

CLOSE TO EUPHORIC

by Phillip Gary Smith

The Superior 50K/Upper Midwest Trail Runners Ultra Championship was a *Tale of Two Cities*. Dickens would scribe, "... it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair," to best describe two different competitions – women's and men's – with two different tactics and outcomes.

Newbie to ultras and a newbie to her status as a PhD, Margot Hutchins ran a race plan worthy of her doctorate: Follow the expert – in this trail university, that's 2008 UMTR champion Helen Lavin, take the lead on the second major climb, and never look back. Although Hutchins says, "I worried about making rookie mistakes," she had raced part of this course by winning the companion 25-km distance a couple of years ago, and was a Michigan Tech track and field standout, hardly the resumé of a rank rookie.

Margot worried the whole way. Leading at the turnaround by four minutes, she fretted, "When I saw it was nationally-competitive Kim Holak, I thought four minutes wasn't very much in the 15-miles-left scheme of things." Climbing the last mountains, Moose then Mystery, on the way back in, she worried more, "That section of trail took me a lot longer going back than it did coming out. I was tired." Finally, the Poplar River crossing with its raging waters rushing to Lake Superior, welcomed her to the finish, "When I could hear the Poplar River, I felt something close to euphoric. I couldn't believe I'd made it." She won the race and the UMTR Championship with a very worthy 4:47.

Kim finished second overall and won the masters class. Most courageous finish for the 50-km race came from the last person to cross the line, Sarah Pritzl, from Wisconsin, who was attempting this distance for the first time.

The odds-on favorite in the men's race was 2009 victor Chris Lundstrom. A nationally-ranked road racer and Twin Cities Running Club elite member still learning the trail game, he provided much of the excitement of the day, but not the win. That was for Duluth's Chris Gardner to capture with a tactical plan that

coaxed a win in a somewhat shocking manner.

Gardner explained his early strategy, "I had been talking with my friend, Erik Kaitala, about my race-day plan. He said it pretty accurately. 'Look, if you go out with Lundstrom and it feels like a five-km pace, you know you aren't going to be able to hang with him, but if you go out and it feels like marathon pace, then you will probably have a shot.' ...it felt like marathon pace, so I decided to stick with him."

Chris and Chris broke away from the field, legging out down the long, rocky slope off the top of Moose Mountain, which leads to Rollins Creek at about mile six. A minor event, one of those trail-racing things, changed the race and very possibly the outcome. "I followed (Lundstrom) through a trail intersection and into a tiny campground," likely the West Rollins Campground on a very short spur, definitely not the course. "For a brief minute we were both lost, but I managed to spot the correct turn we missed so I jumped on the trail and signaled to him the correct way was that direction. I started leading at that point."

Gardner was surprised he led into Oberg, the first aid station, and left before the trailing Chris. That small detail, not leaving with the leader, created another perplexing situation for Lundstrom. About a mile later, while climbing the Leveaux Mountain trail past the Onion River bottom, he missed an all-important, heavily-flagged right turn. He continued up the scenic Leveaux to enjoy its panoramic view from the top. "The feeling in my stomach as I went further and further without seeing any trail markings . . . was not quite as great as the view. I (had) managed to take (yet another) wrong turn on the trail."

Back on the course, Lundstrom caught Joe Ziegenfuss and they took off after Brian Peterson, a rising, young ultra star who had also, remarkably, missed the turn. Brian explained his goof with the sensibility of a weathered veteran, "That's all part of the sport though and the cost of not paying attention out there."

All this time, Gardner was minutes ahead of the chase, making relentless forward progress until reaching Mystery's wooded, rounded peak when the spirits of Gitche Gumeewee grabbed him good, perhaps punishing him for his crisp 2008 Sawtooth 100 victory on these same trails (in one of the top times ever for that exercise in human exhaustion.) His legs turned to cement and he later lamented, "The last two miles to the finish felt like ten."

Trail racing has the capacity to humble all, even front-runners. Lundstrom self-effacingly noted that, "racing on trails requires some skills I seem to be lacking, namely navigation, balance and coordination." Competitors can discover relief by realizing the elite suffer at times the gaggle of challenges afflicting many of us continually. Perhaps the humility exhibited by both leaders is part of the foundation of our sport. Maybe the whole experience of trail racing prompts it, indeed forces it, through the myriad opportunities to obliterate one's ego each muddy root at a time.

There had been rumblings of new records possible but the mountains had other ideas as they seeped rain from a few days earlier and created a cascade of muddy, gunky sections throughout the course. Notably, Wynn Davis completed his portfolio of the Superior races with a win in the 25-km, to go along with his Sawtooth, 50-km, and marathon victories.

Maria Barton relayed the best runner's story of the day, "Guy Pettis, who was running behind me on the way out from Oberg to the Britton Peak aid station, lost his shoe in the muck, and couldn't find it." He ran, half-barefoot, about three miles to the next aid station, where he had an extra pair in his drop bag.

The Superior Spring Races, though on the same paths annually, have yet in their eight years to be the same race twice. Each year is remarkably different. The 2009 50-km with its twists and turns was perhaps the craziest of them all. ■

SUPERIOR TRAIL 50K

LUTSEN, MINNESOTA

MAY 15 | ▲ 3,4

1. Christopher Gardner, 33	3:57:16
2. Chris Lundstrom, 34	3:59:44
3. Joe Ziegenfuss, 35	4:07:40
4. Brian Peterson, 25	4:08:21
5. Matt Zak, 37	4:17:54
6. Tony Kocanda, 37	4:19:11
7. Joseph Jameson, 51, MI	4:35:31
8. Dylan Wiek, 31	4:40:46
9. Ryan Braun, 26, WI	4:42:21
10. Paul Holovnia, 48	4:45:50
11. Margot Hutchins, 30, MI	4:47:14
12. Arley Anderson, 45	4:51:33
13. Jeff Denney, 51	4:52:07

14. Mark Sponholz, 32	4:52:48
15. Dave Schuneman, 32	4:54:18
16. Kyle Klingman, 34, IA	4:55:03
17. Kim Holak, 41	4:55:29
18. Travis Wildeboer, 30, CO	4:58:38
19. Erik Lindstrom, 34	5:00:10
Helen Lavin, 32	5:00:10
21. Mike Bateman, 39	5:02:13
22. Brian Burdette, 38	5:03:03
23. Brian Peterson, 29	5:03:11
24. Valeria LaRosa, 34	5:05:46
25. Scott Hoberg, 32	5:10:26
26. Kurt Decker, 39	5:10:37
27. Roberto Marron, 35	5:14:54
28. Guy Willey, 36, IA	5:15:21
29. Dan Moline, 44	5:16:03
30. Jasmin Paris, 26	5:18:56
31. Alyssa Wildeboer, 31, CO	5:20:16

32. Shane Olson, 42	5:22:14
33. Michael Gorski, 35, IA	5:24:44
34. Andrew Mettke, 27	5:26:50
Sean Faulk, 37	5:26:50
36. Ryanell Johnson, 40	5:28:30
37. Daniel LaPlante, 26	5:28:54
38. Scott Rassbach, 39	5:31:07
39. Steven Sjolund, 59	5:33:12
40. Richard Bjork, 47	5:34:16
41. Jason Furtney, 30	5:34:28
42. Skeeter Moore, 46	5:35:21
43. Ron Hendrickson, 43	5:40:43
44. Hilary Basham, 32, PA	5:41:55
Jonathan Basham, 32, PA	5:41:55
46. Arika Hage, 34	5:43:16
47. Kami Holtz, 37	5:53:21
48. Marcus Taintor, 28	5:56:02
49. Steve Quick, 47	5:56:16