# ULTRA running

## When a Marathon Just Isn't Enough

BY LARRY FREEZE

***Before you explore the Elk River Hiking Trail in Montgomery County, be advised that this is not your average walk in the woods. If hiking can ever be labeled "extreme," then this 15-mile stretch at Elk City Lake, just west of Independence, fits the bill.***

The 15-mile trail is located at Elk City Lake about one mile west of Independence, north of U.S. Highway 160.

For those daring enough, hiking is replaced by ultrarunning. The sport of ultrarunning attracts dozens of participants each fall to southeast Kansas to challenge the trail.

Believe it or not, marathon running can be considered a breeze when compared to the Flatrock 50K race that takes place the end of September each year. Competitors ranging in age from teens to 70s traverse the trail from east to west and back again. Another mile is added on a service road to bring the total to 50 kilometers, or about 31 miles.

It's not only the distance but the terrain that makes the Elk River Trail a formidable challenge for runners.

"The trail is extremely rugged and beautiful," said Eric Steele of Wichita, who conceived the idea of a race in 1995. "Runners always comment on how they are in awe of how incredibly beautiful the area is, how the trail runs along the bluffs providing incredible views of the lake."

While the average marathon is usually run on a smooth course, that's not the case with Elk River. The rocky trail is full of ups and downs.

"The race is called Flatrock, but there's hardly anything flat on the course," Steele said. "There are no greater climbs than 40 or 50 feet, but it's just nonstop. That's part of what brings people back and why we've developed such a following."

That following continues to grow, as the race will celebrate its 18th anniversary on September 29. Last year, 123 runners from 16 states, Canada and the United Kingdom participated.

While the majority of runners tackle the 50K course, a 25K race has also been offered in recent years.

"People started to develop an interest in a shorter race," Steele

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said. "So they go halfway out on the trail and come back. People from 10 states ran in that last year."

The trail itself was the brainchild of local residents Bud and Dolores Baker in the 1970s. The Kansas Trails Council helped carve it out of the wilderness, which includes sheer rock walls, tunnels and a waterfall.

Being on the edge of the Chautauqua Hills and Osage Cuestas regions, the trail seems a bit out of place for Kansas.

"A typical reaction is, 'I can't believe I'm in Kansas,'" Steele said. "It has an Ozarks feel, like being in the woods in Missouri or Arkansas."

The trail has been designated

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The rocky path along the Elk River Trail presents a formidable challenge to ultrarunners like Matthew Brunett from Wichita.

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as a National Recreation Trail under the U.S. Department of the Interior's National Trail System. So majestic is the setting and geography that it has been named the best hike in Kansas by *Backpacker* magazine.

As the trail was being developed years ago, Steele would visit it as a member of the Boy Scouts. In the early '90s, he showed the trail to some of his running friends, who immediately saw its potential as a demanding race venue.

Steele, 46, credits the popularity of the race as a key reason for the trail's health and beauty.

"The race has been beneficial to keeping the trail open," he said. "We're pretty proud of that."

Steele, along with other volunteers, expend a great deal of time and effort keeping the trail clear of growth.

"We've spent a lot of time, especially on the lesser-used western part, keeping out the extra growth," he added. "It doesn't get a lot of traffic like Lake Perry or Lake Clinton in northeast Kansas, because it's not near a major freeway. And you can't mountain bike on it."

It may seem ironic, but Steele-an ultrarunner himself-has never competed in his own race.

"I'm too busy with organizational and leadership duties," he said, "and it is my personal responsibility to make sure all of the runners have an incredible experience at Flatrock."

Steele expects both the 25K and 50K races to continue growing in popularity, simply because of the challenge the Elk River Trail presents.

"For people in this area who have done marathons and are developing an interest in ultrarunning," Steele said, "this is the race you have to do. New runners are told by those who know, 'You haven't done anything until you've done Flatrock.'" **KCL**

**For more information, visit http://flatrock50.org.**


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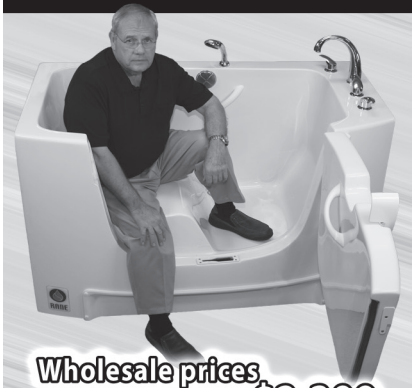

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