

HURL Elkhorn...a Volunteer's Perspective

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I have no race volunteer experience, but the Elkhorn Endurance Run was my first ultra, so it seemed appropriate to be my first volunteer experience as well. In the past two years I had run many a mile through the Elkhorns, so trekking into the Montana backcountry to pump creek water and slice watermelon struck me as a fun task. The trouble was, my wife was on the other side of the country visiting family, leaving me to wrangle 2 year old and 5 year old boys. Since I had previously hiked 6 miles back and 3000' up to clear trail in preparation for the race, I expected backcountry babysitting to be manageable.

After purchasing all the required perishables and collecting the necessary equipment, race director Steve Engebrecht and the core of the Helena Ultra Runners League sorted everything for the appropriate aid stations and worked out the volunteer schedule to make sure runners never ran through an empty aid station.

My trip started the day before the race outside Jefferson City, Montana with a 6 mile drive on unmaintained forest service road. After a brief escort for a ranger with a four wheeler that wouldn't start, a sidewall puncture requiring a tire change in the rain, and a detour to ask horseback riders for directions, we arrived at the site of the aid station. It turns out camping with small children is a breeze if they're worn out. It probably helps that Montana summers mean nightfall and bedtime come well after 9 pm.

After a sound sleep, the rest of the morning aid station crew arrived. Having an aid station run entirely by ultrarunners makes for a well organized aid station. With two gravity filters and a hand pump, we were ready for the lead 50k runners. The Capital City Amateur Radio Club had a radio station operating to keep us informed of the timing for the runners coming through. Since they've started helping out, we no longer have participants spending the night lost in the backcountry.

The lead 50k runners came through a few hours after their start, and anyone unfamiliar with the course remarked about the difficulty of our small town mountain race. I was disappointed to miss the fun of running the Elkhorn, but knowing the difficulty of the course I was also happy to be well rested and able to drive straight home.

Early in the afternoon the front of the 50 mile pack came through. It looked closely contested at our 40 mile location with the 1st and 2nd place runners switching places at the aid station, and the 3rd and 4th place runners coming in less than 10 minutes later. The aid station was abuzz with speculations about the next 14 miles to the race finish--we all knew the route to the next aid station was a demoralizing climb, and that anything could happen on the final downhill from there to the finish.

As the sun brought in the 50 degree temperature swing I've come to expect on this run, my boys made good use of their squirt guns. Kids love squirting people and runners love being cooled off by smiling fans. By mid-afternoon the kids had worn themselves out and were ready to head home. I was glad to be missing the cooler temperatures the afternoon rain was soon to bring.

I highly recommend volunteering at an aid station as a way to get small kids into the woods and keep them occupied for several hours. Seeing ultrarunners nearing the end of their race is a great way to get excited about training, and bringing children to the aid station gives them a better idea of what their parents are doing during those day long training runs. Hopefully next year, I'll have what it takes to hold steady for 50 miles of rough trail in the mountains of Montana.