

Flatlanders 6-hr in Fenton MO September 2, 2012 by David Holmen

On September 2, 2012, I ran the Flatlanders 6-Hour race in Fenton, MO. (Fenton is a suburb of St. Louis.) The last time I traveled to St. Louis for a race, I encountered unexpected weather, resulting in my first (and only) DNF in a marathon. This time I was arriving as the remnants of Hurricane Isaac were moving through the area. I knew I might get soaked, but at least it would be warm enough that I wouldn't have to worry about getting cold.

This race was on the Sunday of a three day weekend. I love racing on holiday weekends, because I can stay for two nights without having to take any time off work. When I arrived on Saturday, the weather was very erratic. It went from drizzly to monsoon-like downpour to dry and back to drizzly, all within 20 minutes. The rain stopped in time for me to go to Fenton City Park to pick up my race packet. It stayed dry for the rest of the day, but I could see dark clouds forming as I returned from dinner.

The Flatlanders Ultramarathons (6 hours and 12 hours) are sponsored by the St. Louis Ultrarunners Group (SLUG). Both races are run on a 1.4 mile loop around the perimeter of Fenton City Park. Like other fixed-time races, you can run, walk or take breaks. You have 6 or 12 hours to cover as much mileage as you can, but anyone who completes at least one lap is an official finisher. Each race has three types of finisher medal, depending on how far you run. In the 6 hour race, they awarded gold medals for completing at least 50K, silver medals for completing at least a marathon, and bronze medals for completing a shorter distance.

After reviewing the results from previous years, I decided that winning my age group was a realistic goal, but I probably shouldn't try to win the race. I expected to need about 36 miles to win my age group.

When I woke up Sunday morning, it wasn't raining, but I could see it had rained during the night. The forecast called for temperatures in the 70s with a 60% chance of rain. I was expecting intermittent showers, but I was glad we had dry conditions for the start.

When I arrived at the race, I saw a lot of local runners wearing SLUG shirts. I also recognized a few Marathon Maniacs and 50 States Marathon Club members. The setup of the start/finish area reminded me of FANS. There were two canopies sheltering the tables with the lap counters, another for the aid station, and one for drop bags. Some runners pitched small tents to stow their gear.

In longer fixed-time races, I've always done a mixture of running and walking, but my plan for this race was to do continuous running at a relaxed pace. I started the race at a pace that felt a bit easier than I would start a marathon. When I finished my first 1.4 mile loop, I was surprised to see my time was 11:30. I eased up a bit and settled into a pace of 12 minutes per lap. That was still a bit fast. At 12 minutes per lap, I was on pace to run 42 miles in 6 hours.

For the first hour of the race, it was mostly dry, but there were a few large puddles left over from the previous day's rain. During the second hour, it rained. It started as a mist, then drizzle, and finally a steady light rain. Because of the warm humid conditions, the rain felt good. Soon, there were puddles everywhere, and some became too large to avoid. The ground was saturated, so rain falling on the pavement had no place else to go.

After the second hour, the rain stopped, and it never came back. I was still doing 12 minute laps. I had to pick up my effort to stay on that pace, but I wanted to run 21 miles in the first half of the race

and see how it felt. The course record for my age group was 41.8 miles, so I decided to test the waters.

I finished 21 miles one minute before the halfway mark. I could tell I was working too hard, so I eased up a little. I decided to maintain a comfortable effort, and stop paying close attention to my lap times.

It was around this time that I started running with another runner named Dave who was doing the 12 hour race. He was just one lap behind me, but needed to pace himself for nine more hours. Since we both needed to slow down, it worked out well to run together for the next two hours.

As I entered the last hour of the race, the sun came out and the combination of heat and fatigue wore on me. I slowed down significantly. Although I could no longer run very fast, I kept running at whatever pace I could manage. There were never more than four runners ahead of me, and I knew I passed at least two of them. I assumed I was leading my age group, but I didn't want to start walking, just in case I was in a close race.

In the last 20 minutes of the race, you switch from the 1.4 mile loop to a quarter mile out-and-back. They give you a flag with your race number, so you can mark your exact location on the last out-and-back. I finished my 27th lap with about 12 minutes to go. With 27 laps, I had 37.8 miles. I needed almost five out-and-backs to get to 39 miles, but it was all I could do to finish four.

As soon as the race was over I went to my lap counter to find out how I placed. I was surprised to discover I was only credited with 26 of the 1.4 mile loops. I was sure I had done 27. The race rules are very clear. Rule 1 is that the lap counter is already right! I set aside my disappointment and asked my lap counter where I placed in my age group. She said, "I think you were first overall." A quick review of all the lap counting sheets confirmed that even without that 27th lap, I had gone far enough to win the race. When all the fractional laps were measured, my official total was 37.41 miles.

The awards ceremony was about half an hour after the race. While we waited, we had lunch. They were grilling hamburgers, veggie burgers, hot dogs and bratwurst. At the awards ceremony, everyone got called up one at a time to receive their medal and hear the distance they completed. They started with the bronze medals and gradually worked their way up to the gold medals. As the overall winner, I was the last to have my name called. I received my plaque at the same time.

This was my first return to St. Louis since my DNF in 1988. I always wanted to come back and finish a race here. I thought if I could ever set a new PR in a marathon, I wanted to do it here. Winning an ultra does the job. I can now remember St. Louis as the site of a victory, rather than a failure.



Note by Diana: Picture is Carl Greeson, my BIL from Columbia MO, and David Holmen with his first place win.