**Black Hills 50K**

**Course Description**

**Course Markings**

If you pay attention to nothing else in this document, for the love of all that is holy, pay attention to this part. You can run this course knowing absolutely nothing about what turns are where so long as you know what markings you are supposed to (or not supposed to) follow. Every year, we describe and show examples of the course markings at the start of the race, and every year we end up with someone who says, “Well, I followed such and such marking and ended up off course” and it’s because they followed markings that are not ours. PAY. ATTENTION.

We essentially have four types of markings on the course. That may sound like a lot, but it’s really very simple:

**Centennial/Deerfield Trail Signs**

The bulk of the course is on the Centennial trail, with the last few miles into Silver City (and back out) following the Deerfield trail. Both trails have permanent Forest Service or BLM trail signage. The Centennial signs have a #89 with a buffalo skull. The Deerfield signs have a #40 with a deer hoofprint. In general, if you’re seeing these markings, you’re in good shape. Any deviations from these trails will be marked accordingly with other markings, as described below.

**Buffalo Skulls**

In addition to the Centennial and Deerfield signage, we have marked the course with our own buffalo skull markings. These are either white or gray signs (the background color makes absolutely no difference) with a black buffalo skull on them. The skull itself is highly reflective, so these double as nighttime markings. You’ll see these skull markings on both the Centennial and Deerfield trails, and along some other short sections that don’t follow these trails. People always ask, “Are there markings every quarter mile or so?” The answer is no. Quite frankly, there are some sections of the trail where there is literally a zero percent chance you could get off course unless you decided to start bushwhacking for some inexplicable reason. Those sections are not marked as heavily. There are other sections that have sharp turns or that have multiple side trails. Those sections are marked more heavily.

**W Signs**

Along the way you may also see white signs with a big red W on them. That W stands for “Wrong Way”. If you see one of these, it would be in your best interest to go back to the last trail intersection and reconsider your options. Take note that not every single intersection along the course has these. If you come to an intersection and see no markings in one direction, but a buffalo skull or Centennial trail sign in the other, then common sense should lead you in the correct direction. If you come to a logging road crossing and see the trail straight across on the other side, but no Ws going either way on the road, common sense says to keep going straight. If a turn isn’t clearly marked as a turn, don’t turn. The Ws are primarily at intersections where it’s easier to get off course, or where we’ve had issues in the past.

**Pin Flags**

We do not place pin flags along the entire course, or at every intersection, because that would be a shit ton of pin flags and a shit ton of clean up afterward. You will see pin flags in a few sections, primarily in areas where it’s either harder to place the other markings described above because of lack of trees, or in areas where we really wanted to mark the piss out of the course. Pin flags are used fairly heavily in the first 7 miles from Sturgis out past the Alkali Creek aid station to get you out of town along the bike path and then on to the Centennial trail and through the grassland section. You won’t see them again until after the Dalton Lake aid station, where the Centennial becomes a multi-use (aka ATV) trail. The ATV section is heavily used and has a bunch of side trails, so we mark it HEAVILY with pin flags at intersections to make sure you know exactly where you’re supposed to be. You’ll also follow pin flags for a couple mile stretch where the course briefly leaves the Centennial to take you along a short stretch of highway to get you to the Nemo aid station, and then along dirt roads to get you back to the Centennial. And, lastly, after the Pilot Knob aid station, you’ll see some occasional pin flags at road crossings, but they’ll be much less plentiful once you’re off the motorized section.

We’d like to be able to say right here and now that the pin flags will all be orange or pink or whatever, but the reality is that sometimes they’re all a single color, sometimes we use three different colors. All depends on how much of what is in stock when we go to buy them.

**Markings We Do NOT Use**

In a nutshell: **do not follow anything not described above**. Everything we use to mark the trail is described above. Anything else was not put there by us.

If you at some point find yourself following flags/ribbons tied to trees, those aren’t ours. That’s not to say you’ll never see these along the course, it’s just to say they aren’t ours. If you follow the ribbons in a direction away from the markings described above, you’ve made a bad choice. These ribbons are used for a variety of reasons by a variety of entities, just make sure that if you’re following them you’re also following one of the markings described above.

You may come to a trail intersection and see a sign that says “Sturgis Trails”. Don’t follow those. They are very nice trails and something you should definitely check out if you’re in the area outside of race weekend, but they’re not going to take you where you want to go on race day. Come back another time and run those trails.

**Course Description**

Okay, now that you have a rock-solid knowledge of what markings to follow and, more importantly, not to follow, let’s get down to the nitty gritty. I’m not gonna bother with exact mileage in this description, because that will inevitably lead to me saying something like “turn right at mile 10.2”and someone will get to the intended intersection and their watch will only say 9.9 miles and they’ll be like “well, I guess I don’t turn yet” and then they’ll get lost and I’ll catch hell about it. I prefer to keep my catching hell to the bare minimum. This is a general description, not a tenth of mile by tenth of a mile documentation of the entire course. Any turns on our course are at easily describable, major intersections. The exact mileage of these locations matters much less than knowing what trails you should be on and when you should be on them.

**Dalton Lake to Crooked Tree (Miles 0 – 7.5)**

Your self-propelled foot tour of the Black Hills will start just up the road from the Dalton Lake trailhead. The idea is to give everyone a chance to get spread out before they hit the single track trail, but that never really works all that well. After running through the trailhead and getting onto the single track, you’ll cross the creek below the dam and follow the trail into the trees above the lake. The trail switchbacks up for a couple miles before you are dumped out onto an old logging road. At one time, much of the Centennial trail followed old logging roads but has since been rerouted onto single track trail. This stretch is one of the few remaining sections of logging road. It’s a nice, smooth jaunt downhill, but don’t get too used to it because it doesn’t last long, maybe half a mile or so. This is one of those spots where people have gone astray before, so pay close attention. The road will keep going down past where the single track takes off to the left, and you definitely don’t want to follow the road all the way down. The turn back onto single track will be heavily marked, so make sure you’ve got your head up and are looking to the left for the markings. No pin flags here, just skulls pointing you the correct direction and Ws pointing you to the wrong one.

Once back on single track, you’ll head uphill a bit more before reaching a ridgeline with some spectacular views off to the left. This ain’t the Olympics, stop and take a picture or two. After the scenic vista, you’ll climb a bit more before you start dropping down some switchbacks. If you’ve still got some downhill legs, you can bomb down this section at a pretty good clip. If not, well, at least you’re going downhill instead of up. Along the way there will some more great views off to the right this time. Go ahead and take some more pictures. I mean, when are you gonna be back? Eventually, you will come across another logging road in the middle of nowhere, and this is where you’ll find the Crooked Tree aid station.

**Crooked Tree to Elk Creek (Miles 7.5 – 14)**

One thing to know about Crooked Tree: **it is an absolutely terrible place to drop**. On a stupid hot day after a tough climb, it may seem like a good idea. It’s not. Crooked Tree is on a rough, unmaintained road and is tough for even our intrepid aid station volunteers to get to, and there is no crew access. If you drop here, there is an excellent chance you’ll be waiting a good while before you can catch a ride out. As long as you are not at the point where you are putting yourself at medical risk to continue, it honestly is probably faster to hike, however slowly, to the Elk Creek aid station instead of dropping at Crooked Tree.

So, now that you’ve decided to keep plowing forward, you’ll head down the hill from Crooked Tree. It’s mostly downhill for a good stretch, but there are some sneaky tough uphill stretches along the way too. About 2.5 miles down from the aid station, you will pass the famous crooked tree along the left side of the trail. At this same time, you will be treated to some spectacular views of the Elk Creek canyon below you the right. This is, arguably, the most scenic stretch of the trail so pick your head up every now and then and take it in.

Eventually, the trail will switchback you down to the bottom of the canyon and you’ll come to the first of the infamous Elk Creek crossings. In a wet year, the creek can be flowing knee deep and fairly fast. In a dry year, you may not see a single drop of water in it. Regardless, you will cross it five times total, with all of the crossings within about a mile. Each crossing will be roped, no matter the water condition, to guide you to the trail on the opposite side. Once you’ve navigated the fifth and final crossing, you’ll be about 2/3 of a mile from the Elk Creek trailhead but remember that the aid station isn’t at the actual trailhead, it’s another 2/3 of a mile up the hill from there. So, after the fifth crossing you’ve got almost 1.5 miles to the aid station. If you have a crew, they can choose to either meet you at the trailhead, or they can hike up to the aid station and meet you there, but they can NOT drive to the aid station. The route from the last creek crossing is slightly uphill until the trailhead, after which you’ll cross a road and then head up a steeper climb that takes you to the aid station.

**Elk Creek to Bulldog (Miles 14 - 20)**

After you’ve refueled at the aid station, the trail will take you through the trees for a short stretch before crossing another road and then up and along the side of a slope. Eventually the trail will make a turn to the right and onto another stretch that was at one point a logging road. You’ll be on this old road for a couple of miles, heading gradually uphill the entire time. Just before the summit, another trail will take off to the left. This is one of the relatively new Sturgis trails and is not somewhere you want to go right now. Follow the course markings to stay on the Centennial and continue heading up. It may not seem like it, but you will eventually make it to the top, where the trail will revert back to single track and wind through an open area known as both The Sisters and Beaver Park. That’s not really important, but now you know.

After meandering through the relatively open area on top, the trail will head back into the trees and start the descent down to Bulldog Gulch. Be glad you’re going down this hill instead of up it because it’s a grind going the other way. Enjoy the effects of gravity for a couple of miles until you are deposited at the bottom of the drainage. The trail will wind through the drainage for a bit, and if it’s a wet year you could have some creek crossings to navigate, but most years you can make it across without getting your feet wet. Not long after the crossings you’ll head down a hill and come to a road at the bottom where you’ll find the Bulldog aid station.

**Bulldog to Alkali Creek (Miles 20 – 24.5)**

Again, as with Crooked Tree, this is NOT a good place to drop. The Bulldog Road is bad and gets worse every year, so getting people in and out is a chore. If you’re at all able to SAFELY move forward, that’s probably your best bet.

After leaving the aid station and going ACROSS the road (not down the road, as some have tried in the past), you’ll pick up the trail on the opposite side. You’ll have a pretty solid climb here, but it’s only about a half mile long (“only” being entirely relative this late in the race). At the top, also know as “The Stump” (you’ll see why), you’ll come across another of the Sturgis trails. Again, you don’t want to go there. At least not today. Save it for another trip. Continue forward on the Centennial and you’ll be treated to about 4 miles of downhill. Okay, it’s not ALL downhill, but pretty close. After a few miles, you’ll emerge from the trees with a large open meadow and the Black Hills National Cemetery off to the right. You’ll also pass yet another Sturgis trail to your left (again, don’t go there). Follow the Centennial forward along the edge of the meadow and you’ll eventually see/hear traffic from the interstate ahead of you. The trail will eventually pass under the interstate through a tunnel (two tunnels, actually, doesn’t matter which one you pick). Once on the other side, the trail will curve to the right and take you over a few rollers for a half mile until you reach the Alkali Creek aid station.

**Alkali Creek to Sturgis (Miles 24.5 – 31.5)**

Last aid station! Make sure you fill up with water here, because the last 7 miles in the heat of the day can take some time. We’d like to say it’s all downhill from here, but it is definitely not. Upon leaving the aid station you’ll head through the grass for a bit, heading ever so slightly uphill until you reach a gate on the left with trail markings on it. Don’t go straight here, that’ll take you somewhere you don’t want to go. Well, when you see where you have to go, you may not want to go there either, but that’s just how it is. Follow the markings and take the left through the gate and up the hill. This climb can be a beast, especially this late in the day, but if it makes you feel any better, it used to be a fair bit harder. Back in the day, the trail went straight up a rocky, washed out hill that we affectionately called the Bitch Pitch. Since then, the trail has been rerouted and switchbacks were added, so it’s longer now, but also less steep and much smoother. Just keep plugging along and you’ll eventually find yourself at the top.

Along this entire stretch it’s critical that you pay attention to the course markings to stay on the Centennial trail. In the last several years, a network of single track trails known as the Seventh Cavalry trail has been constructed. The Centennial basically serves as the backbone of the system, with multiple side trails and loops connecting into it. At intersections you will see large wooden posts with trail numbers branded into them. Always be sure you’re following trail 89 (the Centennial) and, most importantly follow the course markings. Also, portions of the Centennial itself have been rerouted, so if you ran with us several years ago, the route has changed some. Be sure to follow the markings!

After getting to the top of the hill you will of course work your way back down the other side, eventually coming to a gravel road (Horse Soldier Road). Go across it to the trail on the other side (watch out for cows), and follow it across a small creek and then up and around a grassy ridge, around the Ft. Meade Cemetery, and then over a couple of small hills before you finally find yourself heading down a long straight stretch to the Ft Meade trailhead. There isn’t a formal aid station here, but there may be water available on a hot year. Follow the pin flags along the edge of the trailhead and toward the Ft Meade VA Hospital. This is the end of your journey on the Centennial, from here on out you’ve got about a mile of paved bike path to the finish. The pin flags will guide you off of the trail, across a bridge and a road and down to another tunnel, this one passing underneath Highway 34. At the opposite end of the tunnel you’ll hit the bike path and take a left. Once you’re on the bike path, soak it in because it’s free sailing from here on out! Just kidding, you’ll probably feel like crap and it’ll feel like the damn bike path is never gonna end, but it will. The bike path will take you across a couple foot bridges and then along the soccer fields before you finally arrive at the Woodle Field parking lot. Follow the pin flags around the edge of the parking lot, past the football field and just past the concession stand you’ll see the finish line in the grass of the city park. Hot damn, you made it!