

A STORY FROM



In her first 100-mile attempt, Christy Swearingen of Lee's Summit, Missouri, finished second overall (and first female). 📸 KRISTI MAYO | MILE 90 PHOTOGRAPHY

IN THE BACK

BY JONATHAN FLETCHER

CASSODAY, KS // OCTOBER 9

 **3,3' // 125 MILES, 100 MILES, 100K, 50 MILES**

Elevation gain (100 mi): 6,000 feet

A 50-mile out-and-back course of rolling hills on backcountry gravel roads with less than one mile of paved surface. Much of the course meanders through open range with stunning views of the vast expanse of the Flint Hills tallgrass prairie.

“It

wasn't supposed to go this way.” How many times have those words been spoken, grumbled, whined, even cried in the midst of an ultra? In my case, at the Heartland 100, they started before the race. For many of us, this race season wasn't the way it was supposed to go. My race was supposed to be a little affair in California that was set to end in Auburn on the 28th of June, but 2020 happened – as it did to all of us. So, it was time for a new race. I searched the internet for the right event later in the year – COVID has to be gone by October, right? And I kept coming back to the photos and description of Heartland. The course seemed intriguing to me – the Kansas Prairie, the Flint Hills, 100 miles of dirt roads that never seem like a road, open pastureland – you get the idea. I decided this was my race.

This weather report has to be wrong. It was not supposed to be like this. I had done the reading – this race has an average of 40-70 degrees (perfect running weather). There is no way that 85 degrees is the actual high. It is gonna change. And it did – it got warmer.

Driving around a couple of days before the race, that thought came back – it's not supposed to feel this warm. A month and a half ago, 86 wouldn't feel so hot. But all of a sudden, it got cool in North Carolina. All that summer heat adaptation seemed to evaporate with weeks of nice

cool running. “It's all good.” It's grassland and the wind will mitigate the heat – nothing to worry about.

The race started exactly the way it was supposed to: better than expected. In the early miles, I had the privilege of running with my dad who was running one of the shorter distances, which meant we got to share the first 25 miles of the race together. As we started in the dark and then eased into a grey fog, the simple beauty of the course became apparent. If you haven't enjoyed a run through Kansas tallgrass, you should rectify that situation. For those of us without

mountains, long-range views are generally interrupted by features of the landscape that preclude multi-mile vistas. Rolling through the Flint Hills, one is offered these views for all 100 miles – well, 50 miles out-and-back.

Almost through the first 25 miles, things went well. And then they didn't. Starting with the heat warming up, coupled with constant exposure (I think there was shade for about 45 seconds on the whole course). After that, my stomach started to go to an unsettled place. This was my race from about noon until 7 p.m. Oh, and where was that helpful breeze? For the

whole time I was in Kansas it was the least windy during this section. It actually felt stagnant. Facepalm.

It wasn't supposed to go like this. I had great plans – this was going to be a PR race. I know I was the lowest ranked runner in the field on Ultrasignup (I have been back-of-the-pack all my life), but that doesn't matter. I was ready. A cool quirk of Heartland is that they offer an early start for those who feel they will need an extra 2 hours – extending the deadline to 32 hours. Because I “knew” this was going to be a PR run, I ignored that email. In so doing, I had the unmitigated





OPPOSITE: *UR* columnist Errol "Rocket" Jones emerges from the fog during the morning hours of the 100-mile race. RICK MAYO | MILE 90 PHOTOGRAPHY

ABOVE: Nicole Fleming of Springfield, Missouri, (right) and her pacer, Gary Shaw, top one of the Flint Hills in the 125-mile race. RICK MAYO | MILE 90 PHOTOGRAPHY

LEFT: Alexander Abiang of Hope Mills, North Carolina, travels through the fog in the 100-mile race. KRISTI MAYO | MILE 90 PHOTOGRAPHY

pleasure of chasing cutoffs for 50+ miles. Until you have had the relative joy of fighting to stay ahead of cutoffs, you haven't lived.

I pressed into following simple mantras: Stay in the fight – it doesn't matter how you feel. Just keep moving and give yourself a chance to finish. It doesn't always get worse (this one keeps hope alive, especially at night). Things can actually get better. Still, there is the occasional groan, "It doesn't always get better," (not a mantra but still true). But for that first-timer out there, or the person trying again for the

finish and the buckle, allow me to encourage you. It doesn't actually have to get better. If you are moving, you are doing it. Even if you have the slightest margin on the cutoff, it can get done. At Heartland, I spent about the last 20 miles within 20 minutes of the cutoffs. I got to watch the U-Haul that they were using pull past me to multiple aid stations so they could break them down about 15 minutes after I came through.

It didn't go the way it was supposed to, but really, it didn't need to. Ultrarunning is not a story of perfect preparation and race planning. Ultra is all about

adaptation and endurance. It's that simple. One step, then another... for about 220,000 steps (if you are slow). In the end, I had a great race. It wasn't pretty and it wasn't always fun, but I got it done.

Heartland is a great race. It is a cool course, features great people, and has a handy little prize for the last place finisher. The Relentless Turtle Trophy is sitting in my office, and I am pretty pleased with that. ▲



TOP TO BOTTOM: Lindsey Heineken's feet tell the story of 100 miles on dusty gravel roads. RICK MAYO | MILE 90 PHOTOGRAPHY

When Dennis Haig isn't volunteering at the Heartland 100, he's running it. The 2020 event marked his sixth 100-mile finish on this course. RICK MAYO | MILE 90 PHOTOGRAPHY

Author Jonathan Fletcher runs with his father, Michael. RICK MAYO | MILE 90 PHOTOGRAPHY



Heartland

Cassoday, KS // October 9

3,3' // 125 MILES, 100 MILES, 100K, 50 MILES

125 MILES

1	Hans Van Zanten, 46, MO	22:41:57
2	Jaclyn Long, 38, KS	29:27:32
3	Nicole Fleming, 46, MO	31:14:41
4	Stephen Foster, 51, MO	33:22:59
5	Micah Bevins, 43, OK	35:32:10
6	Atlee Burpee, 63, PA	36:29:56
7	Jason Flores, 47, KS	36:42:33

100 MILES

1	Kris Tyson, 39, CO	18:47:18
2	Christy Swearingen, 41, MO	20:40:44
3	Cassie Kottke, 38, WI	22:57:39
4	Paul Schoenlaub, 61, MO	23:44:38
5	Piper Gray, 21, KY	23:46:29
6	Scott Hagerty, 52, KS	25:36:43
7	Rickety Cricket, 54, CO	26:24:54
8	Brandon Opaczewski, 41, IN	27:33:14
9	Daniel Robinson, 46, IL	27:33:15
10	Vincent Swendsen, 58, NC	28:20:42
11	Barb Kliner, 61, WI	28:20:43
12	Alexander Abiang, 54, NC	28:22:38
13	Lindsey Heineken, 35, KS	28:25:02
14	Joe Hermerding, 36, MN	28:29:19
15	Adam Monaghan, 37, MN	28:38:16
16	Dennis Haig, 60, KS	29:25:05
17	Rebecca Sudja, 44, KS	29:38:26
18	Jonathan Fletcher, 37, NC	29:47:36
19	Carri Smith-Marshall, 56, CA	30:08:28
20	Amy Fitzpatrick, 27, KS	30:09:11
21	William Sprouse, 51, KS	30:51:23

100K

1	Chris Perry, 44, KS	11:43:10
2	Jeffrey Walters, 48, KS	14:34:36
3	Tim Reynolds, 42, KS	14:35:36
4	Doug Baldwin, 55, MO	15:58:53
5	Mary Law, 41, OK	17:11:38
6	Isaura Davis, 33, TX	19:19:25
7	Natalia Harrison, 40, TX	19:30:07
8	Nik Cannell, 38, WA	20:32:29
9	Terry Rider, 65, KS	21:48:21
10	Scott Bailey, 43, OK	21:48:28

50 MILES

1	Eric Towle, 35, KS	9:09:09
2	Ella Reusser, 34, KS	9:11:57
3	Matthew Moore, 34, OK	10:48:25
4	Blaine Moore, 50, KS	11:21:10
5	Anita Fromm, 49, CO	12:29:21
6	Clifford Poessnecker, 34, NE	13:44:51
7	Carla Rosales-Banuelos, 37, KS	14:39:34
8	Duane Grigg, 69, MO	14:42:30
9	Laura Marks, 32, MO	14:51:49
10	Monique Garcia, 49, KS	14:51:49

*See page 50 for key

