

# SUN MOUNTAIN 50 MILE AND 50 KM RACE REPORT FOR ULTRARUNNING MAGAZINE

by Matt & Kerri Stebbins

*50 mile elevation gain: 7,200 feet*

*50 mile elevation loss: 7,200 feet*

*2014 50 mile starters: 128*

*2014 50 mile finishers: 106*

*50 km elevation gain: 4,800 feet*

*50 km elevation loss: 4,800 feet*

*2014 50 km starters: 168*

*2014 50 km finishers: 157*

**Course description:** Wildflower-laden singletrack; myriad nordic ski trails around the Sun Mountain Resort area and surrounding private trails; mostly rolling with a few highlighted (moderately steep) climbs and screaming descents, with views of the North Cascades, Pasayten Wilderness, and Chelan Sawtooths, as well as copious amounts of wildflowers and wildlife. A great first 50 km or 50 mile, and a fast introduction to mountain ultras.

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## **RACE REPORT:**

The Sun Mountain 50 mile and 50 km are two of the most beloved Rainshadow courses, and one of the largest and most festive Rainshadow race weekends. Runners travel from all over the country, as well as in merry droves from Canada, to run in the distinctly lovely Methow Valley. Hillsides filled with wildflowers, friendly cows, and varied North Cascades vistas are all highlights, making this a race in high demand. Indeed, this May was by the far the biggest and most competitive event yet, with all three distances selling out in record time. The 50 mile and 50 km races boasted nearly 270 finishers (and the accompanying 25 km added another 300 finishers on the weekend). The kids' race, a highlight for many an ultra-loving family, was also the largest Rainshadow kids' race to date, with over 40 future ultra-runners enthusiastically kicking off the weekend's festivities with their own 1 km event Saturday morning.

Sun Mountain was also notably faster this year, and both the 2012 [Seth Swanson] and 2013 [Adam Hewey] 50 mile winners noticed. Nursing injuries and gearing up for his debut at Western States, Swanson decided not to start the 50 mile, while Hewey chose to use Sun Mountain as a last-minute tune-up for his own Western debut. He noted, "Last year I won with a time of 6:49. This year I ran eleven minutes faster, came in 6:38, and got 5th. Of the top 6 men who all broke 7 hours 4 were Masters."

The men's 50 mile race was anyone's guess for the majority of the distance, with the top 8 runners sharing more miles together than in previous years. Noted Jeff Hashimoto, "We had about 6-8 people running together for over 20 miles. That was fun, and a bit unusual in a 50 miler in my experience." Ben Bucklin knew they'd "...have to go out quick to beat the pack to the single track," but otherwise "...stayed relaxed early and hung out in a pack with about eight other guys, chatting about our season so far, upcoming races, multi-day adventures we'd like to undertake, and other musings about our running lives." Recounts Bucklin, "John Merrill made a bit of a break before the first aid station and I decided to see if I could hold onto him...On the long climb up to the Thompson Ridge aid station I pulled in front of John and kept a steady pace. I arrived at Thompson Ridge and found out I was about three minutes behind Max [Ferguson]."

Ferguson had broken away from the pack early in the 50 mile race, but dropped just after the Thompson Ridge Aid Station, around mile twenty-eight, catapulting Bucklin into an unexpected lead. There was still plenty of

racing to be had, though, as Bucklin battled recurring cramps from mile thirty to the finish. When the pain forced him to sit for a few minutes and necessitated walking a crucial section of the final descent, he actually saw the next several runners about to catch him as they climbed the Patterson Mountain ascent. That was exactly what he needed to spur him on, and he was able to rally to finish with a few minutes' comfortable margin. His wife, Rachel, had a similarly exciting day in the women's 50 mile.

Again, the race was won in the last five miles, via the steep descent from the top of Patterson Mountain. Selina Danko, racing her first-ever 50 mile, and having led throughout the race, found herself chased down in the final miles. "Coming back down Patterson, I heard a runner behind me and saw it was Rachel [Bucklin]," Danko said. "She was running down the hill like a mountain goat." Bucklin credited her run at Sun Mountain in 2013 as her greatest advantage. "I knew it was going to be warm, but not as warm as last year, so I decided to carry two water bottles, which helped between some of the longer aid station stretches," she said.

The 50 km men's race, while showcasing a field just as deep as the 50 mile, lacked the same drama up front. Justin Yates won handily, destroying the previous course record by nearly a full minute per mile, though a few tried valiantly to stay with him throughout the day. Both Yates and 2nd-place finisher [and fellow Missoula, Montana native] Patrick Murphy commented that sharing mid-race miles together was a highlight of their respective races, while others, like top-ten finisher Marcell McArthur, made the conscious decision to back off the leaders in order to save their legs for the many miles ahead. "The best decision I made was to back off from Justin Yates around the 9-mile mark!" said McArthur. "He was hitting the climbs like a monster and sustaining that pace would have ruined my day." Yates said he wouldn't change anything about his race, or the course. "Sun Mountain seems to have really established its own identity and is the early summer highlight for many PNW runners," he told us, post-race.

If the men's 50 km race went mostly as expected, the women's 50 km race was all about having zero expectations, at least where the front-runners were concerned. "Honestly, I didn't really have a race strategy," said eventual winner, Janet Lun. "My main goal was to get out, have fun and feel good about my run...For me, it's important that I start off at my own pace, listen to my body and run according to how I feel." "In fact," she added, "I had no idea where I was in the crowd, until a friend of mine told me at the first aid station that I was 4th." 2nd-place female, Alex Gillett, was in a similar mental and physical place. "I had no race strategy other than to have fun and try to improve on my time from last year," Gillett admitted, laughing. "I was excited to get another gorgeous, sunny day on my favourite course. I am from the Okanagan (Kelowna) so I love the heat." Gillett, like many others this year, ran noticeably faster than she did last year. For her, it was about being healthy, and knowing the course. "Last year I was struggling with injuries and wasn't even certain I would be able to finish the race. Going in healthy this year was a victory in itself for me; improving on my time was icing on the cake."

When we asked runners about their race-related highlights, wildflowers, community, and post-race cheer were most often the answers. "The highlight was the endless fields of sunflowers...Magical and so energizing! Also I LOVED the long continuous flowy downhill sections where I could really let go," Sarah Seeds told us. Rainshadow races are "... my kind of low-key, high-camaraderie, races on beautiful trails" said Scott McMurtrey. Added veteran Rainshadow runner Chris Barry, "I got to spend 7.5 hours with friends in mountains surrounded by beauty...no regrets from this guy."

Sun Mountain, like all Rainshadow races, is about so much more than just the races. "Sun Mountain remains my single favorite post-race festival" commented Nicholas Triolo. Calling Rainshadow weekends "festivals" is definitely an apt description. Many runners look forward to the post-race festivities as much as they do the scenic trails. Said [Rachel] Bucklin, "Honestly, the post race was the highlight of my race with beer, pizza, and

The Pine Hearts playing. “ Added Danko about Rainshadow races, “They are the best – great people, great fun. Who needs Disneyland?!”