

He ran for 37 straight hours. What does it take to survive 154 miles?

Taylor Eldridge | The Wichita Eagle | 2026-09-08

<https://sports.yahoo.com/articles/ran-37-straight-hours-does-120100549.html>

KUHF archival reading copy | KUHF-SRC-000161. Generated page numbering. Historical event dates are indexed separately. Original credits and copyright retained.

At 9 p.m. Sunday, two headlamps disappeared into the darkness at Sedgwick County Park.

They belonged to the last two runners in Laps for Love, each beginning a 4.167-mile loop for the 37th consecutive hour.

One soon stopped moving.

Race director Joseph Hamer could see Brian Walden's light stalled along the course. Walden had covered 150 miles since the race began at 9 a.m. Saturday, answering the starting bell every hour for a day and a half. His legs were failing. His stomach had shut down. Everything inside him argued that he had reached the end.

Hamer grabbed his megaphone and hurried after him.

He called through the darkness with a story from another backyard ultramarathon two weeks earlier. A runner had stopped on the course, ready to surrender, then changed his mind. He completed the lap and continued for another 50 miles.

Walden listened. He stood there a little longer.

Then he decided to try again.

There would be no 50-mile revival this time. The hour expired before Walden could complete the loop. His race was over.

But Hamer had seen enough.

"It was so emotional," Hamer said. "To watch somebody keep moving forward when you know everything inside them is telling them to quit. ... I just feel so lucky to be able to witness all of it."

Farther ahead, Brenyn St. Vrain completed the clockwise loop before 10 p.m. He had won the Laps for Love Backyard Ultra after 37 consecutive hours and 154 miles — nearly six marathons, pieced together one four-mile loop at a time.

Walden was credited with the "assist," a backyard term for the runner who makes the winner's final lap possible. St. Vrain needed Walden to answer the bell for the 37th hour before he could complete the last loop alone.

"You can only go as far as the other person will take you," St. Vrain said.

In a race designed to leave one runner standing, even victory required someone else to refuse defeat.



Race director Joseph Hamer explains the rules to runners before the start of the Laps for Love Backyard Ultra at Sedgwick County Park.

How does a backyard ultramarathon work?

Every hour, a backyard ultra race begins again.

The runners still standing return to the same corral and wait for the same bell. Then they have 60 minutes to complete another 4.167-mile loop. The peculiar distance is intentional: 24 laps of 4 1/6 miles equal exactly 100 miles.

Finish in 45 minutes and the remaining 15 are yours. Finish in 59 and there is barely time to turn around. Eating, drinking, changing clothes, treating blisters and closing tired eyes must fit into whatever remains before the next bell.

No lead can be accumulated. Whether a runner finishes a lap first or last, everyone starts the next one together.

The format strips endurance running to one recurring question: Can you complete four more miles?

The race has no predetermined distance or ending. It continues until one runner completes a lap that nobody else does.

"What makes it unique is that you don't have to be an elite or super-fast runner," Walden said. "You can just be pretty normal, as long as you can cover those 4.167 miles every hour. It's less about physical ability and more about your mind."

Walden's own path into the sport supports his case. The 44-year-old Wichita native was not an athlete in his school days or through his 20s. He began running in his 30s, took up marathons in 2019 and ran his first ultramarathon in 2025.

Laps for Love was only his fourth backyard race.

St. Vrain also discovered distance running after high school. The 24-year-old Bishop Carroll graduate played basketball and baseball in high school but never competed in cross country or track. This was his third backyard ultra.

Ninety-eight runners started Saturday. They included experienced ultramarathoners chasing personal records, marathon runners testing a new distance and others hoping to complete a handful of loops.

"Someone could come out and do one lap and that might be the furthest they've ever gone before," said Melanie Summers, who led all women with 62.5 miles in her backyard ultra debut. "So it gives everyone an opportunity to push themselves. Really, everyone has a chance to come out a winner in a race like this."



A runner battles the physical and mental toll of the Laps for Love Backyard Ultra, where competitors completed a 4.167-mile loop every hour until only one remained.

Why every minute matters in a backyard ultramarathon

Four miles in an hour was not the hard part for most runners. The decisions surrounding those miles determined how long they lasted.

Run faster and gain more time to recover, but expend energy that cannot be replaced. Slow down and conserve effort, but surrender minutes needed for food, foot care or sleep.

The calculation changed with the conditions, as temperatures exceeded 100 degrees Saturday and Sunday at Sedgwick County Park.

Hamer believed the leaders might have survived another night and reached 48 hours — exactly 200 miles — in more forgiving weather. Instead, the afternoon sun kept pressing down on the same exposed stretches of pavement, lap after lap.

St. Vrain responded by slowing to 54- or 55-minute loops during the day. The pace reduced his exertion but left only a few minutes before he had to return to the corral. After dark, he pushed closer to 50 minutes.

The reward was the extra time.

Eight minutes might allow a runner to sit, swallow a few bites and close his eyes. Five minutes could mean choosing between the restroom and a change of socks.

"It's a fun game to play," Walden said.



Crew members use humor to lift runners' spirits and keep them moving during the Laps for Love Backyard Ultra at Sedgwick County Park.

The most competitive runners relied on crews of two to four relatives or close friends who remained at the park throughout the entire race. They filled cups and prepared ice towels before the runner returned. They sponged down overheated shoulders, found dry clothes, prepared food and kept track of the clock. Conversation provided its own relief, a few minutes in which somebody else could carry the thinking.

"I had the easy part: I just focused on running four miles in an hour," St. Vrain said. "If I didn't have my crew with me, there's no way I would have lasted that long."

Most of the first day felt more social than St. Vrain expected. With runners controlling their pace, they moved in groups, traded stories and encouraged people they had only recently met. The conversations shortened the loop and made hours pass without feeling like hours.

The mood survived after fatigue thinned the field. As darkness approached, Daniel Herbert's crew could not find his headlamp. Another crew heard about the problem, opened its bag and handed over a spare.

Herbert, a 34-year-old Wichita native who now coaches distance runners, sees those moments as the source of the backyard's growing appeal. Distance running can be lonely even when hundreds share the course. A backyard keeps restoring the group at the top of every hour.

"You have to come into a backyard race with curiosity of what your body is going to do when you reach those challenges," Herbert said. "When you have that support and encouragement from people who love you, it allows you space to explore that curiosity and find out what's on the other side of that point you thought you couldn't go to."

"That's what makes it so addicting," Herbert added. "You get to explore that unknown."



Runners leave the starting corral for another 4.167-mile loop during the Laps for Love Backyard Ultra at Sedgwick County Park.

An eating contest with running between courses

The heat made eating its own endurance test.

Runners needed calories every hour, including at times when food would never enter their normal routine. Sweet snacks lost their appeal. Stomachs turned. The body required fuel and simultaneously rejected it.

"Sometimes people joke that backyard is more of an eating competition than a running competition," Herbert said. "A lot of it is who can stay the most consistent on food."

St. Vrain usually can eat a burger or quesadilla during a long race. At Laps for Love, his stomach would not allow it. He managed fruit snacks, applesauce and a few bites of beef jerky.

He wanted between 150 and 200 calories per lap. He estimated he consumed roughly half that.

"I knew I needed to eat, but I just couldn't get anything down," St. Vrain said. "Stuff that usually sounds good just didn't sound good to me."

Sleep offered no better bargain. A runner first had to complete the loop quickly enough to create an opening. Then came the work of sitting down, closing their eyes, waking up and reaching the corral before the bell.

St. Vrain occasionally rested his eyes and used a small amount of caffeine. He doubted that he truly slept at all.

By the end of his 36th loop, he said he started to feel "delusional."

"Thoughts start creeping into your mind and you're looking for every excuse to give up," St. Vrain said. "You're hurting too bad, you can't do it anymore.' You start to negotiate with yourself. It really took every ounce of me not to quit."



Runners make their way around the 4.167-mile course at Sedgwick County Park during the Laps for Love Backyard Ultra. A new loop began every hour until only one runner remained.

Why backyard ultra runners need their competition

No one arrived at that struggle alone.

One runner began cramping badly around the sixth loop. Under the punishing afternoon sun, the runner appeared finished. Competitors and crews kept calling him forward until he completed the lap.

Then he returned for the next one.

He eventually reached all 16 loops he had set as his goal.

The encouragement was genuine, but so was the competition. Each survivor allowed the others to pursue another personal best. The person who might eventually defeat a runner was also the only person who could keep his race going.

"If you're one of those top guys and you're wanting to hit a new distance PR, you're relying on those other guys too," Walden said. "It takes at least two people to keep it going, so a lot of times you'll see them encouraging the other."

By the end of loop 20, only Herbert, Walden and the St. Vrain brothers remained. The four spent the next six hours circling the park together before Herbert stopped after 26 laps and 108.3 miles.

Jadyn St. Vrain, Brenyn's older brother and the defending champion, reached 31 laps and 129.2 miles.

That left Walden and Brenyn St. Vrain.

"It is pretty odd going from competitive team sports to this," St. Vrain said. "When it was just me and Brian there at the end, we were talking about how we both wanted each other to win, but we also don't want to quit."

Neither wanted victory handed to him. Together, they carried the race into its 37th hour.



Brenyn St. Vrain, the eventual winner, leads a group of runners through the darkness during an early stage of the Laps for Love Backyard Ultra at Sedgwick County Park.

(Kristi Mayo/Mile 90 Photography)

After 154 miles, one question remained

Hamer brought the backyard format to Wichita in search of a race that could build community. While researching local charities, he discovered Family Promise of Greater Wichita, which helps families with children overcome homelessness and housing insecurity.

The connection felt immediate. Hamer saw families in the runners and Family Promise in the crews surrounding them — offering encouragement, meeting urgent needs and helping people continue toward a destination they could not always reach alone.

Laps for Love has raised more than \$20,000 for Family Promise across its first two years, Hamer said. Organizers pledged \$100 from every registration to support emergency shelter, case management, rental assistance and long-term housing stability.

For 37 hours, runners kept returning to the same line because somebody helped them get there. Sometimes it took food or ice. Sometimes a borrowed headlamp. Sometimes a familiar voice carrying through the darkness when the mind had begun searching for permission to stop.

St. Vrain had entered the race with one promise to himself: He could accept failing to complete a loop in time. He would not willingly quit.

When St. Vrain returned alone from loop 37, he had covered approximately 154 miles in 37 hours without meaningful sleep. No prize money awaited him. He checked on Walden, later allowed himself a few celebratory beers and spent much of Monday drinking water and sleeping.

The blisters would heal. His stomach would recover. The question that brought him to the starting line remained.

"I'm still trying to find a good reason why I like these races," St. Vrain said with a laugh. After considering it, he returned to the question that drives him. "I guess it's about finding out, 'What are my limits? How far can I go?' That feeling ... it's just so addicting."

Thirty-seven times, the bell asked whether he had another loop in him. Thirty-seven times, St. Vrain answered.

What will bring him back is not knowing what might have happened had the bell rung again.