

We Have an Ultramarathon Course

Written by John Estle, Co-Director

Tuesday, 09 August 2011 08:39 - Last Updated Tuesday, 09 August 2011 11:23

A final route for the new, extended course for the Equinox Ultramarathon has been decided upon. At its August 4 meeting, the Equinox Advisory Committee approved the final course laid out by Trail Chief Ben Nelson. The new course is 40 miles/64Km in length.

The ultramarathon course follows the Equinox Marathon course for the first 20+ miles, to the point where St. Patrick's Road turns left off of Henderson Road.

From that point

- Follow St. Patrick's Road to Ester Dome Road
- Turn right on Ester Dome Road and follow the Equinox Marathon course backward through miles 9-8-7-6-5-4 to Ballaine Road at about mile 3.3 on the marathon course.
 - At this point the "Ultra Out-And-Back" segment begins. This section is sure to find its place in Equinox lore.
 - Cross Ballaine Road and run through gate in the split-rail fence on the east side of Ballaine Road
 - Turn left/north and run along the trail through the woods that parallels Ballaine Road until you reach Herreid Road
 - Turn right/east on Herreid Road, and follow it to the four corners at Auburn Drive
 - Continue straight across Auburn Drive and up the powerline
 - Turn left/north off the powerline on the 12-Mile-Trail
 - Continue across Wolverine Drive on the 12-Mile-Trail
 - Follow the 12-Mile-Trail to the four corners at the "Death Gully"
 - Turn right/east and ascend the "Death Gully" to the ridge
 - Turn left/northeast on the ridge trail
 - Follow the ridge trail to a point approximately 1/8 mile beyond the KUAC dish to the turnaround point (we have yet to install a marker)
 - Return to Ballaine Road by the same route
 - Cross Ballaine Road after passing through the gate in the split-rail fence
 - Turn left/south on Ballaine Road
 - Follow the marathon course backward along Ballaine Road,
 - Turn right/southwest into the woods on the marathon course, crossing Sandpiper and Kittiwake and making a small ascent before dropping back to Ballaine Road
 - Turn right/south on Ballaine Road, continue across Yankovich Road and along the shoulder of Ballaine Road
 - Continuing to follow the marathon course backward, turn right/west into the woods along to the point where you can go straight on the 6-Mile-Trail or go left and continue to follow the marathon course backward
 - Go straight/west on the 6-Mile-Trail and follow it as it turns into the "chip trail"

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- Continue on the chip trail
- Cross the USGS/CIGO site road
- Turn left/south on the trail that takes you to the powerline and on to the T-Field
- Run south along the east side of the T-Field
- Continue south along the T-Field road to the "picnic grounds" at the top of the West Ridge (by the GI dish)
- At that point you rejoin the marathon course and finish as you would in the marathon

It's not easy. But then, the Equinox Marathon is not an easy marathon. It's sort of a Feng Shui thing - we wanted to keep all aspects of the marathon in harmony!

Stay tuned for Google Earth course satellite photos and a course profile.

Why We Did What We Did

The Advisory Committee believes that the marathon is, and should remain, the centerpiece of the "Equinox Event" that now includes the relay and the ultramarathon. That being the case, we wanted to ensure that the ultramarathon added to, and did not detract from, the marathon. We felt, based upon talking with many people who had run the 50Km ultra in 2009 and 2010, that the ultramarathon was actually drawing people out of the marathon and into the ultramarathon, rather than bringing into the event people who might otherwise not participate.

The Nature of the Event:

If one looks at the per mile pace for the top finishers in the 50Km race in '09 and '10, one can see that the pace for the ultrarunners was very similar to the per mile pace of the marathoners. Many of the top finishers in the 50Km ultra could have run the same pace and finished in the top 10 of the marathon. To our way of thinking, that meant that the ultramarathon really was not a different event from the marathon.

We wanted to make the ultramarathon an event that is distinct from the marathon. In short, to offer a sufficiently different physiological challenge from the marathon so that participants have a unique, other-than-marathon experience. And we still wanted it have an "Equinox Flavor" (i.e. an Equinox-like course) and to be an integral part of the Equinox Event.

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Our goal is to expand the Equinox Event and try to draw more participants, rather than divide the event (and our existing number of participants) in a zero sum game. The simplest and best way to accomplish this was to lengthen the ultramarathon distance.

The Distance:

What distance should we use? There were a number of factors we took into consideration when deciding upon a distance. The most important consideration was that the Equinox Marathon was the centerpiece, and the ultramarathon would have to fit within existing Equinox Marathon parameters. That means it would start at 8:00AM and that the finish line would close at 6:00PM.

We looked at the results from the first two years of the 50Km ultra, then made some educated projections about what would happen to competitors' per mile pace as we lengthened the distance. One suggestion from participants was that we increase the distance to 50 miles. From our best extrapolations, it seemed that if we extended the route to 50 miles (approximately 80Km) that only a very small portion of the participants the first two years would have finished within the 10-hour window. 50 is a nice, round number, but a 50-mile course is a lot of work to mark, especially if only a handful of people (our estimate - 10-20 people at the most, compared to 55-65 finishers in the 50Km) would finish within 10-hours.

We then looked at 60Km (37.28 miles) and 64Km/40 miles (roughly equivalent). By going with the 64Km/40 mile distance, we estimated that at least 3/4 of the finishers the first couple of years would have been capable of finishing the lengthened ultramarathon. A distance of 40 miles means that participants would have to average 4 miles per hour - fast walking speed. That seemed achievable for a pretty substantial number of people. So we decided to go with 40 miles - a nice round number, especially for metrically challenged people. 40 miles = 64.4Km; 64Km = 39.75 miles. Measuring over that distance, we'll say 40 miles and 64Km are equal, so the distance will be billed as 40 miles/64Km

Now, instead of someone who is considering doing the ultramarathon thinking "It's just another five miles [compared to the marathon]", the potential participant will have to think a little harder and a little longer. Forty miles is 13.8 miles/17.5KM longer than a marathon. It's a little harder choice, which is what we were shooting for. In addition, there are many ultrarunners who pooh-pooh 50Km events as "not real ultras." We believe that by extending the length of the course/event that we will draw some additional entrants who would not otherwise have considered participating in the Equinox.

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Finally, there seems to be a thriving community of ultra-athletes in Fairbanks, and there is a growing slate of events (Sourdough 100 run/mountain bike last month; White Mountains 100 bike/ski/run in March) attracting both local and non-local participants. We hope to serve this community and add another high-quality event that will draw participants from this group.

Logistics

In the many conversations we have had with potential ultra participants, one of the most important aspects of the event is often overlooked when discussing the course, the distance or other aspects of the ultramarathon. That is the logistics of the Equinox Event as a whole.

Back in the days before the Equinox Relay was added, the logistics of the race were simple. In the 1980s the field size was usually under 200, and logistical considerations were relatively easy and straightforward. With the advent of the relay in 1990 things became way more complex. Under the leadership of Steve Bainbridge from 1996-2000, the participation in the marathon and the relay mushroomed, which created way bigger logistical challenges than were the case with the same events with smaller fields. When the 50Km Ultramarathon was added in 2009, yet another layer of logistical challenges was added.

The position of the Equinox Advisory Committee is that the Marathon is the centerpiece, the sun around which all the other Equinox events revolve. Everything that we do has to fit into the marathon framework, and do so without detracting from the marathon. In practical terms, that means:

- All events start at 8:00AM - to start a longer ultramarathon (or other event) earlier than 8:00AM would create huge logistical headaches in many areas: the opening time for the Patty Center; distribution of food, drink and materials to the people who run the feed stations (Moose Mountain Ski Patrol); extended hours for volunteers who would have to get to their feed stations and traffic control points earlier and stay on the job longer; starting the event in the dark; a bigger temperature range (both of which create health/safety issues), etc.

- The finish line will close for all events at 6:00PM - in order to limit the on-the-job hours of our volunteer groups, we need to have a definite end-point, where volunteers can "leave their stations;" in addition, going later than 6:00PM would cause big problems for getting results out in time for the awards banquet/ceremony, and giving many participants sufficient time to get from the finish line to a shower and be able to change prior to attending the awards banquet/ceremony.

- Course layout and marking - marking a marathon course sufficiently to keep all the

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participants on course is a major challenge; marking an ultra course is even more of a challenge. The problems and work inherent in marking (and checking the markings on) a 50-mile course were one potent argument against having a 50-mile ultra. In order to make marking a longer course practical, it was our decision to use a significant portion of the course (about 7 miles, from just past nine miles to just past two miles) backwards; this means that our course-marking crew can mark those seven miles of the ultramarathon course at the same time they are marking the marathon course; similarly, by creating an "Ultramarathon Out-And-Back" section, marking on that portion of the course is simplified - and more reliable.

Summary

You have just read the why and how of how we arrived at a 64Km/40 mile ultra. We believe that the lengthened race will be a huge asset to the Equinox Events, and that it will grow substantially in future years, and develop its own mystique, legends and lore as a stand-alone race within the larger framework of the event we all know and love as "the Equinox."

If reading this has helped you understand that an awful lot of work goes into making the Equinox Marathon, Ultramarathon and Relay the great events that they are, then you understand that high-quality volunteers are ALWAYS needed - and usually in short supply. The Equinox Events don't happen without your help. If you are motivated to help in any way, at any time (and it doesn't have to be on race day) please contact any member of the Equinox Advisory Committee and let them know you want to be an Equinox Volunteer.

The Equinox Advisory Committee:

Susan Kramer, co-Director; John Estle, co-Director, Mike Kramer, Bob Eley, John Carlson, Kat Betters, Monte Jordan, Ben Nelson, Tracey Martinson, Stan Justice, Andy Holland