

Noble Canyon 50K - Race Report
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The Noble Canyon Trail is, as one would expect, a prominent feature of the eponymous 50 km race in the mountains east of San Diego, California. This renowned route is also popular with mountain bikers utilizing full suspension, body armor, and car shuttles to the top, which gives some indication of the challenge it presents to runners (in fairness, there are riders who tackle the trail with minimal rigs and earn their turns by riding up as well - 8th place 50K finisher and winner of the 50+ age group Dan Lehnberg was spotted on his single speed hardtail the following day.) In addition to a journey down and back up the canyon, the race includes a spectacular section of the Pacific Crest Trail along the ridge of the Laguna Mountains, with views of the Anza Borrego Desert, and rolling terrain through woodlands and meadows along the shores of Big Laguna lake. All in all a splendid circuit with a diverse sampling of Southern California single track, and a great primer for the San Diego 100 Endurance Run, held in June, spanning the same trails and more.

The start-finish moved this year from the base of Noble Canyon to the Al Bahr Shrine Camp on Sunrise Highway, resulting in a significant shift in the sequence of climbing and descending - pacing strategies honed by previous finishers would need to be revised. At check in, participants collected fiery red technical shirts and custom socks, sipped coffee and adjusted their gear as they greeted friends from near and far. The temperature was quite chilly as 181 runners were briefed in the lodge by first time RD Brian Gonzales, taking the reins of the Rat Race this year from the legendary Scotty Mills, who was on site as well, continuing to contribute all his skill and knowledge in support of the event. But as the enthusiastic group moved outside for the 7:00 a.m. start, the sun was coming up, and warmth was on the way.

For this fifth running, favorites included the venerable Eric Clifton (two time winner and course record holder), and local speedster and 2010 champ Dean Dobberteen. Other strong contenders included Fabrice Hardel, who had cooked up a solid finish in epic conditions at the UTMB just 3 weeks prior, and a pair of very fast Chrises - Price and Sigel, who have been racking up great results in the region lately. For the women, Tracy Dimino brought substantial experience on the race route, but would surely have to keep an eye on the up and coming Melissa Kurek as well as the tenacious Brenda Corona and the ever-present Annie Langstaff. Previous champ Jenny Henderson claimed beforehand that she'd be taking it easy.

A large crowd of supporters cheered loudly as the race got underway. The group spread out quickly along a short section of gravel road through the campground, and it was on to blissful single track and rolling terrain leading to the first aid station at Big Tree (6.8m) where a crew led by the affable Tracy Moore, himself an eminent performer on these very trails, handled refueling needs. Each successive aid station, from the Noble Canyon trailhead, back through Big Tree, on to Penny Pines, and finally through the Rat Hole brought welcome relief as temperatures rose and the technical terrain took its toll. The aid stations and impeccable course marking were all handled by a distinguished collection of highly experienced Southern California ultra

runners, their friends and families. The knowledge and enthusiasm offered was obviously appreciated by the runners, and paid off in a 95% finisher rate on a very challenging course. When your water bottles get refilled by Tom Nielsen, or you see Paul Schmidt huddled with the Ham operators, you know you are in good hands - if those names don't mean anything to you - go look them up at Ultrasignup, we'll wait...

Descending from Big Tree, the trail becomes considerably more rugged, with some deep shade and a few stream crossings, before transitioning to a desert-like section. At the Noble trailhead turnaround (13.2m), it was Chris Price in the lead by just a few minutes and looking very relaxed, chased by a hard working Dobberteen, with Hardel bidding his time in third, but keeping in contact. Meanwhile, Tracy Dimino was well into an exceptionally even paced effort and holding the lead for the women. With the crux of the race to come - the long climb back up the canyon followed by additional exposed climbing on the PCT - the field was generally in good spirits. It was warm, not crazy hot as in previous years, but anyone who ignored the explicit instructions to carry (and consume) adequate fluids would soon be suffering. Even moderate temperatures and altitude (the course ranges between 3700 and 6000 feet) render an aid-station-only hydration strategy highly ill advised if not outright risky. Translation for ultra-rookies: just because you see Eric Clifton with no bottle doesn't mean you can pull off the same trick. You are not Eric Clifton.

After a second visit to Big Tree (19.6m), it was a short haul up to Penny Pines (22.1m), where those who were able to tear themselves away from Pam Everett's homemade cookies and the friendly crowd of supporters set out onto the PCT toward the Rat Hole (27m). On that deceptively draining yet scenic 5 mile section, Fabrice upped the ante and slid past Dean into second place, and that set the podium. Chris Price remained comfortably in front and crossed the line in an impressive time of 4:03. Tracy Dimino moved steadily through the field into 18th overall to win the women's race in a solid 5:14. A steady stream of finishers rolled in over the remaining four hours - many smiling faces, and a few scuffs and scrapes courtesy of the rougher sections of trail. A large contingent of Search and Rescue medics was on hand, happy to practice wound dressing skills and keeping an eye out for any more severe metabolic symptoms.

A tradition at the Noble Canyon finish is the "kissing of the Rat" - in fact it's more than a tradition...if you want your medal, you've got to pucker up and lay one on the ginormous (and yes, rather disgusting) San Diego Bad Rats mascot which hangs suspended below the finish banner. But somehow, once the runners have conquered the hills, rocks and heat and dragged their tired bodies across the line, there is very little hesitation. And rest assured, the massive vats of chili waiting in the lodge were zippy enough to serve as an effective disinfectant.

10 runners took the start having completed all 4 previous editions, and all made it to the finish line, where they were rewarded with distinctive 5 time finisher jackets, hopefully the beginning of a splendid tradition celebrating the tenacity and loyalty of dedicated Noble Canyon runners (and Gonzo, I'm not just saying that because next year will be my 5th :-).