

2009 Heartland 50- and 100-mile Ultramarathon

by Gary Henry, Kansas Ultrarunners Society

Cold, wind, and four sub-18 hour finishers in the hundred-mile race marked the 10th running of the Kansas Ultrarunners Society's annual Heartland 50- and 100-Mile Ultramarathon, Oct. 10-11 in the rugged Flint Hills of Eastern Kansas.

In the 50-mile, 43 of 44 starters made it to the turn-around at the Teeterville Road aid station and back again for the finish.

Long-time Heartland volunteer Dave Dinkel started the clock and said "go" at 6 a.m., Saturday morning under clear black skies glittering with stars. Temperatures were below freezing, but hopes were high as the runners, including 61 starters in the hundred-mile, shuffled, loped or tore off into the darkness.

There was a brief flare of color and light at dawn, but it didn't last as cold, gray clouds blew in from the north and swiftly clamped down on the sunrise. The sun wasn't licked, though. It fought through the clouds all morning.

It didn't fight hard enough. By afternoon, the sun had dropped from the race leaving a sullen gray sky scowling down on the hills, valleys, cattle and the tall, waving, brown prairie grasses.

Even earlier, during brief happy moments of sunshine, freezing breezes from the North between 10 and 20 mph chilled runners, especially those who'd started out in shorts and other light apparel.

"It was like running through ice-water," commented Brad Bishop, Kansas City, Mo., who nevertheless grabbed a third-place finish in only his second 50-mile start.

The 50-mile's fourth overall and first-place woman, Kathy Youngren, of hilly Huntsville, Ala., also set the women's course record in 8:38.

Kathy, 35; Brad, 24; and second-place 50-miler Brad Smythe, 31, Raleigh, N.C., all finished behind Phil Sheridan, 52, Ellsworth, Kan., who came in at 7:33. It was Phil's 2nd victory in the 50 at Heartland.

The veteran finisher and volunteer of multiple Heartland 50s and 100s celebrated his win by reporting to the Texaco Hill aid station in the hundred-mile race and staying up all night helping the other volunteers feed and water the cold, footsore hundred-milers who'd made it to the 70-mile mark.

In the hundred-mile race, home-state Kansas runners took four of the top five finishes. Daniel Schmidt, 51, Salida, Colo., was the only out-of-stater in the fast first five, taking third in 17:34 – a time that would've won the 2006 and 2004 races, and would've come close in 2005.

Jess McNeely, 40, Wichita, won first place honors in 17:02, fourth-fastest time ever, followed 25 minutes later by fellow Wichitan Scott Hill, 30.

And yet another Wichitan, Tony Clark, 31, paced fourth-place Kyle Amos, 34, Olathe, into a 17:37 finish. Darin Schneidewind, 40, Lyndon, took 5th in 18:19, in only his second hundred-miler, just under a year since his first ultra – the Rock Creek 50K Trail Ultra, at Perry Lake, Kan.

All the Kansans, except Darin, are Heartland 100 veterans. And except for Tony, who was pacing, not racing, they all set personal records.

Course record-holder Paul Dewitt can breathe easy, though, as his 2007 time of 14:26 still stands as Heartland's all-time fastest hundred.

Champion marathoner and ultrarunner Amy Palmiero-Winters, 37, Hicksville, N.Y., captured first-place women's honors in the hundred, along with 9th overall. An amputee, the thin metal running prosthesis taking the place of the lower left leg she lost in a motorcycle accident mirrored the steely resolve that carried her to an 18:54 finish.

Amy was just 15 minutes shy of Sue Johnston's 2002 course record of 18:39.

Second-place woman and 11th overall, Susan Lance, 49, Whitesburg, Ga., was barely 20 minutes behind in 19:17.

Front-runners and the rest of the field alike ran all day hammered by the North wind for much of the race on the course's lengthy and numerous East-West sections. They got it in the face where the dirt and gravel roads turned north.

As night and temperatures both fell, the murderous crosswind kept blowing.

Fortunately, the aid station volunteers had hot food and caffeine ready for runners who needed to warm up and wake up. That may have been one reason why, that despite brutal weather, the 20 DNFs – about a third – were only marginally more than the race sees under ideal conditions.

On the positive side, the three hours of rain predicted for Saturday afternoon never happened.

Heartland 2009 ended 26 minutes before the 30-hour cut-off as Joe Galloway, 52, Des Moines, Iowa, crossed the finish line and staked the final claim to the race's silver and gold finisher's belt buckle with the buffalo design and "Spirit of the Prairie" inscription.

Heartland 2009 was a contradictory race – with some of the worst conditions in Heartland history, from start to finish; and some of the best performances, first to last.