

hit the trails



Anna Lehmann

On the Trail at ...

THE HIGHLANDS SKY 40M

It's an easy target. You've got your hillbillies, your black lung, your blood feuds, your Abercrombie shirt proclaiming "Everything is relative in West Virginia." Go ahead, joke. The locals don't mind. They got something that should turn the rest of the country envy-green: some of the most beautiful hills and hollers, mountains and valleys, lush, rich forests, and clear, cold streams you could ever hope to find.

It's a place made for trail running, and indeed, races are popping up like mushrooms after the rain. This June saw the second edition of the Highlands Sky 40M, held in the Canaan Valley in the northeastern portion of the state. (In West Virginia, Canaan rhymes with "inane"—OK, go ahead, joke.) The course runs alongside the Canaan Valley National Wilderness Refuge and cuts through Dolly Sods, a 10,000-acre National Wilderness Area with a climate and system of vegetation similar to the boreal forest of northern Canada. Atop the ridges of the Allegheny Plateau, the red spruce look cold and miserable, lopsided from the whipping westerly winds. Rocks line the trail, menacing, threatening. The climate lives up to the quote frequently attributed to Mark Twain about waiting a minute for the weather to change.

To Dan Lehmann, 53, it seemed the perfect spot for an ultramarathon. Lehmann started running at age 44, at a time when his life was difficult, and running, as we all know, proved curative. He ran his first 50K in 1999, before he'd ever run a marathon. Seven years ago, Lehmann and his wife Johanna, who have five children ranging from six years old to six and half feet tall, organized a rough trail 10K in their community of Helvetia, WV, a remote town of less than 200 hundred people.

In 2003, they undertook a bigger challenge: organizing the West Virginia Half Marathon in Buckhannon. It went off on a beautiful, late winter afternoon. "From the finish line I saw a runner go down," Lehmann remembers. "He was close enough that when he got up I could see it was Bill." Bill Young, then 36, was

a recent convert to running, a former football player who had gone large and lumpy and, only recently, had started running. "He went down again, and I called the EMTs," says Lehmann. "He was semi-conscious, cold and clammy." The local hospital emergency room got his core temperature down from 107, and he was helicoptered out to Morgantown.

"It was a good lesson for Bill on proper hydration," Lehmann says, "and for me on having a plan."

That summer, Lehmann put on the inaugural Highlands Sky 40M. The point-to-point course is reflective of the man who laid it out: diversely interesting, lovely, and tough as all get-out. You get a two-mile warm-up on a paved country road and then begin to climb on a grassy trail under the canopy of hardwoods. In the first eight miles there's an elevation gain of over 2,000 feet. And then you lose it going down a creek bed. If you were water, it would make sense running here. Down, down, down, until you reach the next climb, where you go back up. It's so beautiful it almost doesn't feel hard. Almost. Then, at around 18 miles, the world changes.

"It should be a place where you can make up some time," Lehmann says of the dirt road that follows the eastern Continental Divide. On your right is a sharp drop, where the waters wend their way to the Atlantic. On the left is the protected Dolly Sods National Wilderness Area and the big drain to the Mississippi. On the road it's you, just you. It's 7.5 miles of misery. Make up time? Lehmann suggests it's a good place for meditation: the road is dead straight. You can see miles ahead, and what you see are ants. But wait, no, not ants. They are your fellow runners. As you look forward the road seems to rise unremittingly. Then you turn around to look back: it seems to go uphill in that direction as well.

A left turn off the road leads right into the good, black mud of Dolly Sods. A boggy, knee-deep, shoe-sucking, tendon-pulling section of ickiness. But the hard part is over. The rest of the course rolls, but doesn't rock you the way the first 18 miles did. You run through meadows and reach the Timberline Four Seasons Resort ski area and make your way to the finish at Canaan Valley Lodge.

Last year, after crossing the line, David Horton, legendary East Coast race director and fierce competitor, pronounced the race, "mile for mile, the hardest on the East Coast." While

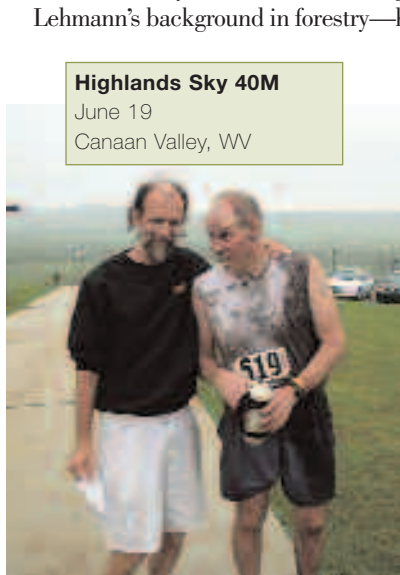
assigning a degree of difficulty to a race may be like asking Russian judges to comment on American figure skaters, there is no question that Highlands Sky is a difficult race. "I never meant for the race to be the hardest," says Lehmann. "The coolest maybe, but I was never going for the hardest."

Lehmann's background in forestry—he works for the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection—is apparent whenever he opens his mouth. During the pre-race meeting he pointed out that runners would cross Red Creek: "It really is red," he said, and pointed out that tannins from the wetland vegetation and soil minerals are what give it such a distinctive color. When describing the boggy part of the course, he described the mud as "good mud, nice black mud."

One of the key qualities of a race director is adaptability. This year, on the day before the race, in a downpour that dumped more than three inches onto the course, Lehmann had to cut a new "trail" to accommodate a motocross race that was being held on the ski slopes. He bushwhacked through the woods and strung ribbons. After the race, muddy and bloody runners begged the race director to keep the "Lehmann Butt Slide" as part of the permanent course.

"He really cares about the runners," says Horton. "He's serious but light-hearted, firm but caring and considerate." And, the most important thing, Horton says, "He's an ultrarunner himself."

Indeed, after the run every person who crossed the line thanked Lehmann. "The course markings were the best I've ever seen," said Derrick Carr, a Virginia ultrarunner who came in second and who has, by his own account, marked his fair share of trail. Lehmann greeted every runner by name, and was clearly delighted to welcome first across the finish line Bill Young, hydrated and healthy, who won in 7:08, edging out



Highlands Sky 40M

June 19
Canaan Valley, WV

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iPlayOutside.com

Opposite page: Women's winner Sophie Speidel; Above: Dan Lehmann with Bruce Johnson, covered in "good mud, nice black mud;" "Dirt Chick" Dru Sexton on the trail.

Carr by two and a half minutes. Sophie Speidel of Charlottesville, VA, took the women's race in 8:06. Neither had ever won an ultra before.

After giving out the awards and raffling off a box of booty at the post-race dinner, with grace and wit, Lehmann finally sat down to eat. He looked up, worried. The resort, he said, was donating the food. But what about the servers? "Don't you think we should put a gratuity jar out for them?" That sense of care and compassion, combined with an obsessive attention to detail, are bound to make the Highlands Sky one of the most popular ultras on the East Coast.

—Rachel Toor

It's a Matter of Degree

180s Exhale Terrain Glove (\$40)

How often do you find yourself breathing on your cold hands to try to warm them? 180s built on that habit by integrating an Exhale Heating System into a lightweight, slim-fitting glove, so you can blow into the handwear without removing them. The Exhale Terrain is built of stretch nylon with synthetic leather palms and moisture-wicking brushed polyester liners for warmth and dexterity.

www.oneeighties.com

180s Pivot Festo Sunglasses (\$60)

At less than an ounce and with 180s Motion Fit System, the Pivot Festo sunglasses are practically unnoticeable. When not in use, the rotating temple arms pivot in front of the 100 percent UV protection, impact resistant lenses to protect them from scratches. Although the clear frames allow for some glare reflection into the eyes, the other Festos colors are great.



180s Pivot Festo Sunglasses

180s Ear Warmers (\$25)

Ear muffs and running are not normally associated with one another, but 180s' performance ear warmers are likely to change that. These internally-framed, lightweight, wicking ear warmers come in many different high-tech materials, such as Power Dry, Thermolite, Dri-Release, Thermal Pro, Thermo Softec, Active 100, Wind Pro, and Merino wool, with varying levels of wind or water protection and insulation.

66° North Glymur Powersheild Jacket with Hood (\$354)

Where better to design and test a softshell hooded jacket than Finland, the Arctic Circle, 66° in latitude? Made of Powersheild, a fleeced stretch-woven fabric from Polartec that protects against moisture and wind, the Glymur jacket is an athletic, form-fitting top that moves with you. The most unique quality of this unisex full-zip jacket is the snug hood that keeps your ears and face warm yet doesn't restrict movement.

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