel</u>	26:45:02
15. Mark Stodghill	26:52:09
16. David Lygre	27:47:06
17. <u>Mary Bystedt</u>	27:47:49
18. Buck Walsh	28:01:18
19. Arthur Moore	28:02:19
20. Ed Korkia	28:21:34
21. Daniel Doty	28:33:54
22. Brian Lanstrom	28:33:54
23. Allen Cambronne	28:48:59
24. Dave Kelnberger	29:12:39
25. Michael Erickson	29:12:39
26. Jim Miller	29:35:48
27. <u>Mary Croft</u>	29:49:52
28. Jeff Goldstein	31:25:51
29. Edwin Demoney	31:44:22
30. Donald Thompson	32:19:30
31. Mark Switala	32:22:23
32. Jim Sisko	32:23:00
33. Glen Zirbel	32:28:18
34. Brian Poeppel	32:30:51
35. Gary Wright	32:58:11
36. James Mulrenin	33:59:32
53 starters	