

2014 Gorge Waterfalls 50 km and Inaugural 100 km Race Report for UltraRunning Magazine by Matt & Kerri Stebbins

100 km elevation gain: 12,000 feet
100 km elevation loss: 12,000 feet
2014 100 km starters: 116
2014 100 km finishers: 61

50 km elevation gain: 6,000 feet
50 km elevation loss: 6,000 feet
2014 50 km finishers: 236

Course description: Waterfalls. Lots of Waterfalls. Singletrack was prominent, but little of it was flowy, interrupted as it was by small and long climbs and descents, technical footing, and so many verdant views. The 50k ran point-to-point, past too many waterfalls to count, while the 100k doubled the viewing pleasure by running the same course, but as an out-and-back. The largest climb on either course was about 1500 feet, but the many climbs of 200-500 feet made it a long, tough day for many runners.

RACE REPORT:

Perhaps more than any other Rainshadow races, the Gorge Waterfalls 50 km and 100 km are best described as deceptively tough and brutally beautiful. While Race Director James Varner generally describes the course as “rolling” and somewhat fast, he's also honest in admitting that this description is only really accurate in comparison to other Rainshadow races, and that he never expects to see many Personal Records on the course.

This year was a record-setting one for both courses, as the 100 km celebrated it's inaugural run, and the 50 km route was new, with a slight change from previous years' route to make it the full 50 km distance.

Mario Mendoza who won handily in setting a new 50 km course record, called the course “tougher than the Angels Staircase 60 km” and admitted he had “a few nice falls out there, on tight turns and slippery rocks.” The course ran deceptively tough; Mendoza won by running a cautious and calculated race from start to finish, saving his legs for the last climb.

If it was wet and slippery for Mendoza, that was even more so the case for the rest of the field, as the skies opened up to record-setting rainfall as most of the field ran over the largest climb. Said Ethan Newberry, aka the Ginger Runner, who'd flown from Los Angeles to film both courses, “In this particular case I was expecting pretty good rainfall for the whole weekend.” He didn't say whether or not he expected the hail that greeted him on the climb. Despite the weather, Newberry was one of the few runners to run a PR. “I love weather,” he said. “Love it. The only time I hate it is if I'm not prepared for when it strikes.”

Women's 50 km champion Brandy Erholtz was another runner who ran exceptionally well in the weather. A former Minnesota native, she told us “The more 'adverse' the conditions, typically the better I run!” Erholtz also credited the birth of her son Asher this past September as a key to her success. “I wanted to have a few winter races on my calendar to keep me focused as I was/am getting back to shape.” She added, “Running uphill comes natural to me, so I just got into my groove and ran at what felt like a comfortable pace from start to finish and just enjoyed the beauty of my surroundings.” She ran a tremendously low-key race, admitting “I wore a watch in this race only to remind me to eat every 30-45 minutes.”

After such a wet, sloppy 50 km, the sun decided to show up for the inaugural Gorge Waterfalls 100 km,

and so did a slew of tough competitors from across the country.

100 km male champion Guillaume Calmettes traveled from Los Angeles to run his first race of 2014 with Rainshadow, and while he may not have trained in weather typical of the Columbia River Gorge, he came in with fresh legs and a solid race strategy. "Climbing is my strength, so if I wanted to have any chances to compete against speedsters like Rod Bien or Yassine Diboun, I knew I had to make up some time where I could," Calmettes told us. "My goal was just to maintain my lead until the bottom of the last climb: I knew that if I was first at the bottom of the last hill...I could secure a win by running hard the last steep climb." Calmettes "ran every single step of the last climb as hard as I could, never looking back" and ultimately finished with a ten-minute margin of victory.

The day was punctuated with tough performances in treacherous course conditions. Monsoon rain that fell steadily during the 50 km the day previous made rocks and roots slippery and already technical trails doubly so. Rod Bien, running for the very first time in the Gorge, admitted he was surprised at the technicality. "It was a tough course. I would say it definitely caught me off guard...my best friend (who lives and trains in Hood River) said it was the muddiest he had ever seen that section of trail." Bien ran hard through the mud and held off a hard-charging Matt Cecill to capture second. Cecill, having previewed much of the course by filming the 50 km for Project Talaria in 2013, told us it was "a race of thirds" for him. After running the first 60 km in fourth, moving up to third by passing a faltering Yassine Diboun (who, despite numerous stomach issues, still held on to capture fourth), was a huge confidence boost. "I was in great position to move up further if anyone faltered...Full credit to Guillaume and Rod for holding steady." Cecill added, "I think most of the runners would agree when I say I expected the course to run faster than it did. A deceptive amount of elevation gain, technical footing, and the MUD, made it a grind...The course was well chewed up and muddy from the previous day's race; that was the most challenging part for me."

Denise Bourassa, training for this year's Grand Slam, decided to race the Gorge 100 km just two weeks before the event. Bourassa was excited about participating in an inaugural race, even if she wasn't entirely prepared for the course ahead. "I readily admit, I did not do my homework on the course and it was crazy technical...This race has it all when it comes to tough courses: Weather only the Gorge can offer, with plenty of rocks, mud, slick moss, water crossings, and vertical feet that the 100 km runners were lucky enough to experience twice. Fortunately, the beauty of the course is as real as the toughness; you have to see it to believe it."

Not everyone struggled with the mud and weather, though, as a few runners seemed to actively embrace it. Noted female champion Alicia Woodside, "I...knew I'd thrive in the technical stuff, and the mud, and the cool wet weather, it's sort of my jam." She added, "I love mud." She heralded a combination of gutsy running and costume pieces as the keys to her day's success. "I was really surprised that I led from quite early on, maybe from the top of the first climb. I was in maybe third to start, and I got my lead early on through sheer reckless abandon." Woodside, who won while donning a McDonald's staff costume, doesn't ever take herself too seriously. "As soon as you put something ridiculous on," she said, "it sort of ensures you take things lightly. When was the last time you saw someone having a bad time in a costume?"

Not taking yourself too seriously while running seriously tough courses seems to fit well within the James Varner / Rainshadow mentality. Said sixth-place finisher Anthony Skierkiewicz, "It really was an awesome day all in all. So many great people out there giving cheers, and the waterfalls made it so enjoyable it didn't feel as hard as it should have felt half the time just because this area is so cool to be in, just purely awesome." Just purely awesome, indeed.