

2014 YAKIMA SKYLINE RIM 50 KM RACE REPORT FOR ULTRARUNNING MAGAZINE

By Matt & Kerri Stebbins

Elevation gain: 9500 feet

Elevation loss: 9500 feet

2014 50 km starters: 116

2014 50 km finishers: 107

Course description: Steep climbs and descents along singletrack and rocky horse trail; a brutal out-and-back comprised of four major climbs and descents, with the Roza Creek floodplain allowing for a brief respite between climbs and rocky ridgelines. One of the toughest and most scenic 50 kms out there; ideal for early and late-season 100-miler training.

RACE REPORT:

Traversing rocky ridgelines high above the Yakima River Canyon, the Yakima Skyline Rim 50 km is one of the toughest and most scenic of all Rainshadow races, and likewise one of the most feared. Those fears are warranted, too: Combined with exposure, unpredictable spring weather, technical trails, and impressive vertical gain and loss (9500 feet each), the Yakima 50 km guarantees to bring the pain. This race can be a quad-buster and a spirit-breaker for many runners. And yet, for our new and veteran Yakima runners, it's exactly the difficulty of the miles that proves most alluring.

That was definitely the case for 50 km winner and course-record breaker Justin Yates, who described Yakima Skyline as "...a super fun, flow-y grindfest," adding that it's "a great early season course for people who love vert and rocks...eased by vitamin 'D,' wildflowers, and bluegrass." Noted Jeff Hashimoto, "I think Grey Rock used to be the toughest 50k in Washington, but there's no doubt now that [Yakima] Skyline is. It's not just the climbs – it's the rockiness. I started off easy...but I still faded significantly in the second half."

The Yakima Skyline Rim 50 km is also one of those Rainshadow races that tends to attract the same runners, year after year, giving it the feel of one big sufferfest-loving family. That continuity, which at some races might lend itself to a feeling of exclusivity, helps ensure newcomers feel welcome, both at Yakima, and at all Rainshadow races. Charlie Duke, visiting Washington State from Tennessee, noted that Yakima Skyline was exactly what he looks for in a race. "My favorite part was completing such a tough course set in an astoundingly beautiful part of the world," Duke said, adding, "James, the race director for Rainshadow, runs a race the way most of us would want it: A hard course, fantastic post-race party, and no fluff. Matt and Kerri on the race crew knew my name to cheer my on at the finish line and made a point to check in and ask how it went; I can't say I've been to a lot of races where the crew works that hard to make mid-pack racers feel welcome."

Yakima Skyline Rim is fast becoming part of a list of notoriously tough races. Noted eight-time Hardrock finisher Billy Simpson, "You just can't come out here...and think you are going to survive this course." He added, "If I didn't have my poles I'da laid down and died out there." Simpson also noted that the post-race party [featuring live music from The Pine Hearts and local beer courtesy of Ellensburg's own Iron Horse Brewery] was the best and most organic he'd ever seen at a race.

As tough as the Yakima Skyline course is, though, it's not impossible to race and enjoy. As Michael McNeill noted, his secret for success this year was "...hills, very steep hills. If you want to succeed at Yakima, find the biggest hill near you. Run up it. A lot." Of course, keeping a sense of humor about the courses also always helps. McNeill added, "I haven't confirmed yet, but my secret weapon this year may have been the combination of shaved legs and tight spandex."

Veteran Rainshadow runner Adam Hewey – he of the impressive and perpetual racing mustache, and two-time Yakima 50 km winner and current Masters record-holder – also offered sage advice, saying the secret to great

runs on tough courses is to run your own race. "I run efficiently the first half and race the second. It has carried me to two wins and two third places. Every year some younger guys decide to follow my lead and run my race instead of their own...it doesn't work. If you run someone else's pace you lose efficiency and get dropped in the second half by old guys with ridiculous facial hair." He also added that Yakima "...is the perfect first 50 km, as it will make all the next ones feel like a cake walk."

Meghan Molnar added that runners looking at Yakima Skyline should "be ready to hurt," adding "it is a tough course, but the incredible views and wildflowers are worth every minute." Yates also chimed in to caution first-time runners: "The final large climb seemed to me to be the most consistently steep. By that point in the race it's hands on knees slog time, which is what I love. Mentally, the worst part is the last, undulating ridge. It keeps coming at you...The one thing that caught me a little off guard, but was definitely welcome, was how rocky the course was. Makes things more engaging."

Ultimately, Yakima Skyline Rim has a reputation, and it's well-deserved. As Gwen Preston noted, "Whenever anyone heard I was going to Yakima the response was always, 'Oh man that one is hilly...!' The climbs are as brutal as everyone says they are – the first is wickedly steep, the second is a mean mixture of steep and endless, the third is really tough underfoot, and the fourth starts with a ridiculously steep ascent and then just keeps going and going! But the terrain and views are truly beautiful."

Added Hewey: "Parting thought: I think this race may be impossible to run without bleeding, just a little." If Rainshadow Running ever decides to design their own Northwest-version of Hardrock or The Barkley, the Yakima Skyline 50 km will be a great place to start.