



Running the Vermont 100

Story and photos by
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The motto of this grueling 100-mile race is: "To finish is to win."

AFINE, MISTING RAIN pervaded the morning air, and as sunlight broke through the clouds, a rainbow arched over the pasture where tents and parked cars lined a stretch of dirt road. Shortly after 6:30, a runner appeared from the shadows of the tree line. He jogged down the road and without pause breezed through the gauntlet of cheering spectators and tables of refreshments. This was the 18-mile point in the race. Had it been merely a marathon, the runners passing through would have been more than halfway home. But it was just the beginning of the Vermont 100.

Before dawn on this July Saturday, 266 runners had started at Silver Hill Meadow, near South Woodstock. An hour later, the hoof falls of some two dozen horses followed in their tracks. Ultra-marathoning, as runners call their sport, began in 1973 with an equestrian endurance rider named Gordy Ansleigh. He had hoped to compete in that year's Tevis Cup, a 100-mile race in the high Sierra Nevadas, but his horse had gone lame. He resolved to run the course instead, and succeeded, finishing in just under 24 hours. Others attempted the feat after him, for many years running their events alongside endurance horses. Today the runners have their own circuit, and the Vermont 100 is the only race in the United States in which horses and humans run together.

Here, something of a mutual admiration club exists between the two. "The runners always come back and tell the riders how much they appreciate and love seeing the horses out there," says ride coordinator Sue Greenall. "The runners just look at us and say, 'I don't know how you ride those horses for a hundred miles.' We can't even



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run down our driveway, let alone run a hundred miles," she says, "but they think riding a horse would be harder."

John Geesler, 45, a textile-mill worker from St. Johnsville, N.Y., is one of the top competitors on the running circuit. Last year was his 14th coming to Vermont. Like most runners, he is slight of build and sinewy, but he stood out among the crew-cut crowd with his long gray hair and a Willie Nelson-style bandana wrapped around his forehead. He passed through the field in Pomfret 15 minutes behind the leader, breathing easy and looking as relaxed as if he'd been idly strolling the trails.

He didn't discover his natural running ability until later in life. "I've never been a jock," he says. Unlike many ultra-runners,

he doesn't train scientifically—that would diminish his enjoyment. "I don't keep track of anything," he says. "I just run."

Geesler's talent belies what an extreme test of human endurance it is to run a 100 miles. "Outside of the elite runners, you're just going out there to finish," says Richard Busa, of Marlboro, Massachusetts, who in 2002, at age 72, became the oldest person ever to run the Vermont 100. He has finished nine times, and this was his eleventh year running the race.

RUNNERS ARE REQUIRED TO weigh in at medical checkpoints along the way, and if they've lost seven percent or more of their pre-race weight, they're disqualified. As the miles wear on, the field



Runners weigh in at medical checkpoints, and if they've lost seven percent or more of their pre-race weight, they're sent to the cot tent.

tends to thin out, as many runners drop out of their own accord or get pulled for failing the weigh-in.

Sarah Tynes, 37, a graphic designer from Atlanta, was running her second 100-mile race ever. Her goal was to finish before the cut-off time of 30 hours, and she hoped she could keep her wits about her. In the middle of her first 100, she said she came upon a stone bench beside the road. "Sarah, lay down and rest, just for five minutes," the bench said. "No! I have to keep going," she replied. "Okay," the bench said, and vanished.

One might suppose that after running 100 miles, a bubble bath, crisp white sheets, air conditioning, and room service would be absolute requirements. But Tynes said she intended to camp out at Silver Hill Meadow, where two porta-potties were the only facilities available.

Riders, by contrast, mind their horses better than some runners care for themselves, although misconceptions about endurance racing are common. "Any time I step out of the tight-knit horse community, people are unaware," said Wendy Bejarano of West Windsor, who was riding Bie-Kin, a 12-year-old chestnut gelding. Those who don't know the sport may suspect it's cruel to horses, which is far from the truth. "They're incredibly capable," Bejarano said. "My horse is always still willing to go."

At about 10:30 a.m., she and Bie-Kin came to a veterinary hold at Highbrook

Farm in Woodstock. Vets immediately started monitoring Bie-Kin's pulse. The 40-minute hold began only after he recovered—that is, when his pulse came down to 64 beats per minute. A horse's recovery time is a major variable in endurance riding. Champion horses are not only fast; they're also extraordinarily fit. Having recovered, Bie-Kin endured a battery of physical tests administered by a vet. Grading is stringent, and at any sign of overexertion, a vet will pull a horse from the race.

Bejarano's crew had come in advance to set up a sunshade, under which Bie-Kin was stripped of his tack, fed, massaged, and sponged with cold water carried from a nearby pond. Once the required time had elapsed, Bejarano swung up into her saddle and set back upon the trail.

AN AID STATION DUBBED Camp 10 Bear marks a point where the trail meets in two directions. People coming from one direction have reached 44 miles, and those coming the other way have done 68 miles. By early evening, most arriving at Camp 10 Bear are 68 miles along. They're soaked with sweat and breathing hard, but in good spirits. After weighing in, some grab a snack and press on. Others collapse on canvas army cots under the open tents. Runners who had dropped or had been pulled mill about chatting with the rest. Richard Busa was among them. He had made it 44 miles, but shoulder pain pre-

vented him from continuing. Still, he had outlasted many younger runners. Matt Kirk, 23, a student from North Carolina, ran out of steam at 31 miles. He said that as hard as the miles were on his body, they tested his will more. "It's a real mental struggle," he said. "All kinds of demons get in your head."

One can imagine what wicked thoughts plagued Joy Grossman, a runner from Reading, when the trail took her past her property, 70 miles into the race. "There have been times when I've run it—I've now done it five times—when I would rather have gone home, no doubt about it," she says. Instead, she finished solidly in the middle of the pack, in less than 24 hours.

For the seventh straight year, John Geesler made the top 10. He came in shortly after sunset, in 16 hours, 49 minutes, which earned him sixth place. In the dark, the wooded trail leading down a slope to the finish line was marked like a runway with glow sticks inside milk jugs. One could see the headlamps of the riders and runners bobbing down the hill before they came into the light of Tiki torches around the finish.

WENDY BEJARANO AND BIE-KIN placed fourth in the horse event, out of 19 finishers (29 started). Although she had been in the lead for most of the race, "I had to pull back and slow down a bit because my horse has had a little lameness problem, and at seventy miles it began to show," she said.

Runners limping in late Sunday morning, aided by pacers who ran alongside to keep them on the trail, were in a state of near prostration, as evidenced by the thousand-yard stare they all had. Sarah Tynes met her goal, finishing with 30 minutes to spare.

Of the 266 runners who started on Saturday, 163 finished—a normal ratio in this sport. Ray Charbonneau, a runner from Massachusetts, expressed what everyone must feel after completing the Vermont 100, regardless of how they place. When he crossed the finish line on Sunday, he stopped short, put his hands on his hips, and said: "There." ▀

The 17th Annual Vermont 100 race will be held July 16 and 17 at Silver Hill Meadow on Silver Hill Road in the town of West Windsor. Visit www.vt100.com, or e-mail Jim Hutchinson, race director, at vt100@vermontadaptive.org.