

April 26

free state trail marathon race report (by Paul from Washington State)

"In the first three miles, you'll have a couple of chances to get your feet wet."

This is what race director Ben Holmes told the 50-odd runners who lined up for the [2008 Free State Trail Marathon](#) in Lawrence Kansas. He wasn't kidding either. Over the next four hours and twenty four minutes, I'd have a number of chances to get my feet wet. Muddy too.



Ben continued on : There were no mile markers on the course, and no one yelling out splits. You just had to keep an eye out for the small yellow flags marking the course, and watch for the signs indicating a turn, or saying "WRONG WAY". Simple!

In fact, it was a lot simpler than trying to make sense of the [online course map](#). The signs and markers were all I'd have. If they misled me, it might be weeks before someone found me.

Not to worry though! Race Director Ben Holmes and his army of able volunteers did a great job with the setup and support. The hills, mud, and lack of chocolate mints on your pillow are a small price to pay for the privilege of grinding out 26.2 miles on the pretty trails of [Clinton Lake State Park](#) with the [Kansas City Trail Nerds](#) and their friends.

But let's back up a couple of months first. I'd been looking for a nice spring marathon to do. My training had been spotty, owing to some nagging injuries, so I was most interested in running one for fun (rather than for a PR). A search on [marathonguide.com](#) turned up a small trail race just outside [Lawrence Kansas](#) that looked interesting. I really like the vibe around small races, and love trail running too. And I've never been to this part of the midwest, which was a bonus.



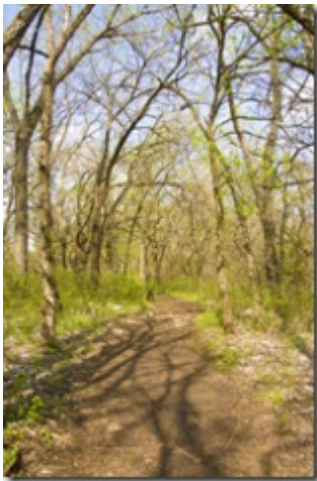
I arrived in the comfortable town of Lawrence two days before the marathon. Walking around town was a great low-key way to relax before the run. People are disarmingly friendly. I especially enjoyed a visit to the well-stocked [Sunflower Bicycle and Outdoor Shop](#), and getting a massage at the [Southwind Health Collective](#). The therapist even offered to loan me a memory foam mattress if the hotel bed was hard on my back! That's a level of friendliness you don't experience in most places.

On race morning, I got to the start about fifteen minutes before the "gun". In this case, the "gun" was really Ben giving the aforementioned spiel about the conditions and support on the trail, followed by a very quick "ready, set, GO!". The sendoff was so quick in fact, that for a second or two, no one moved.

Slowly we all made our way along a 5k out and back that began with a traversal over an open field. The grass was about to mid shin in spots, but the footing wasn't bad. A few minutes later, we descended into a nice single track trail, which included a couple of ankle-deep wades through a creek.

By the time we passed back by the start, I'd fallen into a pace with about five locals. We spent the better part of the first half together, including some hair-raising skids down muddy hills.

By now, I realized that the muddy terrain would be a bigger challenge for me than the hills were. The up and downs were pretty similar in difficulty to the [Redmond Watershed](#), or the easy trails on [Cougar Mountain](#). But trying to run through the thick pasty mud was tiring! After a while I more or less gave up on that, and just walked through the more slippery parts. Another challenge was scrabbling across the rocks along the lakeshore. Any time I'd try to pick up the pace a little, I'd nearly roll my ankles, or myself. Rather than DNF due to injury, I dialed things back and just enjoyed the morning.



Reaching the halfway point, I stopped to mix another bottle of [Cytomax](#), which meant losing my running partners. I spent the next twelve miles by myself. This solitude was both pleasant and disorienting. I really enjoyed the beautiful trails, and varied terrain, and didn't at all mind the quiet. On the other hand, I also had no idea how far I'd gone. Keeping me company along the way were a string of pithy statements that Ben had posted along the trail. My favorite was "if you're going to be stupid, you'd better be tough". Yep!

All I heard until mile 25 was the sound of my own footsteps. My legs were definitely tired from trying to remain upright through the mud, and across rocks and roots, but I felt strong enough to keep a fairly steady pace, occasionally walking up a short hill.

When I finally caught up to another runner, I had no idea how far from the finish I was. The trees weren't that dense, but it also wasn't easy to see too far ahead on the trail. And I'd spent so much

time zoning out that I was surprised when he told me we had less than a mile to go. Five more minutes and a couple of turns later, and I ran across the finish, pretty wiped out. I finished in 4:23:59. This was good for 16th of 75 finishers in the marathon. I was the third male masters finisher, proof that anyone can place in their age group if they find a small enough race!

You can check out the results [here](#) and some pictures of the race [here](#). Also - check out some great pictures and words from the course from [Gary Henry](#), [Strawberry Hill Runner](#) (Colleen), and [Trail Zombie](#)!

Reflecting on the trip as I fly towards home, I'm really happy I chose this event. The easygoing charm, right down to the aid stations consisting of a water jug perched on a stump, and the friendliness of the [Kansas City Trail Nerd](#) community made it all worthwhile.