

Riddle isn't joking with record-setting performance at JFK 50 Mile

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Colleen McGrath, Staff Photographer

WILLIAMSPORT — David Riddle could only describe his performance at the 49th annual JFK 50 Mile ultramarathon with one word Saturday.

“Surreal,” he said. “I would say it’s a dream come true, but I can’t really say that because I could never even dream it.”

Riddle, 30, of Cincinnati, overtook prerace favorite Michael Wardian with about 4 1/2 miles left and prevailed in a course-record time of 5 hours, 40 minutes, 45 seconds.

Wardian, 37, of Arlington, Va., finished second in 5:43:24, also eclipsing the previous course-record mark of 5:46:22,

set in 1994 by Eric Clifton.

Before Saturday, Clifton had been the only runner to break 5:50 in the storied history of the country’s oldest and largest ultramarathon.

“It takes the perfect storm to break a record like that — two athletes at the top of their sport at their peak,” said JFK 50 Mile director Mike Spinnler. “Wardian drew that performance out of Riddle. That’s how that stuff happens. It’s the human spirit — one man versus another.”

“But never did I fathom that a guy would run 5:43 and get beat.”

Wardian trailed Riddle by nearly 5 minutes at the end of the Appalachian Trail section of the race at 15.5 miles, and then went to work on the C&O Canal towpath.

Wardian took the lead from Riddle at roughly 27 miles, and built a 4-minute lead on him by 34.4.

“I was moving really well and thought I had him,” Wardian said. “I thought I had control of the race.”

“He passed me at 27 miles and said, ‘Let’s roll,’” Riddle said. “And I thought, ‘I’m going to just relax a little bit and run my pace.’ In a race this long, you can’t get caught up in what everyone else is doing.”

By 38.8 miles, Wardian’s lead over Riddle was down to 3 minutes. By 43.2, it was down to less than 2. Soon, Wardian was in Riddle’s sight on the rolling paved roads that lead to the finish.

“I love running and the trails and nature, but I do this because I love to compete,” said Riddle, who finished a close second in his first JFK 50 last year in 5:53:09. “When I saw Wardian, I got the fire and went into a different gear.”

When he finally caught Wardian, he blew by him.

“I really didn’t want to give him the opportunity to grab my shoulder,” said Riddle, who extended his lead the rest of the way. “He’s a first-class guy, but I had to do everything I could to put him away when I had the opportunity.”

It was a bittersweet result for Wardian.

“I did what I set out to do — break Clifton’s course record,” said Wardian, who won the 2007 JFK 50 in 5:50:34. “I just didn’t win the race. It’s disappointing, but I ran as hard as I could. He just ran better. He deserved to win today.

“But it’s pretty cool. In the 49-year history of the race, I ran the second-best time ever. ... Next year, everyone just has a new target to shoot for.”

Jeffrey Buechler, 37, of Boulder, Colo., finished third Saturday in 5:53:25. Rounding out the top five were Kalib Wilkinson, 27, of Lynchburg, Va., in 6:05:05, and Michael Arnstein, 34, of New York City, in 6:07:54.

The women’s race was won by Cassie Scallon, 29, of Watertown, Wis., in 6:31:22 — the No. 3 women’s performance in JFK 50 history. She took the lead for good 5 miles into the race.

“It’s crazy. I didn’t come here thinking I could win,” said Scallon, whose JFK debut almost didn’t happen Saturday. “All my training runs the last couple of weeks felt kind of bad, and I thought about not even running it.”

But she ran it — and turned in the performance of her career.

“I don’t know how to explain it. It just came together,” Scallon said. “I wanted to get it over with so I ran it quickly.”

Meghan Arbogast, 50, of Corvallis, Ore., was the women’s runner-up in 6:35:16, as she obliterated the previous 50-and-over women’s record for the race (8:00:31) while also breaking the previous 40-and-over mark (6:42:50).

“I haven’t slowed down,” said Arbogast, who was the JFK 50 runner-up in 2009 in 6:56:05. “I can still get faster at the longer stuff.”

Arbogast had hoped to be even faster Saturday. She said her sights were set on both the overall victory and course record (6:29:21).

“Yeah, why not? I felt like I was in good shape,” she said. “It’s more fun to win, but I wouldn’t say I’m disappointed. I’m really happy for (Scallon). She came in as an unknown and really shattered it.”

In January, Arbogast will be the oldest competitor at the U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials in her fourth appearance at the super-elite event.

“She may be the best 50-plus female athlete in any sport in the United States,” Spinnler said. “She is rewriting the book on aging and the senior athlete.”

Rounding out the top five women were Elissa Ballas, 32, of the U.S. Air Force, in 7:01:39, Karen Benway, 39, of Warwick, R.I., in 7:07:35, and Ragan Petrie, 45, of Arlington, Va., in 7:08:00.