

Complete Focus and Determination | by john storkamp

Two very talented first-time 100-mile competitors performed exceptionally at the 17th edition of the Superior Sawtooth 100-mile, resulting in total dominance of a deep and talented field of runners.

Picking up your favorite trail-running or ultrarunning magazine quickly reveals that the glamour in the sport of ultrarunning is typically focused in the mountains and for many, high-altitude mountain running is the only true trail ultra worth contesting. The Superior Sawtooth, with its estimated 21,000 feet of cumulative elevation change, leaves many out-of-state runners bewildered, as they were previously unaware that Minnesota had mountains. The locals like to think that it's all in the name: Sawtooth. If anyone reached the starting line of this year's SS100 because field limits kept them from getting into one of the summer's big mountain ultras, the great organization along with a strong membership of dedicated aid station workers, radio operators and volunteers is what has compelled them to pencil this race in their ultra-itineraries for next year. As racers packed up and headed out on Sunday after an unforgettable race weekend, all those who toed the line were proud to say that they participated in one of the most beautiful and grueling events on the national ultrarunning calendar.

This year, race morning conditions were crisp, cool and clear. The anxiety of the runners was palpable as they nervously made last-minute preparations prior to the race start at Gooseberry Falls State Park. Upon examination of the list of entrants and some eavesdropping on the muted, staccato conversations between runners, it was evident that the field contained a number of first-time SS100 runners and a surprising number of first-time-ever 100-milers. Throughout the years, a legendary mystique has formed around the Superior Sawtooth 100 and the Superior Hiking Trail where it is contested. The lore of the race and its rugged trail has enticed many runners, whether prepared or not for the challenge, to undertake the great race that this early fall weekend on the North Shore has to offer.

Even after the nervousness of the morning, with the posturing, passing comments and loose commitment by the elite field, the promise of a conservative early pace quickly went out the window as the race became just that: a race. Early aid stations at Split Rock, Beaver Bay, Silver Bay and Tettagouche saw two leaders - Duluth, Minnesota, runner and first-time 100-mile racer, Chris Gardner, and last year's 100-mile champion, Wynn Davis - test each others' tolerance and ability for navigating the often ridiculously technical trail. Due to the rugged nature of the trail, runners who choose to push the pace along with those audacious enough to look up at the beautiful scenery as they dance through the roots and rocks, often find themselves experiencing the trail in the horizontal position - despite their greatest efforts to remain upright. Following behind the two leaders at a safer and more sensible pace, were two veteran Midwest runners, Joe Ziegenfuss and Duke Rembleski, trailed by the potential dark horse of the race, Adam Harmer. Ziegenfuss and Rembleski are humble veterans of long-distance running. Both runners know how to run with patience, and in 2008 Ziegenfuss had already seen several ultra victories come his way as a result, including the coveted title of the Upper Midwest Trail Runners 2008 Ultra Distance Champion. Something about the demeanor of the two men in front of them, however, seemed to say that patience, as a tactic, may have little chance of success on this day. The mood of the two groups could not have been more different; Gardner and Davis were running a frenetic pace by SS100 standards as Rembleski and Ziegenfuss looked calm and relaxed, as if they were out on a slightly tougher-than-normal train-

ing run. The mile 34 aid station at Tettagouche saw one of the first casualties of the day and the end of Harmer's race as he was reduced to a limp. As a result of the constant uneven footing that this trail is notorious for, Harmer was one of the trail's first of many victims; there would be no dark horse on this day. Recording splits at the mile 34 Tettagouche checkpoint, it was noted that the first five runners were running on Sean Andrich's 2006 course record pace.

In a departure from the inherent nature of a race that requires competitors to run the distance of nearly four marathons, the women's race incredulously seemed to be settled well before the first marathon had passed. It quickly morphed into one woman racing against many experienced and talented men. In a race of this distance and magnitude it would typically be ignorant and uninformed to call the race before a quarter of it was complete; that is unless you have been informed about how 31-year-old Helen Lavin, a native of Ireland, now a Minneapolis resident, has been running this year. By September, Lavin had notched ultra victories and high places in triathlons and road races including first place at the inaugural Chippewa Moraine 50K, second place at the Afton Trail Run 50K and first place at the Voyageur 50-mile trail run after only a handful of years running. This was to be Helen's first 100-mile race, but few doubted her chances, and many had bet on her to win. As the day passed, a relentless Lavin increased her lead over the women's field by hours and entire sections, rather than by the usual measuring sticks of mere minutes and miles.

As the sun started to set behind the Sawtooth Range, the front of the race pushed through the 50-mile mark; so began the end of the race for first place. The 50-mile checkpoint at Finland saw the withdrawal of last year's winner, Wynn Davis, with a foot injury. Davis is another local runner who quickly increased his repertoire of race distances to include 100 miles just a few years after beginning his running career. Tending to run with an all-or-nothing approach, he has turned many heads in the ultrarunning community, clocking impressive times and many victories throughout the Midwest. His retreat was another one of the great disappointments of the day. At the aid station, encouraging Davis to continue was Gardner's pacer-to-be from the 100 km checkpoint to the finish. Besides being a skilled pacer, Erik Kaitala wears the crown for the fastest Superior Hiking Trail speed through-run, having run the entire 205-mile trail in a record four days, three hours and 43 minutes.

Beyond 50 miles, Helen Lavin continued to extend her lead in the women's race at the same astonishing rate as Gardner in the men's. Lavin was convincingly the first woman runner and was in fifth place overall. While the second-place woman, Kris Whorton, was one hour and twenty minutes back, last year's women's division champion, Susan Donnelly, was nearly three hours off the lead.

After navigating into the most remote stretches of the race, Joe Ziegenfuss arrived at the Crosby Manitou Checkpoint (a.k.a. the 100K Café), still looking fresh and fast. Bystanders encouraged and prodded Ziegenfuss to make his move, as he still had a chance to take the lead. With the head lamps now on high, and with more tangled roots and rocks to navigate, a still-fresh Ziegenfuss - knowing that Gardner had extended his lead to over one hour - seemed to know that the race for first place was all but over. His patience would not pay today; he had allowed Gardner to extend his lead too far and he was going to pay the price. As Ziegenfuss departed the checkpoint, Rembleski arrived and the race for second garnered new excitement.

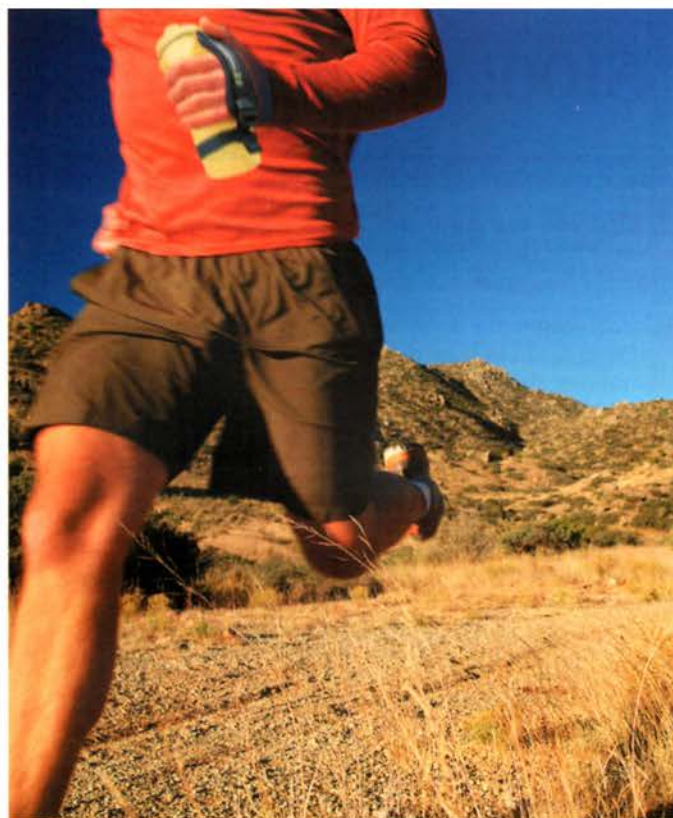
Mile 84 is at the Temperance River. The Temperance, one of the biggest tourist areas on the North Shore of Lake Superior, receives visitors from all over the world. It is an amazingly beautiful and dangerous river with deep gorges carved from water flowing through ancient bedrock formed over one billion years ago. Temperance by definition means "moderation and self-restraint, as in behavior or expression." Duke Rembleski, last year's third-place finisher, was a standout high school cross-country runner and marathoner since age 14. In his road-racing days he clocked a respectable PR of 2:39:00 in the marathon. Like most ultrarunners, Rembleski generally is not keen on moderation or self-restraint, which made the decision to scratch at mile 84 with an injured knee very difficult. Arriving at the aid station, Rembleski commented to his wife and crew, Eve, also a standout Minnesota runner, "I had to walk down the last couple of hills backwards!" With Carlton Peak and Oberg Mountain yet to come, and both sections being difficult to navigate on a good leg, Duke took a seat and the aid station captain took his number. A slimmed-down field carried on into the pre-dawn hours as Gardner crossed the finish line in 21:57:53, only 15 minutes off of Sean Andrishis' 2006 course record.

Remember when Helen Lavin was busy winning all those trail races earlier in the season? Joe Ziegenfuss was taking the men's titles at those same events; in this race he was not willing to fade into third. By mile 90, Matt Aro, another one of the runners chasing the coveted second place, had dropped out leaving Brent Bjerkness to move into third place. For Lavin, it was now not only her strength and determination moving her up in the standings, the course was also on her side; the rate of attrition was indeed high.

Ziegenfuss achieved an excellent second-place finish of 23:46:39, followed by Bjerkness, who had paced himself wisely and steadily improved his position all day, at 25:54:02. At the finish line, anticipation was high and everyone felt the excitement, including several of the night's DNF casualties as they awaited Lavin's finish. Helen turned the corner and a few dozen spectators sounded like an army as she crossed the finish line in fourth place, smashing the women's course record by nearly six hours. As she assessed her war wounds and tabulated the damage, someone asked if Helen had a nickname. The answer was, "No, not officially." But onlookers standing at aid stations throughout the day watching Helen arrive and depart with complete focus and determination naturally came to the same conclusion, "She is a machine."

Continuing to build on her great season, Kris Whorton of Chattanooga, Tennessee tallied yet another impressive finish, coming in second place in the women's race. Kris ran the entire race and crossed the finish line with her husband, Randy Whorton. Last year's champion, Susan Donnelly, held on strong to finish in third place. Julie Berg of Big Lake, Minnesota saw her second finish of the Superior 100 come an hour faster than in 2007, with the added bonus of finishing fourth place in the women's division.

The clock continued to run and throughout the day, those who had survived the night trickled in. Many competitors crossed the finish line with a look that conveyed joy, confusion, pain and disbelief for what they had experienced out on the trail. After a grueling day-and-a-half most of the exhausted runners quickly got into that now familiar horizontal position (this time by choice), shut their eyes and dreamed about next year's Superior Sawtooth 100, as visions of hills, roots and rocks danced in their heads.



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SS100: A Chat with the Champs | by john storkamp

An interview in five questions with the Superior Sawtooth 100 men's winner, Chris Gardner, and women's winner, Helen Lavin.

JS: First off, you both ran an incredible race, congratulations. What other races did you run this year in preparation for the Superior Sawtooth 100 and what were the results?

CG: Last season, my daughter was only two or three months old, and I came to find out how much less of an impact that age has on racing/training, than when they are one year old. This racing season for me was all about balance; trying to find a happy medium between family, training, racing and all the other responsibilities in life.

In April, I ran Zane Grey 50-mile (fifth place, 10:48:46). I didn't know that I would be running the SS100 at the time I ran Zane Grey, but looking back, Zane Grey was one of the best components of my training to get me ready for Superior. I also ran the Voyageur 50-mile (second place, 7:38:57) as I was just starting my ramp-up of training; I didn't expect much out of this race and was pleasantly surprised with second place and a PR.

HL: I ran and won the Chippewa Moraine 50K and the Voyager 50-mile; I was also second at the Afton Trail Run 50K in July.

JS: You both picked a very tough race for your first 100 - many people often look for an "easy" 100 for their first. During the race, did either of you ever think you might not reach the finish line?

CG: Honestly, the only time I thought I wouldn't finish or win was the first half-mile. Since it was my first 100-miler, my stomach was an absolute knot at the start. I could barely swallow my first energy

gel at 20 minutes in, I was so worked up. I honestly thought that it was going to be a very long, hard day at that point and my hopes of winning were pretty much over. After settling down, I have to admit that the day went so well, and I was so focused, that I felt pretty confident that the race was mine after my stomach settled down about an hour into the race.

HL: I knew after a few miles I was in first place for the women but knew that both the second and third place women were very accomplished runners and would be up there with me. I didn't really think too much about it after that. I figured I could only run my race. I never felt like I wasn't going to finish.

JS: What were the toughest parts of the race for you; when was it the hardest?

CG: I feel so at home on that trail and I feel so comfortable with that level of technical trail that I never really hit a huge wall or had a real tough moment. Good example; even at the late stages, I would come into an aid station, and when the race official would check me in and ask me a few questions, I had to be careful because I would find myself joking with them, which they translated as me losing it when in reality I just was feeling that good.

HL: Mystery Mountain. By that time I really wanted to finish [in] under 27 hours. I don't even know why, but that just became a huge deal for me. I remembered the course VERY differently and couldn't believe how it kept climbing, long after the switchbacks. I threw quite the tantrum and kept threatening (not sure who) to just walk.

JS: What is the thought or memory that will stay with you the most from the race?

CG: Since this was my first 100 miler, I think one of my most vivid impressions of the race was one from a "rookie" perspective. Relatively early on, say mile 60 or 70, I felt pretty confident based on the way the day was going that unless I did something stupid, I was going to win this race. I actually said that to Erik when I picked him up at mile 60 - I said, "One of the best things you could do for me as a pacer is to just not let me do anything stupid...like start to push it too hard, eat something I've never eaten before, or do something dumb." I guess it was also around that point that I really remember it hitting me that even though I was going to be able to win this race, I still had to run another 30 or 40 miles to earn it. That was the big thought or memory; how the 100-miler really makes you earn it.

HL: Looking up at Carlton Peak around 6:00 a.m., just as it was getting light. I found it hard to believe I'd been running for 22 hours. And that I was happy. Insanely happy. I remember thinking: How lucky am I that I get to do this? To have this experience that so few people will ever come close to. And to have friends and family there to support me the whole way.

JS: Are there any other thoughts that either of you would like to share?

CG: My style isn't one of talking myself up before a race a whole lot. I prefer a low-profile in terms of publicity and I like to fly under the radar. I like to let my running speak for itself. A great quote that I use to inspire me goes something like, "Talk is talk, plans are plans, but only performance is reality." That kind of described how I went into this race, I prepared hard and trained like I wanted my performance to dictate a reality of winning this race. I didn't absolutely



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102.3 MILES

1. Chris Gardner, 31	21:57:53
2. Joe Ziegenfuss, 34	23:46:39
3. Brent Bjerkness, 41	25:54:02
4. Helen Lavin, 31	26:49:22
5. Chris Hanson, 37, WI	28:34:32
6. Scott Meyers, 41, WI	28:48:28
7. Dale Humphrey, 49, IL	29:15:18
8. Jasper Brown, 50, WI	29:51:45
9. Kris Whorton, 43, TN	30:15:20
Randy Whorton, 48, TN	30:15:20
11. Jerry Frost, 52, MO	30:17:27
12. Ron Bero, 46, WI	31:01:10
13. Doug Hansel, 48, IA	31:20:25
14. Andrew Davis, 39	31:20:28
15. Jason Boon, 34	31:44:39
16. Peter Mitchell, 33, AZ	31:51:54
17. Susan Donnelly, 45, TN	32:16:28
18. Daryl Saari, 45	32:25:00
19. Bill Gengler, 54	32:28:43
20. Robert Lisey, 58,	33:04:58
21. John Taylor, 46	33:06:47
22. Matthew Patten, 37	33:39:15
Gary Sheets, 56	33:39:15
24. Kazimierz Swistun, 56, IL	33:39:28
25. Kris Webeck, 39	34:16:34
26. Julie Berg, 43	34:34:05
27. Stuart Johnson, 49, KS	34:44:59
28. Kami Holtz, 36	35:51:30
29. Brad Birkholz, 40, WI	36:01:25
30. Julie Treder, 32, WI	36:01:26
31. Casey Lopez, 32, WI	36:53:41
32. Shawn Boom, 30, WI	37:00:18
33. Timothy Roe, 29, WI	37:24:14
34. James Jahoda, 46	37:39:12
Laurie Simons, 43, SK	37:39:12
36. Christian Griffith, 38, GA	38:35:19

50 MILES

1. Brian Peterson, 24	10:08:00
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2. Mark Kalar, 35	10:39:39
3. Sean Faulk, 35	10:46:12
4. Charles Allgood, Jr, 43	11:20:48



Julie Berg brightens up the trail

PHOTO BY BRYAN COCHRAN

5. Paul Jaeger	11:26:17
6. Buck Benson, 56	11:33:56
7. Eric Storbakken, 37	11:51:33
8. Ted Niemann, 45, OH	11:57:30
9. David Hannenburg, 34, TX	12:13:57
10. Valeria Shuster, 32	12:27:08

11. Angie Puert, 37, WI	12:49:51
12. Brian Moen, 38	13:27:47
13. Ryan Braski	13:41:08
14. John Gustafson, 56	13:41:47
15. Jeffrey Mallach, 48, WI	13:41:58
16. Greg Taylor, 61	13:50:48
17. Jeff Allen	14:05:12
18. Zach Pierce, 35	14:17:44
19. Nolan Barrios, 40	14:20:03
20. Deb Vomhof, 46, WI	14:21:32
21. Tom Weight, 56	14:35:12
22. Richard Chrz, 36, WI	14:39:13
23. Rick Bothwell	14:50:49
24. Tom Rowe, 60	15:04:07
25. Christopher Hasling, 47, DEU	15:04:08
26. Alicia Gordon, 42	15:13:55
27. Keith Krove	15:13:56
28. Jennifer Flynn, 34	15:23:04
29. Jim Blanchard, 58, WI	15:29:32
30. John Pitera, 50	15:29:39
31. Natalie Kaufman Stamp, 34, SD	16:04:00
Jeffrey Swainhart, 53	16:04:00
33. Peter Ickert, 47, DEU	16:11:44
34. Kurt Neuburger, 27	16:35:00
Wynn Davis, 27, WI	9:40*
Ryan (Duke) Rembleski, 32	9:48*
Matthew Aro, 29, WI	10:18*
Dallas Sigurdur	12:11*
Craig Swartwout	12:22*
Pierre Ostor, 51, MN	13:54*
Ryan Flynn	14:41*
Nicholas Stoneman	15:51*
Steve Quick, 46, MN	15:43*
Gary Giannunzio, 63, MI	16:09*
Carl Gammon, 53, MN	16:31*
Tony Evans, 38, ON	16:50*
Ryan Jacobson, 34	17:24*

* 50-mile split in 100-mile race, credited with 50-mile finish

know that I was going to win this race since there are a million things that could go wrong over the course of 100 miles and there were easily five or six guys [who] could win this race, but I was running for the win right from the start and I feel very fortunate that all my hard work paid off with such a good day. I also think that if you are going out there to do really well in a 100-miler, having a pacer and crew that you have absolute confidence in is a must. Having Erik as my pacer and my wife, Christy, and Gregg Robertson as my crew was an essential component in me winning this race. I could not have performed at this level without them.

HL: It was incredible experience and I am so glad to be able to run such a classic race "at home" in Minnesota. It is almost scary to think now how achievable 100 miles is. I don't say that lightly; I know many people had to drop from the race. But as someone who ten years ago could

barely run a mile, I think it shows what's possible with the right training. No doubt mental toughness plays a big part too. You have to believe you can do it. You have to believe you are worthy of it. And I think if you go into a race having worked hard and trained for it you should never question that.

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