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Around the Columns

Hills, humidity make Heart of America tough

If running 26.2 miles through Columbia, across river bottoms, up the legendarily colossal Easley Hill and back into town during the most humid time of the year sounds like fun, get ready for a treat.

Labor Day 2009 marks the 50th [Heart of America Marathon](#), and although it has been a relatively well-kept secret nationally, it's not because the course didn't leave an impression on race participants.



The 50th annual Heart of America Marathon will run through Columbia on Labor Day, Sept. 7, 2009. Many experts consider the race to be the most difficult marathon in the United States. Photo by Shane Epping

“All of the things that make this race unique are what make it so challenging,” says Matthew Laye, PhD '09, last year's Heart of America champion. “Whenever you have significant hills after mile 20, it's tough.”

Columbia Daily Tribune writer Bill Clark, BJ '58, first organized the marathon in 1960.

“It started after an argument between a bunch of boxers and MU distance runners who were training here in the summer,” Clark says. The boxers, thinking they trained harder than anyone, issued the challenge at the marathon distance.

Five runners started the race at 8 a.m. Sept. 5, 1960, near Bernadette Drive and Stadium Boulevard. Almost four hours later, track runner Joe Schroeder, BS Ag '62, MS '65, defeated his teammate, Morris Patterson, BS BA '62, to win bragging rights. They were the only runners to finish, and the boxers never even showed up.

“I had blisters for most of the race, and I fell face down on the lawn of the Fulton [Mo.] courthouse with cramps in both legs,” Schroeder says.

The original route from Columbia to Fulton changed in 1963 to its current loop format. It begins at the Hearnes Center and heads south on Providence to the Missouri River community of Easley. From there, it changes direction north through Rock Bridge State Park and culminates in downtown Columbia.

With humidity levels typically near the 90s, many, including *Runner's World* magazine writer and running guru Hal Higdon, consider it to be the most difficult road marathon in the country. More than 150 runners participated in last year's race.

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