

2014 ORCAS 50K RACE REPORT FOR ULTRARUNNING MAGAZINE

by Matt & Kerri Stebbins

Elevation gain: 8400-9000 feet

Elevation loss: 8400-9000 feet

[Runners' GPS reports varied; it definitely feels steeper than 8400 feet]

Course description: Steep singletrack, rolling loops around three distinct lakes, and screaming downhills through old-growth forests on a tough, green, scenic, loop course taking runners to the top of the San Juans and back down to Camp Moran in Moran State Park. Mostly singletrack, the course includes occasional doubletrack and even a short paved section, offering a sweet mix of extremely runnable terrain with rocky, technical trails.

RACE REPORT:

With steep singletrack tempered by rolling loops around three lakes and careening downhills through old-growth forests, the Orcas 50 km is a testament to verdure and toughness. The course boasts close to 9,000 feet of gain from start to finish, guiding courageous runners through nearly every mile of runnable trail in Moran State Park, including the high point of the San Juans atop Mt. Constitution at mile 25.8. This year's race was especially poignant for the depth and breadth of the forefront competition, and equally for the memorable and inspiring stories from runners throughout the field. Jodee Adams-Moore led the women the entire race, shattering the previous women's course record with her easy-going style. Max Ferguson led the men until mile 20, when his hamstring dictated he was done for the day. Shortly thereafter, as they were leaving the mile 20 aid station, Ryan Burch asked eventual winner Andrew Miller how far ahead first was. In Burch's words: "Andrew answered, 'That was him back at the aid station; he just dropped. You're in first now.' Within one second of telling me, he passed me and never looked back. Classic."

Miller, only 17-years-old, held on for a signature win, followed by an accomplished, albeit battered, field. Top Masters finisher Adam Hewey, training for his self-titled "Mondo Slam" (Western States, Hardrock, and Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc), finished his sixth Orcas 50 km in seventh place. As he told us, "The course is amazing, the climbs brutal, the views unparalleled." Other top finishers shared similar sentiments. As fourth-place finisher Jason Leman noted, "The ups and downs ranged between gradual and steep...the powerline trail was one of those 'WTF' moments, which is to be expected in every James Varner race." Added Hal Koerner of another one of the course's signature climbs, a cheeky road grade in the first few miles, "The initial climb on the road lured a lot of fresh legs up the mountain...but might have been costly for early season legs." He added, "Hitting the wall at 20 proved too much for my training...and I found myself in preservation mode. Luckily the vistas up high and the epic Northwest singletrack under lush green canopy helped make the finish a little easier."

He wasn't alone in his assessment. Added Leman: "There wasn't a single moment where I wished to be done, and that says a lot about how much I enjoyed the course." Second-place female Care Nelson, on Orcas Island for the first time and running her first-ever Rainshadow race, felt similarly: "I loved the

atmosphere of the race - and the volunteers...[the] flagging was perfect, aid stations were awesome, post-race food was delicious." As Hewey said, "Nobody finishes Orcas 50 km and says, 'Never doing that again.' Myself included."

Every year, Orcas attracts new victims alongside faithful veterans. We talked to Glen Mangiantini, who's enthusiastically finished the 50 km every year since its 2006 inaugural run. That first year, there were 23 finishers; 2014 saw 200 runners cross the finish line. As Mangiantini noted, the "singletrack, tough climbs, cruising downhill, and moss-covered rainforest," combined with a great post-race party make it a tough race to resist. Added Adams-Moore, "Rainshadow races are in dreamy settings with wonderful and quirky people and a darn good after-party." After each finisher was greeted by a high-five from Race Director James Varner, The Pine Hearts, a local bluegrass band, led a pizza-making party and kept runners dancing into the early morning hours.

Outside of the realm of sheer speed, the 2014 Orcas Island 50 km also saw some tremendously inspirational runners. After having trouble with his prosthetic left leg (and consequently missing a cut-off) the week prior at the Orcas Island 25 km, United States Army Veteran Edward Lychik returned a week later to take on twice the distance and nearly twice the gain. As he noted about his first and second trip to Orcas, "I loved the people and the community. Everyone is kind enough to send some encouragement...or lend me a hand when things go sideways." Lychik challenged the way runners and spectators alike thought about what was possible on the formidable 50 km course, reaching the top of Mt. Constitution moments before sweeper Matt Barry, and ultimately setting up what fast became one of the most inspiring photographs in Rainshadow history. Fittingly, when asked, Lychik said he runs, "To shine light on what the human spirit is capable of doing...[to] magnify it for others so then they can get in on all the fun, too." He added, "Disability is not a burden...if used correctly it could be a gift." Like Lychik, Rainshadow races aim to inspire, to challenge, and to encourage runners as an eclectic and beloved brood of crazy, adventurous souls. At the 2014 Orcas Island 50 km, that's exactly what happened.