

Braje, Abramiuk take 50 mile championships at Mountainback; relay teams post new records

Rain on race eve is often a bellwether for good conditions at the Tussey mOUntaiNBACK 50. This year, overnight temps in the 40s and a light rain in the wee hours raised a thick mist that burned off very slowly as daylight inched onto the color-flecked hills for the race's tenth running. Weatherwise, racing conditions were ideal.

Sight Unseen

The field of registered ultrarunners promised a battle for the USA 50 Mile Championships title, and a possible challenge to the course records laid down by Eric Grossman last year and by Anne Lundblad in 2007. (A more detailed story on the ultramarathon can be found in the December issue of *Ultrarunning Magazine*.)

A favorite in the men's race was Todd Braje, 33, of Arcata, Calif. Braje had clocked a blazing 5:30 at the Jed Smith 50 Miler in February and represented Team USA at the 100K World Cup in June. With only the course maps as background, Braje led early and ran strong the first three quarters of the race. "I think I was on course record pace until between 35 and 40 miles. However, I knew that the record was safe after 25. I just didn't have it on the day." Still, winning and turning in the third fastest time ever with a smile was not half bad. "Overall, it was a beautiful and challenging course, perhaps a bit more difficult than I expected." Braje hopes to defend his title in 2010 as long as competing at Tussey won't adversely affect his performance at the World Cup in November (if he's selected for the team). "The races are far enough apart that I think I can perform at a top level in both." Andrew Bartle, 33, of Johnstown, Pa., took second in the men's race and Julian Michael, 28, of Millersburg, Pa., took third. The men's masters title went to Brett Pfleiger, 45, of Dover, Pa.

Death and Rebirth

The women's race would be open season for whoever was most ready. Larissa Abramiuk, 40, of Wayland, Mass., had started running at age 19 after she stopped competing as a diver in college. This day she was taking her first run at the 50 mile distance. "The first 22 miles of the race I felt very strong—the running surface was forgiving, so I felt that I could pound out the downhills to make up time." Abramiuk was averaging 7:45 until mile 22 or 23 and then felt her pace declining, but by mile 32 she felt better. "Ultramarathons are very process oriented," she recalled. "They are about death and rebirth." She would take this one home, nabbing both the open and master's championship titles.

Course veteran Alisa Springman, 35, of Mercersburg, Pa., just wanted to enjoy the beautiful scenery and run as strong a race as she could, and 10 minutes before the start she decided to run without her watch. "I thought obsessing over mile splits would be counterproductive to an enjoyable run. It turned out to be a good decision, as muscle spasms in my lower back brought me to a stop several times in the first three miles."

Despite a good marathon split, she chose to look away from the mile markers from 30 to 40, as she knew this can be a tough section. But with the sun flickering through the trees and then upon reaching the race's much celebrated overlook vista near mile 44, Springman turned exuberant. "It had turned into a clear, sunny day and you could see for miles across the valley. I commented to a crew member that the view was worth the price of admission. I took just a few seconds to appreciate the moment before I hit the turnaround of the short out and back and pounded out that quad-shredding descent to the finish." Sans watch, Springman scored a new PR and placed third in the USATF standings. "Choosing not to live and die by my watch and to listen to the natural rhythms of my body led me to a performance I didn't think was possible on such low mileage training."

Ellen Komesarook, 45, of Gaithersburg, Md., finished 11 minutes behind Abramiuk. She was followed by Anita Fromm, 38, of Colorado Springs, Colo., whose own seasoning included last year's world-record double crossing of Death Valley following the Badwater 135. "After about 4 miles of leap-frogging each other, the race seemed set as far as who the top three women were going to be," recalled Fromm, who found out afterward she was also fighting an oncoming cold. "It was harder than I thought, the last 14 miles." Fromm was also well aware of Springman's prowess from Badwater. "She is one tough cookie, and seems to do well in the heat, and gets stronger as she goes. If Tussey were 10 miles longer, she would have had me."

Number Seven / Caving to Temptation

A few local marathoners who'd already experienced the course relay-style decided this was the year to run their first ultras: David DeGroot, 51, George Lesieutre, 50, and Frank Zaffino, 39.

Zaffino motored through his fifty in just over 8 hours. "I had a fantastic experience running my first ultra," he recalled. "The volunteers at every transition zone were very helpful and enthusiastic, which helped me during some difficult moments in the race."

Lesieutre was only seconds behind Zaffino at the finish. He had run every leg prior to the race. "In fact, I ran the entire course one weekend as two long runs. So, I had a sense for the relative difficulties of the legs as well as the paces I might run on each." Lesieutre found his breathing to be "a good throttle and gauge of effort" and kept it "below my normal long run cadence. On the final stretch (leg 10 plus), I knew I was likely to beat my target time, and that gave me a bit of a mental boost. Although my quads were already sore (legs 2, 5?), I felt pretty good at the end. I suppose that means I should have run harder, but no complaints. It was great day to be in the woods, and I enjoyed it."

DeGroot made this run his own experience, too. "It's such a beautiful course...I even stopped to take a few pictures along the way. The volunteers and spectators are great...[as an ultra] you feel famous at the TZ's!" DeGroot was surprised how much he was by himself, given the number of runners and support vehicles. "The hardest part was miles 28-30...the farthest I'd ever run, and still 22 to go!" Any thoughts of a reprise? "I decided

after only a few days to do it again and try to improve my time...it took weeks to say that about my first marathon.”

Just three weeks after completing over 4 months hiking the 2,663-mile Pacific Crest Trail, Warren Renninger, 53, of Muncy Valley, Pa., turned in his seventh Mountainback. So why was his time faster than his most recent previous three? “I think using salt tabs helped,” Renninger recalled. “I had salt depletion in the desert and concluded that my problems the last three years, which seemed to be a loss of energy (and a cold), were because I didn’t use salt.” Plus, Renninger was 30 pounds lighter this year. “I think I could have done better this year if I’d had more time to practice. I had sciatic nerve pain, too.”

Relay Fever

The relay saw a record field of 96 teams start, with an interesting shift this year toward larger teams. Only two Supra teams took part, compared to 13 last year, and at the other extreme there were an unprecedented 38 Mega teams. A record 56 local runners took part in a draft-style competition known as the Draft Challenge Relay (DCR), which assembled eight 7-person teams.

The **Supra** contest saw only one team take up the ultimate relay challenge to the finish. A second team, Muddy Runners, was a larger team that collapsed to two and did not try to finish.

There were 22 **Tri/Quad** teams this year (three were Tri’s). The overall Tri-Quad division title went to Inside Track, featuring three masters marathon standouts, Gregg Cauller (1,4,7,10), Tim Schuler (2,5,8,11) and Mark Amway (3,6,9,12). Though their 5:13:49 time was edged out for the overall relay win by one 8-person team, Inside Track’s time was the fastest Tri/Quad masters time ever and would be the #5 Tri/Quad men’s Open time ever.

In the men’s open division, Gems led the field of 10 teams and edged out Final Four by just a minute and a half. Final Four led four Navy ROTC Quad teams, which placed 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 8th in this category. The four teams in the women’s open category were led by Running Is Cheaper Than Therapy. The mixed open field of five teams was dominated by a trio, Phoenixville Phury, which included Brian McNally (co-holder of the overall course record that still stands from 2002) and Michele and Brody Bush. Team Inside Track (cited earlier) handily led the men’s masters field of three teams.

Thirty-four **Standard** teams came out. The men’s open field of nine teams was headed by Deep Six Racing, who led the rest by nearly an hour. With a field of two, the women’s open title went to Fitness Love II. Track Cult came out on top of a field of 21 mixed open teams. The women’s masters and mixed masters categories had one team each, Sole Sisters and Built for Comfort, respectively.

The **Mega** division of 38 teams produced the fastest time of the day, posted by the men's open team Boshank's Buds, whose 5:10:58 ranks as the second fastest Mega men's open finish, bested only by Track Cult – The Dudes in 2006. Four draft (DCR) teams were in this division and finished within a spread of 27 minutes. Four women's open teams took to the roads, led by Smokin' Staters. In mixed open action, For Those About to Rothrock, We Salute You had the fastest time (and longest name of the day). The four remaining draft teams were in this division and finished within a spread of 23 minutes. Overall draft brags went to OK Go!

Mega men's masters honors went to the Old Men of the Mountains, whose average age of 78 is an auspicious record in itself. Word on the street is that these men are already itching to return to these mountains in 2010. The ringleader of the group is 89-years-young George Etzweiler.

The sole **Military Mega** team this year, Elite 8, posted a 6:52.