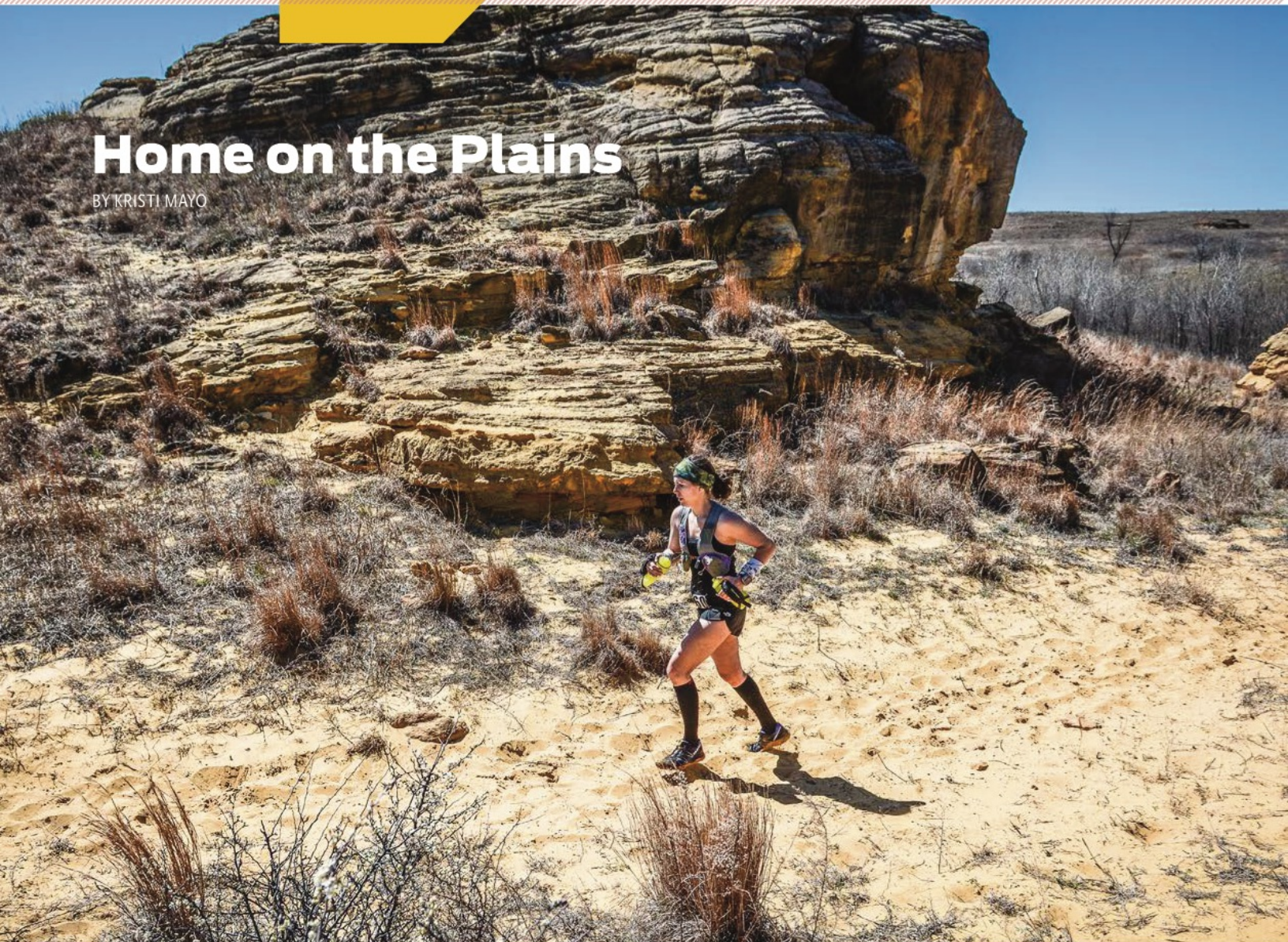




Home on the Plains

BY KRISTI MAYO



ABOVE: Kristi Mayo (author) in a Utah-esque section of Kansas. [📷 Rick Mayo/Mile 90 Photography]

BELOW: Ross Davison reacts to the chilly water. [📷 Rick Mayo/Mile 90 Photography]



About 20 minutes west of Salina, KS, we steer the Jeep south. The landscape around us buckles and folds into undulating topography in shades of gold and green. This year it's an early spring, so the Chickasaw plums are in bloom; their masses of white flowers dot the ravines and offset outcroppings of red sandstone. The subtle prairie palette is punctuated by a vast, unbroken blue sky. It feels like coming home.

Before Rick and I started doing race photography, we made the pilgrimage to Rockin K nearly annually. Rick ran his first 50-mile there. I crewed there while I was eight months pregnant with our daughter. I held my daughter's hands while she practiced her walking skills around the aid station. I watched her ring a cowbell and run the final few steps with her daddy to the finish line. And she ran me in the first time I finished the marathon on this course. The growth of our running experience, our

photography experience and our family can be measured by memories on this course.

For the 2016 edition, Rick will take the pictures, and I will run the marathon for the second time. We arrive before dawn and I shuffle into the shelter house, where a record number of 120 starters huddle near a fireplace, avoiding the 27-degree air outside. As the sky lights up with the first red and purple colors of dawn, I move away from the tension of the crowd and out toward the starting line. My mind is still, mirroring the morning sky. The crowd emerges from the shelter and reconvenes around me, someone says, "Go," and we move forward down the pavement, find the trailhead and the race has begun.

I drew on past experience – both crewing the race and running it – to prepare for Rockin K. I trained on bridle trails, as most of the course is on paths rutted by horse hooves. I focused on steep, short climbs, as the Big Bluff loop at Rockin K involves three hands-on-knees grinds. And while I trained,

I also reflected on what, exactly, makes the course so difficult. Everyone has their own demons: some runners will tell you it's the sections of deep sand that pull at your legs. Others will point to the waist-deep water crossings that keep your feet wet for a good part of the day. No one will deny

that the climbs in Big Bluff are tough. And for the 50 milers, who must run the course twice, the hardest part might be leaving the comfort of the shelter house to head out for another 25 miles.

Running Rockin K this year, I realized it's not just one aspect of the course that preys upon a

runner's weaknesses. It's all of those elements combined. One moment I am in the foot-sucking sand, and now I'm slipping over a 2-foot drop of smooth sandstone; first I am negotiating hoof-pocked ground, and now I'm twisting to avoid the thorny branches of the lovely Chickasaw plums; tip-toe across a beaver dam, then plunge into breath-taking cold water. The course refuses to yield a rhythm.

This year, nearly half of the 50-mile entrants either do not start or opt for a marathon finish, succumbing to the allure of hamburgers, beer, camp chairs and camaraderie at the shelter house. I cross the finish line into the arms of my now 8-year-old baby girl and receive hugs from the rest of our trail family. Even as time passes and this race

grows, it still offers its unique combination of challenges – and the warm feeling of coming home. 🌿

Rockin K 50-Miler

Ellsworth, KS // April 2

🏃 2,3* // 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.

1	Adam McRoberts, 41, CO	8:46:56
2	Todd Nott, 51, NE	9:23:04
3	Ronald Lapoint, 34, KS	9:32:10
4	Patrick Goschke, 29, CA	9:38:05
5	Mark Nygaard, 47, NE	10:23:10
6	Keith Wurm, 35, MO	10:32:02
7	Kristen Weigand, 36, MO	10:36:06
8	Todd Salzer, 42, CO	11:22:03
9	Krystle Dalke, 33, KS	11:26:20
10	Leia Anderson, 32, MO	11:37:17
11	Stuart Johnson, 56, KS	11:57:22
12	Carol Johnson, 29, KS	12:10:22
13	Dave Krishock, 56, KS	12:10:25
14	Scott Snyder, 41, KS	12:15:13
15	Deb Johnson, 56, KS	12:17:50
16	Barry Luck, 48, KS	12:18:32
17	Dennis Haig, 55, KS	12:39:19

Kristen Weigand sets a strong pace early en route to a first-place women's finish. [📷 Rick Mayo/Mile 90 Photography]

*See page 46 for key



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