

The Heartland 100 Mile

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

by Gary Dudley

Late night out in the Great Plains, mid-continent, east central Kansas: I'm running through the Flint Hills on the tallgrass prairie in the heartland of America. No trees block the view, no canyon walls blot out the stars. There are no high ridges, no deep valleys, no rock formations, mountains, pine trees, or man-made structures between me and the great, overarching sky. Clouds of glittering stars blanket the night and extend down to all horizons. There is Orion, with the three perfectly aligned stars forming his belt and the stars of his sword, clear and distinct. Just above the horizon in every direction there are scattered lights miles and miles away: the blinking red lights of a radio tower, a bright light bobbing up and down on an oil derrick, a pair of white lights marking a grain silo, and 20 miles away a faint dome of light over Emporia.

My flashlight beam lights up the gravel road beneath me and catches the ragged edge of switch, Indian, and bluestem grass that covers the prairie. Clumps of wildflowers grow in the center of the road, their shadows forming into phantom wild animals that seem to leap at me as I pass by. From time to time a rabbit appears and regards me with curiosity. Surprisingly, the dark grasslands around me are alive with a host of odd noises: whirrs, buzzes, muffled screeches, low screams, howls, hisses, clicks, and grinds. A coyote begins a plaintive howl at the half moon hanging over the horizon, and there are seemingly a thousand voices yelping and yipping in return in an unearthly chorus that fills the night and raises goose bumps on my arms. I pray that the next howl does not come from nearby, because I swear I'll jump right out of my skin if I'm suddenly surrounded by yelping coyotes.

The day before, I pulled into Cassoday, Kansas, (population 93) the "prairie chicken capital of the world," and passed by the Cassoday Café ("good food and good gossip since 1873") and a quaint wooden church where Laura Ingalls Wilder might have warmed a pew as a teenager. The empty streets and harsh sunlight pouring down on the motley collection of paint-starved wooden

buildings and scattered homes gave the place a lonely, betwixt-and-between look, as forlorn as a train whistle in a heavy fog. In fact, freight trains from two lines do roar through town, not slowing a bit as they pass. Sitting in my car behind the lowered railroad barrier just feet from a passing train, I can imagine the massive hulk sucking me forward onto the tracks as it hurtles past. Winters out here on the edge of the Flint Hills must be unbelievably harsh. A sign stuck on an inside door between the main hall and the bathrooms of the town's tiny community center gives a hint: "Please leave door open so pipes won't freeze."

Soon enough however, the community center gave way to the familiar routine of ultrarunners weighing in, leaving drop bags, and trading war stories. I had imagined a local race filled primarily with runners from Kansas and the surrounding states. Amazingly, of the 44 pre-registered runners in the 100-mile, exactly *two* were from Kansas. Texas and New Mexico were well represented, but so were Canada, Washington and many other states. Luminaries such as Eric Clifton and Sue Johnston were there, and of course, the ubiquitous Monica Scholz, the two-time defending women's champ. What was going on, I wondered; why had so many people come so far for this race? The race briefing held few clues to the mystery. Our instructions were to follow the white flour arrows, look for surveyor's tape, and the glow sticks at night. There was also discussion of how to handle cows and cattle guards—unique to this race—and some mumbo-jumbo about not focusing on things in the distance, as they had a tendency to never get any closer. At the time I didn't get it.

On race morning we gathered in a gravel parking lot just outside of town next to the abandoned and shuttered limestone Cassoday High School building that looked like it had seen its heyday in about 1920. Several derelict junk cars sat nearby to drive home the point. A persistent drizzle, filtering down through the light cast from bulbs stuck up on telephone poles, fell from a bank of low slung clouds as we lined up to start. We ran down the

one stretch of blacktop in the whole race and then turned onto gravel and began stair stepping across the countryside beside dark fields and pastures in between barbed wire fences. As the light slowly came up, we made our way into the Flint Hills proper. The road beneath us began to dip and roll gently up and down. None of the slopes were particularly steep or particularly long. The cadence of these climbs and descents seemed remarkably in tune with ultrarunning. Running down was an easy flow to the bottom. Walking up was calming and restful.

Not much good for farming, the Flint Hills have been left largely untouched since pioneer days, except for grazing cattle and widely scattered oil rigs. It is a vast grassland of gently sloping hills formed by the uneven erosion of the minerals below the surface. Where the flint or chert dominates, the land wears away slowly. Where there is limestone or shale, the land erodes more quickly. Streams wind among the hills in boxlike channels cut down through the chert or in shallow valleys formed through strata of limestone.

In the hills, the miles rolled by. Sometimes the gravel was well crushed and the road was smooth, but just as often, the road was like a dance floor covered with rocks the size you could pick up, hold in the crook of your finger, and fling at a tree trunk. The drizzle ended around noon, just in time for the cutting edge of a front moving down from the north to confront us with a stiff headwind as we traveled up toward Matfield Green. We battled this wind until late evening, especially up on the ridgelines and on Texaco Hill, where aid station volunteers had to huddle inside a tent held together with duct tape. Luckily the world's best cookies could be found there. The corner of the course that held the Matfield Green aid station jutted out across I-35, so we followed dirt roads up to old concrete overpasses that spanned the highway. Suddenly the idyll of the gentle hills was broken by cars and trucks careening madly beneath us as we crossed. Leaving Matfield Green on the way back at 57 miles, a fiery orange sunset lit up the western sky before me as night approached. I picked up my pacer just in

time for the two of us to see a pronghorn antelope leap up a slope in the fading light.

Thus began the long hypnotizing run through the prairie night. Willa Cather's character Antonia says when she first encounters the vastness of the prairie, "There was nothing but land, slightly undulating. I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction. I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete doom of heaven, all there was of it. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be." That captures the spirit of the run that night, the way you became

lost in yourself between aid stations, the way space stretched out all around you, so it seemed you had left the world behind and entered some realm of the spirit, running along beyond limits, outside of normal experience, where what would be would be.

As the night stretched on in this dream state, I found my eyes working overtime to play tricks on me. I stopped beneath a hedgeapple tree for a moment and set my flashlight on the ground. When I looked up to the branches above me, the dark spaces quickly formed into a cougar sprawled out in the crook of two branches. It was watching me. The longer I stared, the more real the big cat became, until I whipped up my flashlight and shined it directly at the branches. Nothing

there. Later when I approached the Battle Creek aid station I thought at first I saw a whole group of people standing below the canopy, until this resolved itself into just a single man with the hood of his sweatshirt up over a baseball cap and a woman beside him in a green coat with her hands wrapped around a cup of steaming coffee. I said hello and went past them to sit in a chair next to the aid table. When I looked back up, only the man was there. "You all alone out here?" I ventured nonchalantly. "Got someone in the back of that truck asleep," he said, "otherwise, yeah." I let it drop, deciding to keep my visions to myself.

At last, the night and my race came to an end—at just about the same time. Volunteers greeted me at the finish with ringing cowbells and a whooping welcome. There was so much to praise about this race. The different soups at the aid stations were the best I've ever had, including the "three pellet" soup at Matfield Green where the cook yelled down the road, "Dinner's on!" when a runner came along. The Kansas Ultrarunners Society members deserve enormous credit for having the imagination to see what a great venue the Flint Hills would make for a 100-mile. No wonder the turnout was so far flung; word has spread about this unique run. This was truly a Kansas experience, with the wind, the stars, the prairie, the cows, the barbed wire, the heart-breaking distances, the pioneer spirit, and the unstinting hospitality.

Heartland 100 Mile: The Spirit Of The Prairie

by Randy Albrecht, R.D.

Kansas is named after the Kansa Indians that inhabited the eastern portion of the state. While the exact meaning of their tribal name is not known, historians generally agree that it refers to wind or the wind people. More than 50 runners from 20 states and Canada gathered for the Third Annual Heartland 100 and 50 Mile runs. Temperatures at the start were in the mid-50s with light winds and a steady mist. This would soon change, as the spirit of the Kansa Indians would be felt in full force by late morning.

Historian Waldo Wedel in his book on the Kansa Indians talks about a tribal ritual. "They initiated their young men into manhood through the vision quest. The procedure was simple. The young brave sought out a lonely spot, and there abstained from food and water for four days or more if necessary. The spirits were invoked by wailing and, often some form of bodily torture. The dream or vision induced by this prolonged self-mortification might provide the young man with invulnerability and thus might profoundly affect his entire life." It may have not been an ultra, but there are a lot of similarities.

From the pre-race entries we knew this would be the fastest field we have had, with 2001 Heartland 100 Mile champions and course record holders Mark Henderson and Monica Scholz back to defend their titles against a strong field.

From the start it was clearly Eric Clifton's race against Mother Nature. Eric went through the 50-mile mark in 6:42 with nearly a lead of an hour over Mark Henderson. He went on to destroy the course record in an outstanding time of 14:30:27. Mark, who has always finished first or second in each Heartland, went on to finish in second place in 17:52:00.

The women's race also quickly turned into a two-runner race, with Sue Johnston reaching the 50-mile turnaround in 8:43, 45 minutes ahead of Monica Scholz, the two-time defending champion. Sue extended her lead in the second half of the race, also smashing the course record, finishing in 18:39:47. Monica finished second in 20:11:55.

The prediction of a fast race unfolded despite the strong north winds and temperatures that dipped into the mid 30s during the night. Normal high temperatures for this time of the year are in the low 70s with overnight lows in the upper 40s. Runners were prepared for the conditions however, as 34 of the 40 starters finished, an 85-percent finishing rate. Sixteen finished in less than 24 hours. All 13 of 50-mile runners finished with course records of 7:47:50 set by Gregg Buehler and 11:27:05 by Angela Negrette-Smith. The Heartland experience is unlike any other 100-mile race. We hope to see everyone back next year.

Heartland 100 Mile and 50 Mile

Cassoday, Kansas

October 12

Gravel roads and trails

100 Miles

1. Eric Clifton, 44, NM	14:30:27!
2. Mark Henderson, 42, TX	17:52:00
3. <u>Sue Johnston</u> , 36, VT	18:39:47!
4. Dave Daly, 41, IL	18:54:45
5. Blair Zimmerman, 53, TX	19:02:10
6. Michael Bur, 37, MD	19:51:47
7. Raul Flores, 46	19:52:59
8. <u>Monica Scholz</u> , 35, CAN	20:11:55
9. David Lygre, 60, WA	20:16:49
Tim Englund, 36, WA	20:16:49
11. Bobby Keogh, 53, NM	20:25:20
12. John Mark, 50, AZ	21:15:49
13. Kevin Guest, 34, MO	21:57:00
14. John Raney, 41, VA	22:40:30
15. Butch Allmon, 47, TX	22:50:41
Joe Prusaitis, 47, TX	22:50:41
17. Dallas Smith, 62, TN	24:06:14
18. Gary Dudley, 49, CA	24:44:50
19. John Bandur, 64, WA	25:52:54
20. Richard Smith, 57, FL	27:30:07

21. Louise Mason, 49, IL	27:44:20	30. Yen Nguyen, 40, TX	28:43:12	4. Jason Hodde, 32, IN	10:22:05
22. Bradley Youngblood, 38, TX	27:54:11	31. Peggy Gaudet, 33, AZ	28:45:45	5. Ron Jansen, 34	10:32:30
Vincent Swendsen, 40, NJ	27:54:11	32. Ken Eielson, 54, CO	28:52:43	6. Willie Lambert, 40, WI	11:08:20
24. Mary Kashurba, 46, PA	27:56:21	33. Stephanie Willingham, 50, CO	29:07:20	7. Angela Negrette-Smith, 36, OK	11:27:05
25. Lee Norris, 54, TX	28:10:45	34. Angi McEwen, 34, IN	29:15:17	8. Bill Gomboc, 52, OK	11:37:05
26. Bruce Hilton, 64, CAN	28:21:52			9. Duane Grigg, 51, MO	12:02:14
27. Christopher Luke, 40, TX	28:37:50			10. Paul Morgan, 61, FL	12:28:45
Evan Groutage, 53, TX	28:37:50			11. Dianna Keogh, 46, NM	13:36:56
29. Peter Bennett, 27, TX	28:38:31			12. Dottie Duncan, 48, IL	14:08:26
				Rocky Holly, 48, TX	14:08:26

50 Miles

1. Gregg Buehler, 31	7:47:50
2. Scott Demaree, 51, TX	8:25:20
3. Robert Rayburn, 19, CO	9:47:46

Eric Clifton's Reveries on the Heartland 100

Just the place for a Snark, the Bellman cried

The rest of my speech (he explained to his men)

You shall hear when I've leisure to speak it.

But the Snark is at hand, let me tell you again!

'Tis your glorious duty to seek it.

To seek it with thimbles, to seek it with care;

To pursue it with forks and hope;

To threaten its life with a railway share;

To charm it with smiles and soap!

Excerpt from Lewis Carroll's
The Hunting of the Snark An Agony, in Eight Fits

Forty people converged on Cassoday, Kansas to hunt a Snark and for some, it turned into an agony of more than eight fits, but most were successful. The Heartland 100 Mile is run, out and back, on rolling Kansas dirt roads. The course and terrain are benign; the race has the potential to be very fast, although this race also has its challenges. The openness of the land creates 360-degree horizon vistas, which can be mentally daunting. To be able to look up and watch the road rolling off into a seeming infinity, coupled with the perception that the time it takes to hit a point on the horizon is an eternity, can be tiresome. If that's not enough, all that openness can lead to breezes for which some are not ready. There is also a possibility of a hot shelterless day (although less likely in mid-October).

There is free camping at a park near the start and during the night before the race, I took as a good omen the three or more trains per hour (every hour) that honked and roared through town. Good because I knew effective Snark threatening with

railway shares is increased with such a strong railway presence. Plus, it also meant, since I was only hearing one train per hour, I was soundly sleeping 40 to 50 minutes per hour, which is above average the night before a 100-mile Snark hunt.

Since my 2002 ultra racing season had been fairly lackluster, I decided to change my mental approach and use the Banker as my model while hopefully avoiding his fate:

And the Banker inspired with a courage so new

It was matter for general remark,

Rushed madly ahead and was lost from their view

In his zeal to discover the Snark.

As I was seeking the Snark with thimbles and care, I had many experiences along the way. From 15 to 16 miles, I was accompanied by five horses on the right and one the left. From miles 25 to 31, the road runs gently up Texaco Hill, the biggest hill of the course. The panorama stretching out before me—the fog creeping into the valleys, the low clouds hovering above, and the road winding off into the distance—created a very calm and peaceful feeling. This became my favorite section both coming and going. At 30 miles, I could see two radio towers a couple of miles north—the clouds were so low, only half the towers were visible. After the Texaco Hill aid station, I thought I glimpsed a Snark ahead in the mist. I charged on with forks and hope, but soon discovered it was an active oil derrick instead. Also, somewhere in the 30 to 40-mile section of the course, I encountered a herd of cows. When they saw me coming, they started running, criss-crossing the road in front of me. Some late stragglers had to sprint to get ahead. They all ran to a feed pen area and most got

there while I was still a quarter-mile away. Then, I was treated to a bovine choir. I got the full vocal range, from bass to soprano moos. Several lined up shoulder to shoulder for better harmonization. As I passed, they went to pianissimo and as I left them behind, they again raised their voices to the heavens, fortissimo. Not confident in my hoofed musical interpretation, were they lamenting because I was leaving or were they cheering for the next runner? I rushed on.

At 43 miles, briefly running alongside the Interstate, it started to become breezy. At 48 miles, imagine my surprise when I ran right to the radio towers and turned north to the turnaround. Turning around was great. Running south, back to the towers, there was a great tailwind. Luckily, for me, the wind only blew in one direction throughout my race and I only had two bad direct headwind sections. It was mostly a crosswind. A bonus was meeting everyone on their own Snark hunts. I didn't see much soap, but almost all appeared ready to charm with smiles. Mark Henderson looked smooth and relaxed; Sue Johnston seemed happy and determined. Bobby Keogh was cutting up and Monica Scholtz was charming Snarks, cows, derricks, and runners, all with her beamish grin.

The day had cleared and the views looked to march off to Oklahoma, Missouri, and Colorado, depending on the direction run. Now I had to race the sun, keeping in mind the Bellman's words that "*Once it becomes dark, there's no chance of a Snark.*" He was wrong this time, as it was dark when I returned to Cassoday and found my Snark. Thirty-four out of 40 had successful Snark hunts while for those unfortunate six, "*The Snark was a Boojum, you see.*"