

HURL Elkhorn 50 Mile...It's a good pain, right?

Andy Reed, 50 mile winner

The **HURL Elkhorn Endurance Runs** promise, according to the race website, '*...big time challenge, small town feel.*' Race director Steven Engebrecht adds '*We challenge you to find a more difficult 50 mile course anywhere.*'

On all fronts, the Elkhorn 50 miler, lived up to it's billing.

I always relish the opportunity to run new trails, but I have to admit, now wrongly so, that the hills around Helena, Montana, have never been a draw. Typically, as I've headed south from Alberta, Canada, down Interstate 15 to Utah or Colorado, I've merely glanced at these hills, not knowing what gems are hidden beyond view. I won't make that mistake again! The hills look somewhat tame from the I-15. Believe me, they are anything but, and the Elkhorn 50 will give you a real ass kicking if you haven't put in the requisite training.

This year, a modified course promised an additional 3 miles of single track, adding 450ft of climbing to an already challenging 13,450 feet of climbing. Throw in temperatures close to 100 degrees, and you can see why this is not a race to be underestimated.

The race started early at 5am from the Willard Creek trailhead. Primitive camping was available, but proved popular and a real community of like minded trail runners up for the challenge sprung up the evening before. The heat was evident immediately on rising early at 3:30am on race morning. Pockets of warm air drifted through the start finish area. It was going to be a scorcher, especially for the Canadian contingent, more used to down parkers at this time of day.

The race start was relaxed. We hit single track immediately. Head lamps were mandatory, but I suspect the full moon would have been adequate. There was little breeze and the silvery hue of moonlight lit the way. It was a beautiful setting as we slowly climbed in the dark up Willard and Jackson creeks, with the Elkhorn mountains enticing us in the distance. Occasional elk were startled by our presence, and charged away into the undergrowth.

The early miles were easy, the pace gentle, and the climbs runnable. I joined a small group up front. Locals and past participants, it was a good group to hang with. They knew the way, and the difficulties.

As we climbed upwards, headlamps were soon discarded. First light revealed breathtaking views of distant ranges. We crested 7000ft, then began the first of many rocky and technical singletrack descents. I feared for my quads later in the day, so descended conservatively. Fast and nimble feet were required to negotiate the drops. Wide grins were evident as we stopped to refuel at Tepee creek aid station after a furious descent.

Soon we were climbing again. Temperatures were warming up now, but feeling good on the climbs, I moved into the lead. I had been passed on the early descents, and nursing a minor

foot injury for a few weeks, I was deliberately conscious to pick my way easily down the rocky descents. The climbs are generally my strength, and this was my opportunity to put some time between myself and the chasers. Power hiking, keeping within myself, I was soon alone, 15 miles in. The trail was beautiful, and I took time to take it all in. Twisting, dusty single track wound it's way across exposed grassy hillsides, rocky ridges and ancient old mining roads. We crossed numerous muddy creeks, and scrambled through dense forest. There is no pavement in this race, and 85% is single track. Hard to beat.

Eventually I was descending an old road into the historic ghost town of Elkhorn at mile 30, and the main crew access point on the course. The early miles seemed to have flown by. The varied trail had certainly entertained and challenged. No fear of boredom here! The legs felt great though, and I knew I was having a good day. My family greeted me, anxious to see how I was doing. They have become extremely proficient at crewing duties over the years, and I trust them to get me fueled and back out into the race efficiently. This time was no different, and all too soon, I was leaving them, having had a very efficient pitstop. The historic old town looked like a place to explore, but the race was on, so no time to dawdle!

My crew was well prepared for the conditions; I had an ice filled bandana looped around my neck, and cupfuls of ice down my race vest. The climb out of Elkhorn town up to Leslie Lake and the Skyline mine was a brute. The trail began as a rocky, loose and exposed boulder strewn old road. It was difficult to run, and with numerous steep pitches, it rapidly became a baking hot hands-on-knees type of affair. I was glad of the ice in my pack, keeping the core temperature down.

Leslie Lake was an oasis. The single track trail skirted around the shores, and it was tempting to take a dip. I refrained but repeatedly dowsed my cap in the numerous feeder creeks. I sensed I had a good lead, but felt the need to keep pushing, as no one had any idea where my chasers were. The swivel-head was in full action! After a steep climb from the lake, it's a dash across some primitive and indistinct trail, before a 1500 ft plunge down to Tizer creek and Manley Park. The trail was brilliantly marked, and renowned for losing my way, I was glad the trail crew had done such a good job! It's a rare day that I don't get lost! I was able to concentrate on the running and not worry about the directions.

As I crossed the grassy hump of Manley Park, in waist high grass, it was a relief to reach the friendly and encouraging aid station of Tizer Creek for refreshments. Here I joined the 50km course, and after almost 20 miles alone it was nice to see some other runners. Sensing another runner up the trail is like the proverbial dangling carrot, and with renewed vigor I set off up the final climb to Elk Park. The grade is very runnable, but with temperatures hovering around 97 degrees, and 45 miles in, it was more of a run/hike. I felt guilty to be hiking, and reminded myself that to dig deep now would bring rewards.

Soon I was descending steeply and after a few painful miles the technical loose trail eased into a smooth, hard packed single track. The final miles reverse the initial gentle climb of the

early morning, and I pushed hard on this perfect last stretch to take the win. I was glad I did, as it turned out that second place Chase Parnell was less than 6 minutes back!

I cannot say enough good things about this race. The organization, trails and scenery make for a highly memorable day out. A great crew hung out at the finish line until 10pm to see in the last finishers. The atmosphere was relaxed and sociable. A few beers with new and old friends, and even a slice of chocolate cake, cooked on site, made for a fun evening. My legs will take some time to recover, but hey, that's a good pain, right?

If you're a devotee of difficult, technical trails, and big elevation changes, consider adding the HURL Elkhorn Endurance Runs to your bucket list. The low key atmosphere is refreshing, and the Montana hospitality is outstanding.