



SEPTEMBER 27, 2014



Matt Ostrander, aka "Coach O"

## How to Train for the Birkie Trail Run Marathon and Marathon Relay Part 1 of a 3-Part Series

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### “Getting to Know the NEW Course!”

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SEPTEMBER 27, 2014

<http://www.birkie.com/run/events/birkie-trail-run>

#### COURSE OVERVIEW

*Note: If you plan to run the marathon course or parts of it before the event, please take the Course Description and the map from the [Birkie Trail Run](#) with you. The course is marked in some areas—like turns onto the singletrack sections—with pink arrows, but it is not yet completely marked as it will be on race day. Enjoy!*



As you may know by now, the course for the Birkie Trail Marathon, Marathon Relay, and Half Marathon has been changed. If you're a hard core trail runner, you're going to love the changes. If you're a road runner who has dabbled in running on the Birkie Trail because it seemed like a safe way to connect with Mother Nature, well, this may be a big step for you.

Since many of you have already run the old course, it makes sense to start with a one-paragraph summary of the differences between the two courses. (1) Three sizeable single-track sections have been added. (2) The course is now a loop, rather than a point-to-point course. (3) The course is (or at least seems) much hillier. You will actually need to watch your footing in a few places. Finally, although it is more challenging, the course is WAY more scenic than it was before.

#### THE COURSE, AS IT UNFOLDS

The course starts at the new Birkie Ridge Trailhead—as you're driving north on Highway 63, you'll see it a couple of miles north of Seeley, on the right. You'll pass a wooden sign for the Nordic Ridge housing development, and then the entrance to the trailhead is the next right after that.

From the parking lot, the course skirts the tree line at the south edge of the field, then at the southeast corner of the field, it angles uphill. Then, 1.9 miles into the course, you come out on the Birkie Skate Trail. The main thing I'd stress about these first two miles is that you go out easy. Respect the hills. You may feel at mile 2 as if you fought those hills and won, but you won't know until mile 18 or 20 just how much it cost you.

When you come out on the Birkie Skate Trail, you turn right and head south to the Boedecker Road aid station. There are some good-sized hills in this section, including one steep one at the 16K marker and a long one shortly before Boedecker. If you're looking to win this race, you might run up those hills, but I think a person can walk up them and still win an award in her or his age group, know what I'm sayin'? The Boedecker Road aid station (when you're heading south) is the first exchange zone for the marathon relay.

About a half mile before you get to County Road "OO" and the Birkie "OO" Trailhead, you'll cross over to the Birkie Classic Trail on the Seeley Highlands "crossover" (about 600 feet) and turn back north. The great news is that you do this before you get to that long, nasty uphill just north of OO. Continue to make the most of the downhills, until you get back to the Boedecker Road aid station. That's the second exchange point for the marathon relay.

You only go north on the Classic Trail another half mile before you turn right onto the "Seeley Pass" singletrack. You will enjoy every step of the next 2.5 miles, a masterpiece of trail construction from the good folks at CAMBA (the Chequamegon Area Mountain Bike Association). Down in a lovely, low-lying meadow you'll see a plaque and wish you had time to read it, so I'll tell you what it says. It's kind of a Golden Spike commemoration, saying that on that spot, in summer, 2013, CAMBA connected the longest continuous piece of singletrack in the United States. Notice how ingeniously the trail builders laid out the best hillside routes, for trail drainage. Observe how skillfully they incorporated natural formations into the trail. Take a minute to ogle the wonders of the Gravity Cavity as you run safely by on the bypass. Gaze wistfully at the log rail that you (if you're like me) will never have the nerve to try on your bike. Not only is the log rail cool, but it also signals that you've reached the Birkie Classic Trail again, and the highest point of the course. Turn right onto the Classic Trail.

From here, you've got a long segment (2.9 miles) of mostly downhill on the Classic Trail. In June it looks like a long, wide belt of green between two walls of green, but on race day you should see plenty of beautiful fall color. This section of woods is a rich blend of conifers and mixed hardwoods. Just before you get to Timber Trail Road, the Classic Trail loops away from you to the left, and you continue more or less straight on what is now the Kortelopet Trail. Timber Trail Road is the third exchange zone for the marathon relay.

After Timber Trail Road, you continue roughly northwest on the Kortelopet Trail for 1.6 miles. In September, this should be a nice, open, breezy section of the course. Next, turn left onto the Ojibwe Trail and stay on that for about a half mile. You'll come out on the Birkie Skate Trail, where you turn left (south). You will now be starting to complete the loop back to the Birkie Ridge Trail and the finish.

After turning left on the Skate Trail, you go south on the Skate Trail for 1.8 miles. At Timber Trail Road you'll have another aid station, and that's the fourth marathon relay exchange zone. Continue south on the Skate Trail for another 0.6 miles, at which point you'll turn right onto the final singletrack section of the course. The turnoff is at about the 10K marker on the Skate Trail.

This section of CAMBA singletrack is, if possible, even more beautiful than the first. You'll pass some breath-taking special attractions, like ".38 Special" and "John's Chute." You'll see gorgeously banked turns, some of which were built up, but most of which used natural formations to enhance bike riding through here. I ran this section the morning after a heavy thunderstorm and only saw two puddles on the trail—those of you who are bikers or trail builders will appreciate what a marvel of engineering that is. Just be aware that the end point of this long section of singletrack is the High Point, and that means you'll be doing a lot of climbing over this 2.7-mile section. Some of it will be long and gradual, and some of it will be short and steep. Use the "Down-and-up" method whenever you can: Grab some momentum off of each downhill and let it carry you partway up the next hill. CAMBA trails are designed for that sort of thing.

After 2.7 miles on this section of singletrack section, you'll come out on the Birkie Skate Trail right by the "High Point" sign. Turn right and head south. You'll have .6 (a little more than a half mile) of mostly downhill until the Fire Tower Cabin Aid Station, which is also the last exchange zone for the marathon relay.

Now there's just eight-tenths of a mile left on the Birkie Skate Trail, and then you turn right to enter the Birkie Ridge trail. You'll go down a little, then up a long hill to a big intersection. Here you don't take the shortest way back to the beer tent: You turn left and head around the back (south) side of the Birkie Ridge trails. You'll add about another mile to the course by doing this, but you'll see some pretty hills and discover new depths of strength within yourself. Don't forget to shorten your stride and pump your arms. You can do it. Eventually you'll come out at an intersection with the main Birkie Ridge Trail—the trail you came out on from the parking lot, oh-so-many hours ago. Turn left. When you get to the magical panoramic ridgetop, it's all downhill to the waiting arms of your loved ones, your relay team members, or at least to that free first beer.

## **SOME GENERAL TIPS**

**If you're running on a marathon relay team**, you might be struggling with who runs which leg. Let me offer you a little advice on that:

- Stage 1: A strong hill climber. If you have someone who's all gonzo on race day, let them lead off.
- Stage 2: Someone who knows how to use rolling hills, being patient on the big climbs but going fast downhill.
- Stage 3: Your strongest runner. It's the longest leg, and there's plenty of uphill as you climb to the High Point.
- Stage 4: A smart, alert, coordinated runner. There's tricky footing.
- Stage 5: An experienced trail runner who can deliver on long uphills. A good balance of coordination and stamina is needed on that long, uphill singletrack.
- Stage 6: Someone with good speed, fast turnover on the downhills. If you have a road racer in the group, put them here. This is the easiest leg, but you have to be able to let it all out on the downhills.

**If you're running solo**, my general advice is to go fast on the downhills when the footing is good, to be patient on the uphills, and to take plenty of fluids at each aid station; it can feel like a long way between stops.

Solo marathon runners in particular should not be ashamed to walk some uphill, even very early in the race. If you're trying to run up a hill but your breathing is labored and you feel like you're not going any faster than a walk, it's time to walk. You will use some different muscles for a minute or two, and it gives you a chance to eat or drink something and regroup. Just keep your walk brisk and businesslike, and don't forget that you have to hit it hard again right away at the top—don't continue to walk over the crest of the hill. Once I hit the crest, I like to take a very deep breath, to recharge my muscles with oxygen and remind myself that it's Go Time.

**All runners,** For most of the hills on the Birkie Trail, a good strategy for all runners is this:

- Slow your pace by shortening your stride—not by slowing your stride frequency. Climb at a pace that does not significantly raise your effort level.
- Keep your head up and over your spine. I know that a lot of people mentally just don't like to look at that upslope, but your head weighs ten pounds, so hanging it down is a major energy drain. Scott Jurek, one of the greatest trail and ultra runners ever, says that on uphill he likes to imagine a wire coming down from the sky, lifting his head up.
- Give a little more swing to your arms. However, I don't want to see anyone out there doing the ear-high karate chop. Keep your shoulders relaxed and down, elbows bent at about 90 degrees, and hands relaxed and lightly cupped. Run as if you have a potato chip in each hand and don't want to break it. Sometimes when your legs don't want to keep going up a hill, concentrating on a good arm swing can keep you from bogging down.
- On uphill, keep thinking to yourself, "quick and light." (On flats, if I'm thinking a mantra, it's "fast and loose." On downhill, it's "active running," to remind myself that I should continue to apply effort to go fast and keep my form, not just let gravity flop me down the hill.)
- Finally, DON'T make assessments of how you feel or how your race is going while you're struggling up a hill. While climbing a hill, I think about nothing other than footstrike, head position, arm swing, and breathing.

As I mentioned earlier, this new course is more challenging than the old one. I think it's a big improvement, though. There's much more scenery and variety, the multiple-use of the aid stations makes it easier for support staff, and the loop nature of the course makes it much more convenient for runners.

**Heading out to scout the course this summer?** The map of the course on the Birkie website gives you a good overall picture of the course, but if you're going to try the course on your own before race day, I recommend the map at this page: <http://www.cambatrails.org/page/show/1050115-cable-area-silent-sports-map>. The area bounded by Timber Trail Road on the south, Spider Lake Fire Lane on the east, McNaught Road on the north, and Randysek Road on the west is an area where it's easy to mistake a snowshoe trail for a bike trail, or the Classic Trail for the Skate Trail. When I go up there alone, I carry the Silent Sports map with me on my phone. You should also be aware that neither the Boedecker Road warming hut nor the Fire Tower warming hut offers water—you must carry what you will need, plus a little extra.

If you have any other questions about the course, you can email me at [mathewostrander1@gmail.com](mailto:mathewostrander1@gmail.com), or you can contact Chris Campbell (the Birkie Trail Manager who designed it) at [trail@birkie.com](mailto:trail@birkie.com). I'll see you in September!

*Continued, About the Author ...*

**About the Author**

Matt Ostrander is a local trail runner (ultrarunner!). In 2013 alone he placed 22<sup>nd</sup> overall in the Birkie marathon in addition to being 1<sup>st</sup> in his age-class. This guy knows how to run! High school cross country coach and English teacher, and all-around-great-guy, Ostrander took off on the Birkie Trail to give everyone a detailed description of the all-new Birkie Trail Run marathon and marathon relay course. He also has some expert advice on those Birkie hills, overall training strategy, and race-day prep. The article above is 1 of his 3 articles for the 2014 Birkie Trail Run on Sept. 27. Check [birkie.com](http://www.birkie.com) for his complete series as it is posted - <http://www.birkie.com/run/events/birkie-trail-run>.