

2014 BEACON ROCK 50K RACE REPORT FOR ULTRARUNNING MAGAZINE

by Matt & Kerri Stebbins

Elevation gain: 7400 feet

Elevation loss: 7400 feet

Starters: 94

Finishers: 71

Course description: Gradual climbs and descents on double track and jeep road; lush single-track through heavily-canopied forest; screaming downhill and steep ascents featuring vistas up and down the Columbia River Gorge. A sweet mix of terrains, offering a selection of extremely runnable trails broken up by rocky, technical sections.

RACE REPORT:

With long, runnable sections of singletrack and a smaller entrants' list compared to other races in the series, the Beacon Rock 50 km sometimes offers the illusion that it's a relatively easy Rainshadow race. Or so runners think on their first of two 25 km loops. Of course, then they start the long, steep climb up Hamilton Mountain a second time and realize they don't have as much left in the tank as originally anticipated. For most runners this June, though, that was more than okay – as the race itself was just one part of a much bigger weekend centered on celebrating summer as a diverse and beloved trail-running family. Rainshadow's deemed Beacon Rock its “best-kept secret,” and if you come spend the weekend on the Washington side of the Columbia River Gorge, it's not hard to see why.

Even more so than other Rainshadow races throughout the year, the Beacon Rock 50 km is a family-oriented weekend-long event, and one of Owner and Race Director James Varner's favorite weekends. As such, he and Team Rainshadow go out of their way to ensure everyone comes into and leaves the weekend feeling like family. Runners, volunteers, family and friends can park and camp for free at the group campsite that also serves as the start/finish for the race, and various group activities – from hash runs to rock climbing to hikes to secret swimming holes – punctuate the weekend. This year, highlights included a Friday evening campfire, Saturday group hikes, and, in addition to Sunday's races and the usual Rainshadow post-race shindig, a makeshift Slip N' Slide and an impromptu soccer game, featuring extra cords of firewood as goal posts. The weekend was the perfect introduction to summer, and a great representation of why runners and volunteers love Rainshadow race weekends, and will travel from all over the country to run Rainshadow races.

As for the racing, the competition was stiff, and many runners used it (or the accompanying 25 km) as a last tune-up for early summer goal races like Western States 100 and the Bighorn 100.

Connor Meakin, Korey Konga, and William Emerson (who'd won the 50 km after also running and winning the 25 km in 2011, and who chose to double-up again this year) kept the opening pace quick in the men's race, before Meakin began to pull away on the long, steep climb up Hamilton Mountain. From there, Meakin kept after it, finishing his first loop ahead of any of the 25 km runners before settling into trying to keep the chase off. As he put it, “The second loop was fairly uneventful, aside from me constantly looking over my shoulder...This is a crazy headspace, like you're a small animal being chased down. I did what I always do: Just keep grinding it out.” Meakin went on to set a new course record for both the 25 km and 50 km loops.

Masazumi Fujioka ran a strong second half to nab second, passing Korey Konga on one of the last climbs. As Konga put it, “The race is either up or down. I doubt there's even a mile of flat running...When Connor started to pull away, I figured I'd see him again and knew I only had to worry about Masazumi.” He added, “I blew up a bit on that third climb. Towards the top I found myself power hiking and thinking, 'I'm done with this,'” but Konga's race eventually turned around. “Once I was up on the ridge it felt like there was no other place in the world I would rather be. It was beautiful...The views at the top outs were breathtaking.”

Added Jason Leman, “This was a perfect tune-up for Western States. I needed a chance to hammer my quads, and this gave me a good chance to do just that without pushing too hard. And Rainshadow races are always beautiful.”

The women's race was plenty dramatic, too, as Marta Fischer led from the start, with Jordan Maki-Richards on her heels, ultimately catching her on the last descent. On the final mile climb up to the finish, however, Fischer found another gear to take the lead back and nab the win by mere seconds. As Maki-Richards said, “When [Fischer] passed me at a good jog, I told her if she had it in her to run the hill she could have the race. She was very clearly not happy about having to work that hard for her victory...I couldn't close the gap.”

For Maki-Richards, the best part of the weekend didn't center on the scenic views, the steep climbs, or the sweet descents. Instead, as she put it, “No one knows how to throw a running party like James and the Rainshadow crew...we made a slip-and-slide! I got exactly what I came for: Fun and sun and a pretty darn awesome run.”

At Beacon Rock, the racing was serious and the course tough and serene, but the real highlight was the whole weekend itself, laden with family, friends, ladder golf, plenty of sun, and a sweet celebration of the beginning of summer. Added Konga, “I wish I had arrived a day earlier because they had all sorts of activities from climbing, to swimming, to hashing, which I missed out on. I suggest you partake in the whole Rainshadow experience when running their races! Totally worth it.”