

ROCKIN' K

THE STEREOTYPE: KANSAS TO THE CORE

by Chris Wristen

Some call it flyover country, believing the heartland prairie is best viewed from an airplane window while journeying from one coast to the other. Why run here, when the coastal views along the West Coast, the historic trails of the east and the panorama of the Colorado Rockies tug at the imagination?

Besides, Kansas is flat, the land of fields and farms, right?

If you're looking for stereotypes like tornadoes and Toto, you'd better try the northeast corner of the state where the Run Toto Run races take place on rocky, hilly, root-covered single-track through the woods in the Sunflower State's most plentiful trail region. Truth be told, Kansas' trail-running scene is all about single-track, hills and woods – with one exception.

Welcome to Rockin' K, Kansas' lone trail ultra through the prairie. The 50-miler through the Smoky Hills of Kanopolis State Park is packed with unforgiving terrain similar to what Jesse James, Wyatt Earp and other Wild West frontiersmen plowed in the 1800s.

The steep sandstone bluffs; frigid, waist-deep water crossings; soft, orange sand; skin-slicing brush and cacti; and inescapable wind on the fully exposed prairie are stereotypical Kansas to the core.



RICK MAYO / MILE 90 PHOTOGRAPHY

Jeremy Morris on his way to his fifth-straight win in the 50-mile

"There's no course like it that I know of," says Jeremy Morris of Kearney, Nebraska. "I actually enjoy how challenging the course is and how it just completely drains you of all of your energy."

Adds Coleen Voeks of Kansas City, Kansas, a Colorado native and five-time finisher of the 50-miler: "I've run some hard mountain races, and this is up there in regards to pain." Runners have flocked to Kansas' oldest state park in early April for 16 straight years to test themselves on the brutal trails and savor the expansive beauty at this small, family-style event that's as much a family reunion as it is a trail race.

It's one of trail-running's hidden gems, and many of those who opt to skip the flyover and stop to run keep coming back year after year.

"If you are open to it, you tap into the early westward traveling pioneer spirits," Voeks says. "The landscape gets into your soul if you don't fight it. I feel wonder around every corner no matter how many times I do it. It keeps drawing me back with an eagerness that I don't feel for other courses."

The race consists of two loops on four interconnecting trail systems. First is a 27-mile journey through the prairie, up and down the bluffs and across two waist-deep horse ponds. Runners then complete an abbreviated second loop of the course. Both trips around the course include the notorious Big Bluff Loop, a five-mile jaunt that features three climbs so steep that runners must claw their way up with their hands – "show-stoppers" as Morris affectionately calls them.

Limited to 120 runners between the two distances, most Rockin' K participants sign up for the marathon – one loop. On race day, many of the 50-mile runners complete the first loop and decide they've had enough.

Few know the pain or the payoff of the course quite like Morris. He has raced Rockin' K seven straight years, six times in the 50-miler, including five consecutive victories. He capitalized on ideal weather conditions – starting temperature in the low 30s, high in the low 60s, wind blowing at only around 20 mph – to claim the 2014 victory in a course-record time of 7:32:10. Todd Nott of Plattsmouth, Nebraska, was a distant second in 8:52:14, and Jeremy Ebel of Lafayette, Colorado, finished third in 9:01:08. Lara Robinson of Boulder, Colorado, was seventh overall and the women's champion in 10:32:05.

"I think the perfect weather and the fact that I had no real cramping issues definitely helped," Morris says. "I don't think I could have had a better race on this course. It is going to be tough for me to top this result."

While Morris pursues victory at Rockin' K, others simply hope to survive the course. For Larry Long of Prairie Village, Kansas, 2014 was about redemption after he fell victim to blistering heat in his last attempt, and dropped after 43 miles.

"My heating/cooling system shut down. I was freezing and couldn't get myself warm," Long recalls. "It was on my bucket list to avenge the DNF."

Long accomplished his goal as he ran the full race with training partner and friend Sherrie Klover of Bonner Springs, Kansas.

Like many who've raced Rockin' K, Long wasn't willing to commit to return another year. He kept the door open, however, hinting that much like Voeks and Morris, he knows he'll be back again.

"Rockin' K is kind of like being in an unhealthy, abusive relationship – you know you should probably leave it behind, but you keep going back despite the suffering," he says. "This is a bucket list race." 🏃



Coleen Voeks running the second loop of the 50-mile race

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50 miles | Elevation gain: 3,374 feet | The race consists of two loops on four interconnecting trail systems. First is a 27-mile journey through the prairie, up and down the bluffs and across two waist-deep horse ponds followed by an abbreviated second loop of the course. Both loops include the notorious Big Bluff Loop, a five-mile jaunt that features three climbs so steep that runners must claw their way up with their hands.

50 MILES			
1. Jeremy Morris, 34, NE	7:32:10	6. Raymond Churgovich, 48, CO	10:28:34
2. Todd Nott, 49, NE	8:52:14	7. Lara Robinson, 41, CO	10:32:05
3. Jeremy Ebel, 29, CO	9:01:08	8. Phil Sheridan, 57	10:52:53
4. Glen Strandvold, 48, CO	9:55:15	9. Val Zajac, 29, CO	10:56:10
5. John Lacroix, 32, CO	10:16:41	10. Stuart Johnson, 54	10:56:28
		11. Chris Perry, 38	11:00:04
		12. Sherrie Klover, 47	11:03:53
		13. Larry Long Jr, 46	11:03:55
		14. Carl Wooten, 44, CO	11:14:03
		15. Coleen Voeks, 40	11:36:07
		16. Sheila Huss, 38, CO	11:36:08
		17. Deb Johnson, 54	11:57:39
		18. Betsey Goering, 34	12:07:52
		19. Shelby Berg, 44, CO	12:20:39
		20. Matthew Battiston, 46	12:33:45