

## RATTLESNAKES AND SOLITUDE

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“Where else but Bishop would I be watching out for rattlesnakes, but not see another runner for two hours?” asked a Swiss runner at the finish line of the 17<sup>th</sup> annual Bishop High Sierra Ultra-marathons. Where indeed? Many snakes were sighted, or perhaps the same 32 snakes were sighted by many runners, but the reports flooded in regardless.

Cool, sunny and fine weather prevailed, and the Race Director thankfully realized she had dodged a bullet, as weekend weather before and after the race was cold, snowy and windy – happily, global warming prevented its being even colder. Early morning freezes still greet Bishop residents at the end of May.

Race weekend started on Friday with packet pick-up at Sage to Summit, our local running store. From there, runners progressed to Whisky Creek restaurant for a wonderful pasta dinner, race briefing and raffling the race quilt, donated by Deb Neumann.

Race Director, Marie Boyd, announced her retirement from the race in 2013, the 20<sup>th</sup> annual presentation of the Bishop High Sierra Ultra-marathons, to a stunned crowd. The race is a huge time commitment, and with her retirement age approaching, it is time to work with a new Race Director, whoever that might be.

On Saturday morning, at 6:00 a.m, a field of 285 runners headed into the Eastern Sierra foothills to do battle with the 20 mile Fun Run, 50k, 50 mile and 100k races. By mid-morning, the first of the 20 mile runners had returned, and from then until 1:00 a.m. timers were busy recording finishes, often for 3 races at once. Two hundred and fifty nine runners completed their missions.

While not an ultra-distance event, the 20 mile Fun Run attracted a great field who took from 2:47:16 to 8:35:30 to finish the distance. A number of finishers opted into the run when it was apparent their day had taken a turn for the worse. Pami Cheese finished, despite falling, breaking her wrist, chipping a tooth and walking the last 3 miles accompanied by Bishop High School cross-country team members.

The 50k (or really 52k) event was won in record time by local runner, Dan Yarborough. His 4:00:48 left him wondering where those 48 seconds could be eliminated! At 46 years of age, Dan is still a force to be reckoned with in distance events. Ladies winner, Anne Langstaff (a 1999 50 mile winner) was challenged by the hills and altitude, but finished with an amazing 6:05:37 – a fine time on this high altitude and hilly course.

Perennial winner of the 50 mile event, and now 10 time finisher, Jeff Kozak was an hour slower than last year. His 8:08:42 reflected the 2 miles of snow on the roads of the Edison Loop, as did most of the times for the longer distance events. Sada Crawford ran to first place in 9:05:55, despite a heavy fall, severe bruising and gravel rashes needing attention at the finish line.

The 100k event has now achieved a fine reputation. “Can’t recall running a tougher 100k any time in my years of running ultras!” was John Radich’s summation of the day. Winner Juan Sanchez (10:51:30) waited patiently for the rest of the field to finish. Women’s winner, Jamie Frink set a new record of 13:02:02, and then we all waited until 1:06:52 for the last runner, Yen Darcy. The general consensus

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was - “a difficult event, worthy of attention from runners seeking a challenge, or training for the most demanding 100 mile trail events”

Runners face the character building choice at Tungsten City aid station (48.5 miles) to continue the 100k race, or drop into the 50 mile event with the Millpond finish line clearly visible in the distance. Those who persevered were treated to an incredible valley view, starry night sky, and the unspeakable Sage Summit aid station, peopled by the likes of C2M RD, Chris Scott, former OTHC RD, Chris Rios, and their band of camp followers. Reports of merriment, multitudinous food choices and much runner support filtered down to the finish line.

An unmanned turnaround at 56 miles, with runners selecting from a bucket of numbered poker chips, was followed by re-climbing the 1000', 1 mile, 9 switchback trail back to Sage Summit aid station and then 6 miles to the finish. Random finisher's prizes were awarded, including 3 pairs of running shoes, and complimentary entries to next year's 100k event.

A heavy winter left much more snow on the mountains than normal. There was a brief consideration of re-routing the 50 mile and 100k races to the “Plan B” option, although with careful scrutiny of the roads by the trail marking crew on the previous Thursday, it was felt that runners were capable of meeting the added challenge of snow. In fact, if there is snow at Bishop Ultras, there will almost certainly be snow on Western States trails, so here was an opportunity to practice! The Overlook aid station was deleted this year, and runners instead had to punch a hole in their race bib to attest to their reaching the correct turn-around point.

An avalanche of runner “thank you” emails greeted the Race Director in the days following the race. Superlatives abounded – “best aid stations, best food, best volunteers, best trail markings, best rattle snakes, best race ever!!!” With an army of the greatest volunteers, how could we fail?

Ham radio communications were augmented by the addition of several volunteers from the Ventura area, very experienced in tracking large fields of runners over extended and remote areas. Big Pine Fire Department delivered and set up a huge generator, giving the finish line the capability of lights, cooking and running computers all day without interruption. The Salvation Army provided the use and staffing of their Field Kitchen, and a wonderful array of hot and cold food was available for runners and crews.

Rita Klabacha manned the computer all day and night, and results were posted to the race website by the following day. A team of recorders stood by and faithfully wrote down every finish time, and were happy to note that every runner who had dropped into a shorter distance insisted their time was entered into the correct distance. Every runner who completed the 100k had the poker chip ready, and all 50 mile and 100k finishers had indeed punched a hole in their bib.

The trail marking teams, under the direction of Chief Henschman Jan Gnass, started their task in the days before the race, ran their respective events, and by Sunday afternoon, had completely cleared the course, as required by permit issuer, the United States Forest Service. Several runners picked up and brought in discarded packets of gels, for which the Race Director is very grateful - the race has a 5 year permit, but that is conditional on the trails being cleared of all markings and trash.

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Aid station crews have elevated their game to an art form. Dress up, various themes, plus off the wall menu choices greet runners. The conversations at the hospital, for weeks before the race, reflected the efforts being made – trips to Costco for decorations, menu items, what colour wigs to wear! Runners were effusive in their praise for the cheerful volunteers, variety of food available and wonderful atmosphere.

Awards for finishers, age group awards and overall finisher's prizes come from local artists – pottery and photography are now a race tradition, and runners happily accepted mugs, medallions and local scenic photographs.

Hospital support for the race contributes to the success of this event. All departments are represented on race day, and in the weeks before and after the event. Funds raised are donated to the Northern Inyo Hospital Foundation's equipment fund. With our new addition partially complete, and hopes for moving into the new building before the end of 2011, there will be many opportunities to provide "extras" not in department budgets.

My tenure as Race Director has an end point, but I do expect this event will continue for many years to come.

Entries open for 2011 on October 1, 2010, at [Active.com](http://Active.com).