

MCKENZIE RIVER TRAIL RUN

SMOKE ON THE WATER

by Joe Uhan

You don't have to live and run in the Eugene, Oregon, area for very long to be asked, "Have you run The McKenzie?" What they're referring to, in part, is the McKenzie River Trail – recently voted the number one mountain biking trail in America, and equally beloved by trail runners for its friendly but challenging terrain, lush green canopy, and roaring rapids.

"THE McKenzie" refers to the McKenzie River Trail Run, a west-central Oregon 50-km trail race. In addition to being one of the oldest and most established ultra races in Oregon, it is also the final stop on the Oregon Trail Ultrarunning Series – a seven-race ultra circuit with events throughout the state.

A slow recovery from the Western States 100 forced me to back out of the Waldo 100K, the penultimate Trail Series race and first stop on the Montrail Ultra Cup. But after a solid month of training, I thought this would be a terrific training and racing opportunity, and a chance to take in a local classic. No sooner had I gotten a bib number than a major forest fire just miles east of the trail, threatened the event.

I watched daily as the fire grew closer and closer, the winds carrying the smoke due west, over the course and into the Willamette Valley, creating orange sunsets and deteriorating air conditions. Just days before race day, the Forest Service ordered the northernmost 10 km of the trail closed, effectively wiping out a quarter of the course.

Behind the scenes, the race directors deliberated: Cancel the event? Reschedule for October? Or run it anyway?

After collaborating with the other RDs in the Trail Series family, the decision was made to run on an amended course. The typical McKenzie Course starts by running upstream along waterfalls and lava flows for six miles, before turning back on itself for a progressive downhill 25 miles (and approximate 1,500-foot drop in elevation).

This year, we'd go up river only a mile and a half, then run downriver 15 miles before turning back for a presumed 14-mile grind back to the start/finish.

I had my doubts: high training volumes and allergy-related malaise wore me down all week. As such, I doubted my ability and willingness to gut out a tough, uphill-finishing 31-miler in acrid smoke.

Beyond the sleepy town of McKenzie Bridge, the smoke was heavy enough to reduce visibility and cast serious doubts. However, once over the ridge to the start area, the smoke – like a fickle morning fog – disappeared. I was committed.

The race start was a half-mile dirt road which allowed the field to spread out and prepare for the single-track ascent. By the time we hit the

trail, it was Jeremy Tolman up front, then me and Nick Triolo. Jeremy set an honest pace – just hard enough to feel the effort, but easy enough for me to consider sticking on him. We passed at least one impressive waterfall along the technical single-track and lots of roaring whitewater before crossing a log bridge to our long descent. Initial water-only aid was at 3.5 miles.

Jeremy was really working his bottle in those initial miles, so it didn't surprise me that he stopped for a refill. I took that opportunity to blast in front to make him work to catch up with us. We never saw him again. After a couple miles, now entering the two-mile stretch of technical lava, Nick and I chatted a bit. I'm really happy for him – if not more than a bit jealous – that he earned a coveted Montrail Western



Rocks, roots and waterfalls

MICHAEL LEBOWITZ/LONGRUNPICTURECOMPANY

MCKENZIE RIVER TRAIL RUN | 50 KM | BLUE RIVER, OREGON | SEPTEMBER 10 | ▲2,3

1. Joe Uhan, 33	3:47:54	20. Shawn Donley, 41	4:47:10	39. Bill Rupp, 45, ID	5:12:00	58. Colin Cigarran, 42	5:45:41
2. Nicholas Triolo, 27	3:54:22	21. Ryan Zastrow, 36	4:51:00	40. Caitlin Strickland, 34, CO	5:12:02	59. Sharon Rogers, 50	5:46:19
3. Jeremy Tolman, 34	4:10:38	22. Doug Randels, 46	4:51:48	41. Kristi Leblanc, 27	5:12:04	60. Terri Libert, 43	5:46:20
4. Ken Sinclair, 44, ID	4:17:11	23. Mark Jones, 50, ID	4:51:53	42. Lynn Roylance, 29	5:12:38	61. John Zeier, 59, WA	5:46:21
5. Mikio Miyazoe, 35	4:17:22	24. Tom Atkins, 41	4:53:00	43. Cary Miller, 50	5:12:39	62. Christopher Walkup, 41	5:48:36
6. Craig Thornley, 47	4:19:03	25. Jeff Phillips, 40, OH	4:55:23	44. Stacy Vynne, 31	5:17:49	63. Guy Marx, 48, SK	5:50:19
7. Jeff Larson, 37	4:19:45	26. Cory Winar, 36	5:00:38	45. Mandy Meyer, 28	5:24:07	64. David Johansen, 56	5:50:26
8. Rhea George, 27, WA	4:22:01	27. Aaron Porter, 40	5:00:51	46. Christina Howard, 40	5:25:09	65. Paul Rowe, 60	5:51:29
9. Joel Port, 33	4:29:00	28. Lynette Kertis, 43	5:01:08	47. Megan Henning, 35	5:27:22	66. Charlie Barr, 38, WA	5:51:31
10. Todd Temple, 42	4:31:53	29. Linda Samet, 45	5:01:53	48. Aubra Lewellen, 31	5:32:04	67. Anne Miller, 46	5:54:31
11. Mark Moran, 44	4:32:24	30. Scott Leonard, 43	5:02:28	49. Colleen Wedin, 41	5:34:48	68. Marcel Radominski, 26	5:55:17
12. Rui Zhu, 35	4:33:23	31. Andrew Miller, 15	5:02:47	50. Cindy Naffziger, 52	5:36:44	69. Miriam Hickey, 32	5:58:55
13. Co Jones, 38	4:34:31	32. Todd Janssen, 43	5:03:08	51. Jeffrey McAlpine, 43	5:37:11	70. Carrington Sedgwick, 40, WA	5:58:58
14. Denise Bourassa, 41, ID	4:36:50	33. Nathan Wallace, 33	5:03:19	52. Hannah Shallice, 36	5:37:47	71. Ian Stuart, 50, BC	5:59:35
15. Taylor Spike, 33	4:37:14	34. Gerhard Behrens, 52	5:04:53	53. Danielle Micheletti, 45, WA	5:40:24	72. Ben Travers, 42, CA	5:59:46
16. Thomas Green, 26	4:39:09	35. Dan Dellitt, 38	5:06:16	54. Joe Snyder, 29	5:40:25	73. Collin Andrew, 33	6:00:00
17. David Uri, 42	4:40:25	36. Christian Beck, 39	5:09:26	55. Tom Deleгарde, 44	5:41:49	Moises Lucero, 31	6:00:00
18. Rick Kneedler, 49	4:43:54	37. Scott Glazer, 41	5:09:48	56. John Doel, 34	5:43:01	Rebecca Nelson, 32	6:00:00
19. Richard Nelly, 53, WA	4:45:45	38. Eric Larson, 35	5:09:55	57. Todd Bosworth, 54	5:44:05	76. Paul Ward, 38	6:01:19

States 100 spot for 2012 with his finish at Waldo. But because of that effort just three weeks prior, I knew he couldn't be fresh. I pushed the pace a bit when feasible - in the smooth wooded areas after the lava, before the second aid station at Trail Bridge (mile 8.5) where the trail climbed away from the river along a ridge.

Keeping a sustainable effort was paramount in order to save for the uphill second half. I thought about the words of "The Gentle Giant," Dave Mackey, who said in his 2011 Miwok 100K race report, "In an ultra, it is my goal to never be breathing hard...until the last five miles or so if needed. So I try to maintain an effort level which feels like I could always run a bit faster at all times." I tried to use good mechanics to keep the pace honest, instead of "working hard."

After descending the ridge we crossed a dirt road and returned to nice swath of flat, smooth single-track. Deer Creek aid station (mile 13) was more of the same - very quick fluids, no solids, go - as we navigated through some more technical root- and stone-covered trail before emerging on a dirt road. Normally, we'd run only a short segment on here, but the RDs took advantage of this strip to create a three-mile lollipop at the turnaround, thus alleviating a great deal of the out-and-back traffic at the turn. At the turnaround, I again blew through the aid station at mile 16 with two quick gulps of Pepsi and a water, and began the return climb - 14 miles uphill to go. I didn't look back but I felt like I had a good minute on Nick. And again, my focus was to make it hard for him to work back up to me, using the mantra, "Tall-Arms-Hips," keeping ideal form, and the feet moving. I ran solo for a good two km, occasionally scanning behind me for Nick, before re-emerging onto the road and into the face of the rest of the field. I worried a bit about this, but the cascade of "Good job!" from fellow runners buoyed my efforts and more than offset any inconvenience of the traffic.

A couple significant climbs reminded me that, "I'm not working hard!" and re-focused on



A runner blends in with the sunlit forest, and ferns that line the trail

TOM RILEY

form. I popped an S-cap; you know you need salt when a gram of it on your tongue tastes good. The climbs before the Trail Bridge aid station were killer and I knew I needed a fluid refill. The helpful aid workers made quick work and I was off, buoyed by hearing, "only 8K to the finish." My watch read about 3:03 when I left, so I figured another 40 minutes of running, at worst 45 for this last 5 miles.

Channeling "The Gentle Giant" once again, now it WAS time to work: I pushed the last five miles, especially those initial kms after the aid station that were non-technical. But back on the lava, it was a game of obstacle negotiation and keeping the feet moving, neuromuscular demands trumping the aerobic.

"Tall-Arms-Hips! Tall-Arms-Hips!" Finally through the lava, I pushed and pushed, up and over rolling moguls, alternately scanning to my right for any sign of Carmen Reservoir, and for Nick at my rear.

Finally - the reservoir, as the course climbed for the last time to a ridge overlooking the water. The legs felt great and the stride opened up on the final descent and river crossing to the finish. I crossed the line at 3:47:54 for my first victory since last year's Autumn Leaves. Within a few minutes came Nick. While re-hydrating on water and soda we chatted about the race before Jeremy came in for third place.

The rest of the late morning and early afternoon was spent hanging at the finish line, watching and cheering the other finishers in "The McKenzie Family."

RD MARK HUMPHREYS ADDS

The running of the 24th McKenzie River Trail Run was threatened by a forest fire that closed the upper portion of the course just two days before the race. Some last minute course changes by the race directors and much appreciated cooperation by the U.S. Forest Service allowed the race to go on. The potential for last-minute cancellation if the fire changed course and threat of poor air quality reduced the number of starters from the expected 200 to about 165. There were 152 finishers. The normal course is point-to-point, running downriver. The course change resulted in a modified out-and-back, with a short lollipop on the far end. With the out-and-back, the runners did the second half in the uphill direction which meant doing the most technical part of the course a second time in miles 25-31.

Wrapping up a season that included a top-10 finish at American River and a 20:01 finish at Western States, Oregon runner Joe Uhan won the men's race in 3:47. On the women's side, Rhea George won in 4:22, which placed her eighth overall. Other notable finishers were 15-year-old Andrew Miller, completing his third 50-km of 2011.

Denise Bourassa was second female in 4:36 and was the women's champion of the Oregon Trail Series. Nicholas Triolo, who placed second male in 3:54 was the men's winner of the Oregon Trail Series. ■

77. Jim Campbell, 39	6:01:45	96. Paul Kuenzi, 35	6:14:51	115. Chuck Roberts, 37, WA	6:48:44	Emily Supanchick, 27	7:19:57
78. Wendy Neely, 42	6:02:05	97. Jeanne Giraudier, 35	6:16:09	116. Mimi Raiter, 50	6:49:49	135. J Simond, 37, WA	7:25:06
Lisa Labbee, 39	6:02:05	98. Mike Richmond, 53	6:21:39	117. Rebecca Dusseau, 56	6:49:52	136. Trisha Swanson, 40	7:28:14
80. Tato Sumantri, 53	6:02:26	99. Peter Mersereau, 42	6:23:06	118. Phil Vaughn, 64	6:49:56	137. Darin Swanson, 40	7:28:16
81. Brian Wood, 45	6:03:17	100. Lauren Peters, 28	6:23:29	119. John Lotts, 48	6:50:03	138. Matt Barry, 35	7:33:29
82. Chris Esparza, 37	6:04:20	101. Fergus Morrissey, 35	6:23:33	120. Liz Kellogg, 62	6:50:23	139. Doug McCarty, 57	7:44:42
83. Scott James, 43	6:04:46	102. Kathleen Birkholz, 44	6:24:58	121. Todd Thompson, 48	6:53:56	140. Melinda Hoeye, 36	7:52:43
84. Megan Bruce, 38	6:04:47	103. Michael Smith, 47	6:27:28	122. Avery McCombs, 32	6:54:52	141. Kathleen Rafish, 49	7:52:52
85. Todd Evans, 42	6:05:04	104. Ken Krebs, 61	6:30:37	123. Gail Henry, 50	6:56:58	142. Vicki Sarazin, 56	7:52:53
86. Pele Pasquesi, 35, MT	6:07:12	105. Gayle Vanderford, 50	6:32:05	124. Gregory Costanzo, 53	7:01:41	143. Stephanie Smith, 51	7:56:32
87. John Asman, 31	6:08:03	106. Scott Kruis, 49	6:32:06	125. Jeff Hsu, 34	7:03:57	144. Tamara Skordahl, 52	7:56:33
88. Gregory Spike, 63	6:08:34	107. Beki Ries-Montgomery, 40	6:32:15	126. Lori Figone, 50, WA	7:10:35	145. John Hufsmith, 64	8:05:49
89. Carri Skinner, 35	6:08:44	108. Josh Cheney, 31	6:32:35	127. Iliisa Rooke-Ley, 50	7:10:41	146. Wes Pyne, 48	8:07:48
90. Josh Owen, 33	6:10:33	109. Lisa Derby, 42, CA	6:33:48	128. Jeral Godfrey, 69, WA	7:11:44	147. Raychel O'hare, 31	8:07:56
Roger Chou, 41	6:10:33	110. Randall Law, 56	6:37:36	129. Henry Alaman, 49	7:11:55	148. Dave Black, 60, CO	8:21:27
92. Pamela Johnson, 53	6:11:08	111. Indya Bull, 45	6:38:38	130. Ryan Overbay, 39, WA	7:17:33	149. Randy Thorn, 56, ID	8:22:24
93. Wade Frey, 40	6:12:04	112. Mary Aiwohi, 52	6:40:33	131. Robin Brougher, 30	7:17:48	150. Andrea Simmonsen, 40, ID	8:39:43
94. Christine Nile, 55	6:12:22	113. Jesse Applegate, 36	6:44:52	132. Larry Williams, 75	7:18:43	151. Bridget Pisan, 50, WA	8:54:43
95. Shelby Katz, 40, CO	6:12:37	114. Laurie Thornley, 46	6:48:18	133. Rayna Wilde, 35	7:19:57		