

Trailing along

Area runners push themselves over the Kaw and through the woods, up the hills and into the mud

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Veteran trail runner Gary Henry is flanked by “Babes and Nerds” from the Lawrence trail running club.



The Trail Nerds and Mud Babes have a short route tonight—only seven miles. In preparation for their weekly Wednesday evening run on the trails between the levee and the river just north of downtown Lawrence, the runners grab hand-held flashlights or don headlamps, gloves and trail shoes. Some attach drop bags or even a knife in case cougar encounters occur. For now, the only thing that has any bite to it is the cold, crisp air that will be several degrees cooler at spots along the trail closest to the river. By then, however, the runners will be so warm they will hardly notice.

As the runners leave behind the illuminating city lights, they stride into darkness and fall into their individual rhythms, each pace marked by a bouncing light. For these athletes, leaving the glow of the city and the safe footing of the levee path is as common and automatic as running itself.

“If I didn’t run, I’d be like tapioca,” says Gary “The Ludite” Henry, a Lawrence Trail Nerd.

Henry is among those in Lawrence who run the trails together for support and motivation. Their individual goals vary, but many are preparing for ultramarathon competitions—off-road races ranging in distance from 31 to 100 miles and staged across trail courses, including desert or mountain routes that can take up to 30 hours to complete.

Christy Craig, a local Mud Babe who recently moved from Colorado, says she fell in love with Lawrence because of the trails and “the great friendships and connections” she has made through the group.

Being a part of this group, say many runners, allows them to improve as individuals.

“For somebody like me, what they call a mid- or back-of-the-packer, the competition is always against myself,” Henry says. “When you get to the finish line of your first 100-miler, you will have discovered depths in yourself that you never ever would have suspected were there.”

The number of runners in any ultra, which many describe as a spiritual or life-changing experience, varies from a couple dozen to hundreds. On average, 60 percent of runners will drop out or be eliminated by injury, illness or fatigue, which results in the dreaded “DNF” or “did not finish.” Nevertheless, racers are lining up for ultras, and the most popular races hold lotteries to accommodate the swelling number of entrants.

“The fact is modern day life just doesn’t challenge us physically very much, so some people seek out that challenge,” Henry says. “People want to really see what they’ve got inside. The only way to do that is to go farther and faster than you ever have before.”



whiners allowed” motto and requests an annual membership fee of \$15. Race costs are separate. Opportunities to train include four to eight planned group runs a week, two of which are in Lawrence: the Wednesday night nontechnical or smoother run and a longer, more technical or rougher Saturday morning run on the North Shore Trail System at Clinton Lake.

There also are plenty of opportunities to compete. Lawrence Nerds and Babes organize three races per year at Clinton Lake: the 100-kilometer (62 miles) and 40-mile ultras and 26.2-mile trail marathon that make up the Free State Trail Run in April, the 8.5-mile Northshore Trail Run and the 5K Pod Trod MP3 Mile Challenge, both of which are in September.

The Pod Trod’s three courses are the Lumbering Luddite, Mud Babe’s Revenge and Clinton Cornfusion. Participants download the course of their choice onto iPods the night before or the morning of competition and follow digital directions. The race requires runners to pick up “trail tokens” along the way to prove completion. The only clues to indicate level of difficulty appear in cryptic descriptions available online.

For the club’s weekly schedule, which includes detailed descriptions and locations of trails and times, visit www.psychowyc.com.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND AT:

WWW.ULTRASTORY.COM

[HTTP://SPORTS.GROUPS.YAHOO.COM/GROUP/KCTRILRUNNING](http://SPORTS.GROUPS.YAHOO.COM/GROUP/KCTRILRUNNING)

WWW.KCTRILNERDS.BLOGSPOT.COM

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