

BLAKE EARNS HARD FOUGHT MT. WASHINGTON VICTORY

By DON SIKORSKI
Special to the Bulletin

Most people think of treadmill running as a redundant, even paced cardiovascular effort in an air conditioned health club. So when Eric Blake speaks of churning the treadmill up towards a 12 percent grade and hamming out 6 consecutive miles at a serious effort, you know his motivation is somewhat greater. Those uphill treadmill efforts and plenty of other miles paid off nicely for the 29 year-old New Britain resident two weeks ago when Blake outran a very competitive field to win his second title at the 48th Annual Mt. Washington Road Race in Pinkham Notch, NH. Brandy Erholtz of Bailey, CO claimed top female honors in her debut effort at the grueling, all-uphill run from the base of Mt. Washington to the 6,288 foot summit, the highest peak in the Northeast. Each earned \$1,000 for their hard fought victories.

Blake, now an experienced mountain racing veteran, fought off an intense challenge from first-time Mt. Washington participant Clint Wells, of Superior, CO to finally breaking away in the race's final stretch to win in 1:00:39, 11 seconds up on Wells, whose superior track speed concerned Blake over the final miles. "The halfway split was 29:01, which is about 20-25 seconds quicker than I've ever gone through there," recalled Blake of how the race played out. "I knew the pace was solid. A half mile later, I felt the pace slow a little, so I took the lead and tried to push the pace. With 600 meters to the finish, he (Wells) took the lead, and I was working very hard to stay with him," said Blake of that final effort. Blake finally did get past Wells in the race's final stretch, which delivers a 20+ percent uphill grade to the oxygen-starved runners heading to the finish line. It was a hard fought victory for the former Lebanon, CT resident.

A State Open Cross-Country champion at Lyman Memorial, Blake continued to develop as a runner during his collegiate years. His graduate school experience at Adams State in Colorado served as his first introduction to mountain running, a discipline which he has since excelled. Blake finished an impressive 4th overall in his debut Mt. Washington effort in 2004. He returned to the mountain a year later to earn runner-up honors, and then claimed his first victory at the 2006 race. Blake did not compete at Mt. Washington last year. "This one was definitely the most satisfying for a couple reasons," explained Blake. "The field was definitely deeper than ever. There was so many runners under 66 minutes; under 70 minutes. And a lot of the New England runners that ran the race that I compete with were there running for the first time, so I really didn't know what to expect from them," said Blake. "There was also a big national presence. Colorado always brings good runners" (the 2-3-5 finishers were all from Colorado with 4th from Washington). One reason the west coast presence was so strong at Mt. Washington is the fact that the top 4 runners also qualified for the World Mountain Championships. Blake is enthusiastic about being part of that team again in 2008.

Of course, you don't win a 7.6 mile uphill race against national class competition without putting in plenty of hard work. And there aren't many runners out there more dedicated than Eric Blake. His standard training week is comprised of twice daily running (10-12 miles in the morning and 5-6 miles in the afternoon), with a faster interval workout mid-week and a weekend long run to provide the strength and speed necessary to race at an elite level. Blake's approach in training for Mt. Washington combines standardized distance training with doses of specific treadmill workouts designed to mimic the continuous, uphill grind. "I try to get in the best shape possible as if you're running a half marathon," explained Blake of his preparation, "compared to 5K racing for only a 15-16 minute effort or marathon training, when you're racing for over two hours. Tempo runs always work well. And twice leading up to the race, I do a treadmill run where, after a flat warm-up, I put the incline up to 9 percent for a mile and keep going up, 10, 11, 12 percent. I do that for 6 miles, and I do that workout twice. It's a good simulator, because you don't get a break, just like at Mt. Washington".

Blake, a member of the Boston Athletic Association team, is self-coached but always open to feedback from fellow runners and coaches. He is also the Assistant Track Coach at Central Connecticut State University. Although he has recognized tremendous success with specific training methods himself, Blake is careful to customize training plans based on each of his athlete's particular strengths and weaknesses. "The runners you coach have to have belief in the system and in what they're doing," explains Blake. "The Coach-Athlete relationship is so important, because if they don't believe that a particular workout will help them out, then it won't help them out, since there's so much of a mental aspect to running. I'm also careful to coach the athlete," said Blake. "All athletes are different, and what works for me may not work for someone else."

Blake will now look ahead to representing the United States on September 14th at the World Mountain Running Championships in Switzerland and is planning on competing in a fall marathon, most likely the Twin Cities Marathon in Minnesota, which will serve as the USA National Championship event for the distance. Because the pace of mountain running is slower than traditional road races, Blake expects to be recovered and ready for the 26.2 mile race. "I'll be tired from the travel and running the (mountain) race," predicts Blake. "But my legs will be fine. I'll take the week after easy, but I'll recover pretty quickly". Through hard work and dedication, Eric Blake has capitalized on what works best for him as a distance runner and has clearly found his niche as a distance runner. "I think I'm built more for mountain running than for the track," says Blake in trying to explain his success racing on the hills. "There's something about mountain running where it hurts early in the race. A half mile in, you're running up a steep hill and already breathing hard, and you've got an hour (of racing) left. I think there's just that mental aspect of being able to grind it out that I've developed over the years".

Local Update

Eastern Connecticut runners also fared very well in the race up the mountain. Norwich's Joe Banas ran a very strong 1:25:50 clocking in a return appearance to the mountain race to lead all local males, but Joe was proud to point out the fact that he was not the top local finisher at Mt. Washington. In her debut Mt. Washington effort, Joe's wife Melissa Perkins-Banas posted an outstanding effort of 1:23:26 to finish 13th female overall. Anna Hankins of Mansfield was also competing in her inaugural Mt. Washington run, finishing in 1:53:24 and claiming top honors in the 19-and-under category. Mystic's Stanley Mickus finished in 1:27:10, while a pair of Putnam runners with prior mountain running experience also returned to the Mt. Washington race with much success. Martin Fey, 54, hit the finish tape in 1:28:24, with fellow Clippers alum Jim Gothreau, 50, finished in 1:32:44 in his first appearance at Mt. Washington since 1994. And another former Putnam XC and Track standout Josh Stockdale, 41, posted a strong effort in 1:36:38. Curt Hirsh of Storrs reached the summit in 1:40:13 to complete his 26th consecutive finish at Mt. Washington at the age of 59. 8 of the top 30 runners hailed from the state of Colorado. There were 861 official finishers.

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