

## **Flashes of Gold: 2018 Run Rabbit Run 100**

Historically, people have journeyed to the mountains surrounding Steamboat Springs, Colorado in search of gold; many others go there in search of powder. Those of us gathered at the base of Mount Werner on a hot September weekend last fall had something different in mind: we were there simply to spend a couple of days running through the wild.

As it turned out, we encountered an abundance of gold as well. The changing of the aspen forests at peak foliage provided a constant backdrop of spectacular yellow and orange along the entire course. When we weren't dancing over fallen leaves on lush single-track through the woods, or gazing at sunlight sparkling off serene mountain lakes, we enjoyed vistas of yellow hills that stretched as far as the eye could see. Sunrise and sunset added their own unique spin, as the first or last rays of light danced off the leaves in more vivid detail and contrast than anything you can accomplish with an Instagram filter.

It was a good thing the scenery was so consistently uplifting, because the Run Rabbit Run 100 course can beat you down in a variety of ways. This year's seventh running featured approximately 30% new terrain, adding several long sections of single track instead of jeep roads, and eliminating all but about 3 miles of asphalt from previous editions. Vertical gain is comparable to previous versions at just over 20,000', but many of the new trails were significantly more rugged, rocky, and challenging than in the past. The majority of the course takes place at elevations just above or below 10,000', which isn't "take your breath away" high, but over an extended period of time will still wreak havoc with your circulatory, respiratory, and digestive systems.

An unplanned challenge was the heat, which hit record highs for Steamboat Springs in September. Temperatures reached over 90 degrees, and the majority of the field found themselves taking on one of the hardest climbs of the course, a 6-mile uphill grind from Fish Creek Falls trailhead to Long Lake, in the worst heat of the day. This climb was a challenge for elites and midpackers alike; Jeff Browning, who would eventually finish in third, called this the most difficult part of the course.

One of the coolest aspects of Run Rabbit Run is the "race within a race" of tortoises and hares. The majority of the field runs in the tortoise category, which starts at 8AM and has a 36-hour cutoff time. The elites and anyone who wants to race for the event's \$65,000 prize purse start four hours later, and have a 30-hour limit to finish. This results in faster runners passing slower runners throughout the day, and in combination with a couple of long out and back sections, the tortoises get a front row view of what's developing at the front of the race. We saw how strong women's winner Michele Yates looked; and how smoothly eventual male winner Jason Schlarb and second place Mark Hammond floated along. And almost everyone who saw Jeff Browning heading down Fish Creek Falls in about 15<sup>th</sup> place had a similar comment: "Just wait – he'll catch up!" Which of course is exactly what happened.

Almost unanimously, the highlight of the course was the newly added, perfectly named 10-mile stretch of gently downhill flowing single track called Flash of Gold. The smooth trail meandered through dense aspen groves, and most runners hit this

section as the sun descended into the hills to our west, scattering golden beams of light into a kaleidoscope of brilliant orange and yellow hues. It was the perfect moment of serenity before the hardships still to come – because after all, darkness was falling and we still had more than 60 miles of mountainous terrain to cover.

Night came harshly, in the form of temperatures that dropped to the 30s, and in sequential climbing challenges after leaving the Olympian Hall aid station: the first time featured a steep grind called the Lane of Pain, while the second kicked off a roughly 15-mile stretch of continuous uphill that made up the crux of the course. The trails around Olympian were active with wildlife sightings through the night, with bear, mountain lion and moose encounters reported by runners.

My own wildlife experience was less threatening, but equally surreal: after my second pass through Olympian, isolated on the trail somewhere around 4AM and close to mile 70, my light fell on a large red fox, standing still in the trail and seemingly just as curious about me as I was about him. In the beam of my headlamp, it glowed like a Patronus – and just like the protective creatures from the Harry Potter series, it seemed to reassure me that I'd be able to survive the treacherous challenge that lay ahead. He eventually vanished into the trees, and I continued on to the most difficult section of the race as morning finally started to break.

Miles 72-77 presented the most formidable obstacle for almost everybody; the Grouse Trail is primarily used as an extremely technical downhill course for mountain bikes, but us tortoises and hares were doing it on foot in the reverse direction. Many sections of “trail” were nothing more than painted dash marks over piles of granite, steep enough to require your hands for leverage in places. This section reduced practically everyone to walking, and significantly determined the race outcome for the men: it was here that second-place finisher Mark Hammond had difficulty following the trail and getting into a rhythm, allowing Jason Schlarb to pull away. This is also where Jeff Browning finished his almost inevitable move into podium position.

The women's field was a bit more stretched out, but not without compelling storylines. Michele Yates returned from a long injury layoff (and a previous drop at this race) to run strong from start to finish en route to the win. Second place Emma Roca fell in the dark on her way into Olympian Hall, fought with a malfunctioning headlamp, and soldiered on to maintain second place. Kerrie Bruxvoort held onto her podium space by a mere 10 minutes in finishing third.

Practically all the other tortoises and hares came away with an appreciation for what an outstanding event the Run Rabbit Run 100 has become in a relatively short period of time. Race directors Fred Abramowitz and Paul Sachs have created an epic course with an impressive prize purse (\$65,000 was split evenly among the three male and female winners; next year's first place hares will receive \$15K each) as well as a cool family vibe built around a full weekend of running that includes the original 50-miler in addition to the 100. The race showcases the best of what these mountains have to offer, and those of us who shared the experience consider it absolutely golden.