

# Missoula Marathon

Scenic wilderness: a race runs through it.

“I grew up at the junction of great trout rivers in Missoula, Montana.” These are among the words that open Robert Redford’s movie adaptation of Norman Maclean’s semiautobiographical novel, *A River Runs Through It*. In the early 1990s, this movie helped to make Missoula known beyond the borders of Montana. The result, much to the chagrin of many of the locals who enjoyed having their favorite fishing holes to themselves, was a fly-fishing boom that brought out-of-staters by droves to western Montana seeking the therapeutic powers of nature that were depicted in the film. More recently, a different event has begun to draw a different crowd to Missoula. The Missoula Marathon started in 2007 as a small local event and in four short years has expanded more quickly than the organizers possibly could have imagined. The running boom has begun in Missoula.



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## Missoula history

Missoula was settled as a small outpost amid the Montana wilderness in the 1860s. Debate rages over the meaning of the name “Missoula.” Everyone seems

# The Basics

**NAME:** Missoula Marathon

**ADDRESS:** PO Box 7965, Missoula, MT 59807

**PHONE:** 406/214-7140

**WEB SITE:** *www.missoulamarathon.com*

**E-MAIL:** *jen@runwildmissoula.org*

**RACE DIRECTOR:** Jennifer Straughan

**YEAR ESTABLISHED:** 2007

**COURSE CERTIFIED:** USATF certified

**FUTURE RACE DATES:** July 10, 2011; July 8, 2012; July 14, 2013

**COURSE TYPE:** Point-to-point

**TYPICAL WEATHER:** Average high temperature on race day is 82 degrees, average low is 50 degrees. Start time temperature is typically 45 to 55, typically warming to the low 70s by the time the course closes. Humidity is generally low, and precipitation, if any, usually occurs as late-afternoon or early-evening thunderstorms.

**COURSE ELEVATION:** Elevation of Missoula is 3,200 feet. The marathon course has approximately 200 feet of net elevation gain.

**START TIME:** 6:00 A.M. for the half- and full marathons (separate start location but shared finish). Marathon walkers have the option of starting at 5:00 A.M. The course is open for six and a half hours (seven and a half for walkers taking advantage of the early start).

**COURSE RECORDS:** Men's—2:30:37 (2010); women's—2:57:44 (2009)

**ASSOCIATED EVENTS:** Marathon relay, marathon walk, wheelchair and hand-cycle half-marathon, half-marathon, kids' marathon, 5K (the kids' marathon and the Hellgate Village 5K both take place the day before the other races)

**PRIZE MONEY:** None

**AWARDS:** Medals for all finishers. Awards for top three overall male and female, open and master's. Age-group awards for top three in five-year increments. Technical fabric T-shirt for all participants.

**ENTRY FEE:** \$65 through May 15, \$85 May 16 through June 30, and \$120 July 1 through 6:00 P.M. on July 9.

**COURSE MARKINGS:** Mile markers are statues of a lower leg and foot, each one painted by a local artist. Markers are for sale following the race. Timing mats at start, halfway, and finish.

**MARATHON FINISHERS IN LAST RUNNING:** 1,278

**MALE/FEMALE RATIO OF FINISHERS:** 48% male; 52% female (2010)

**NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS:** 655

**AID STATIONS:** Seventeen aid stations located roughly two miles apart for the first 20 miles and then one mile apart for the final 6.2 miles. Water and sports drink at all aid stations. Mile 15.6 and mile 23 aid stations have gels. Mile 23 aid station also has orange slices and Gummi Bears.

**MEDICAL AID:** Red Cross volunteers are located at each aid station. Bike monitors travel the course. A medical tent is located in the finish area.

**EXPO:** Located in Caras Park, just below the finish line along the Clark Fork River. Relatively small with a few local vendors including the Runner's Edge (the local running store), which carries a wide variety of last-minute supplies.

**LODGING AND TOURIST INFO:** Thirteen local hotels offer discounted rates and there are five host hotels: the Holiday Inn Parkside (right next to finish area), the Doubletree Edgewater (one-half mile from finish), the Holiday Inn Express (one mile from finish), the Hilton Garden Inn Missoula (3.7 miles from the finish), and the Wingate Inn (5.6 miles from finish). Many other hotels are available. Visit the Missoula Convention and Visitor Bureau Web site ([www.missoulacvb.org](http://www.missoulacvb.org)) for additional lodging info.

**GETTING THERE:** Allegiant, Delta, Alaska/Horizon, and United Airlines fly in to Missoula International Airport. The nearest larger airport is in Spokane, Washington, approximately three hours west of Missoula.

to agree that it is an anglicized version of a Salish Indian phrase, but the exact meaning is not clear. Some think it roughly translates to “river of ambush” in reference to the Clark Fork River, which flows out of the Hellgate Canyon on the eastern edge of Missoula. The narrow canyon was frequently used by warring tribes to stage ambushes. Another faction believes the word translates to “place of freezing water,” possibly in reference to Glacial Lake Missoula, an

enormous lake that was created by an ice dam that blocked the Clark Fork River in northern Idaho and filled the Missoula and Bitterroot Valleys during the most recent ice age. Geologists estimate that this dam was 2,000 feet tall and that, at full capacity, Glacial Lake Missoula held as much water as Lake Erie and Lake Ontario combined. Eventually, the tremendous amount of water breached the ice dam holding it back, causing massive flooding that created the scablands formations and the Columbia River Gorge of modern-day eastern Washington. After the flooding ceased, the ice dam reformed, and the process repeated itself. The old shorelines of Glacial Lake Missoula are still evident on the slopes of Mount Jumbo and Mount Sentinel, which rise side by side on opposite sides of Hellgate Canyon. The 2010 Missoula Marathon paid homage to the legendary lake with the slogan “Run the bottom of the glacial lake.” Regardless of what the word “Missoula” means, the first lumber and flour mills constructed in the valley in the 1860s were dubbed “Missoula Mills,” and the name stuck.

The small settlement along the Clark Fork River expanded with the arrival of the Mullan Road, the construction of Fort Missoula, and the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad in the 1870s and 1880s. In 1895, the University of Montana was founded in Missoula and its campus situated at the base of Mount Sentinel. In 1908, the U.S. Forest Service selected Missoula as its Northern Region headquarters. These events, along with a burgeoning logging industry, brought more jobs and people to Missoula and allowed the once-remote settlement to expand into a thriving city.

Today, Missoula is considered a big city if you live in Montana. With a population of roughly 70,000, it is the second-largest city in the state (behind only Billings) and the largest city in western Montana. The University of Montana is the largest institute of higher learning in Montana and has a noticeable influence on the city. Although the logging industry is no longer as active as it once was, other industries, primarily centered on tourism and outdoor recreation, have expanded greatly.

Missoula is known as a progressive and diverse community, in sharp contrast with the rest of Montana (politically speaking, Missoula is a speck of blue in a sea of red), with a population that is generally very active in the outdoors. Opportunities for such activities are plentiful in and around town. The Snowbowl ski area is visible from town and is a short drive away. Snowbowl’s 2,600 feet of vertical drop makes it one of the steepest slopes of any ski area in the country. The Clark Fork, Bitterroot, and Blackfoot Rivers (the Blackfoot being of *A River Runs Through It* fame) provide opportunities for fishing and rafting. The Rattlesnake Wilderness Area is the nearest designated wilderness to a metropolitan area, with its southern boundary only four miles from Missoula. The adjacent Rattlesnake National Recreation Area, which fills the gap between the wilderness area and the city limits, provides additional hiking, trail-running, horseback-riding, and

# must see/must avoid

## MUST SEE

**Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks.** If it's your first trip to Montana, you may want to set aside a few days to visit some of the natural wonders the state has to offer. Glacier is approximately three hours north of Missoula, and Yellowstone is approximately 4.5 hours southeast. Glacier is often referred to as "the Alps of North America" and features stunning mountain and lake vistas along with the namesake glaciers (which may not be around much longer). Yellowstone was the country's first national park and features numerous geologic formations such as geysers and hot springs. Wildlife-viewing opportunities are plentiful at both parks.

**National Bison Range.** For an outdoors experience closer to Missoula, the Bison Range is only about 20 minutes northwest of town. Established in 1908, the Bison Range is one of the oldest wildlife refuges in the nation. It was created to protect the remnants of the once-large bison herd, which were nearly extinct by the beginning of the 20th century. Today, the refuge is home to approximately 400 bison, along with elk, deer, bears, coyotes, pronghorn antelope, and over 200 species of birds. A visitor's center and several driving and walking tours are available.

**Rattlesnake National Recreation Area and Wilderness.** If you're up for some hiking, Missoula is the closest metropolitan area in the United States to an established wilderness area. The wilderness area boundary is only four miles from the Missoula city limits. In between the wilderness and the city lies the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area. Both areas offer hiking, camping, and fishing opportunities.

**The M.** Located on the west face of Mount Sentinel directly above the University of Montana campus, the 100- by 125-foot concrete *M* has been a Missoula landmark since 1908. If your legs are up for it, a three-quarter-mile trail ascends 620 feet from the base of Mount Sentinel to the *M*, offering great views of Missoula and the surrounding valley and mountains. If you're really feeling frisky, you can follow the trail a mile farther to the summit of Mount Sentinel for an even more stunning view.

**A Carousel for Missoula.** Located adjacent to Caras Park (the expo and awards ceremony location), the Carousel was one of the first fully hand-carved carousels built in the United States after the Great Depression. The Carousel, which opened in 1995, features 38 horses and two chariots.

**The University of Montana.** Named “the most scenic campus in America” by *Rolling Stone* magazine, the UM campus is nestled along the Clark Fork River and the base of Mount Sentinel at the mouth of Hellgate Canyon.

**The Smokejumper Center.** Smokejumpers are elite wild-land firefighters who access fires in a unique way: by jumping out of airplanes. The Missoula Smokejumper Base is the largest in the country. A visitor center is located on site, and guided tours of the facility are available.

**Lolo Hot Springs.** If your legs need a good soak after the race, this is the place to go. Located approximately 45 minutes from Missoula, Lolo Hot Springs includes indoor and outdoor pools, along with a restaurant, hotel, and several miles of hiking trails.

**Local Breweries.** If you’re a beer connoisseur, Missoula is home to three popular microbreweries: the Bayern Brewery, Big Sky Brewing Company, and Kettlehouse Brewing. Bayern features German-style beers, Big Sky is home to the famous Moose Drool brown ale, and Kettlehouse includes a wide selection of microbrews and home-brewing supplies.

**Missoula Osprey.** For baseball fans, Missoula is home to the Osprey, minor league affiliates of the Arizona Diamondbacks. The Osprey play in Ogren Park at Allegiance Field, located downtown along the Clark Fork River. They claimed Pioneer League championships in 1999 and 2006. The namesake bird nests atop light poles just outside the outfield fence and, during games, can often be seen circling the adjacent river in search of fish.

## MUST AVOID

**Traffic.** Despite its relatively small size, traffic can be troublesome in Missoula. The road network wasn’t really designed to handle the number of drivers currently using it. This is less of a problem in July, when most UM students are away for the summer.

**Outdoor Hazards.** If you are venturing into the woods around town, keep in mind the inherent dangers. In areas such as Glacier, Yellowstone, and possibly the Rattlesnake, grizzly bears are present and could be encountered. Other wild animals, such as bison and moose, seem less threatening but can be every bit as dangerous. Also, July is typically the beginning of fire season in western Montana, so be aware of weather conditions and the potential for wildfires to affect outdoor activities.

mountain-biking opportunities. Access to hundreds of miles of National Forest System hiking trails is available within a 15- to 30-minute drive from Missoula, including some that connect directly to the Kim Williams and River Trail systems, which parallel the Clark Fork River through town before entering the Hellgate Canyon. Two iconic symbols of Missoula are the *L* and the *M* located on the sides of Mount Jumbo and Mount Sentinel, respectively. The *L* stands for Loyola Sacred Heart High School, and the *M* stands for Montana and is located directly above the University of Montana campus. Both landmarks make for popular hiking destinations that offer great views of the city and surrounding valley.

## The Missoula Marathon

Despite this love for the outdoors and a fairly active running community, Missoula went without a marathon for a very long time. It was home to the Governor's Cup Marathon in 1975, which at the time rotated between different Montana cities before eventually settling in Helena for almost three decades until moving to Billings in 2009. Other than that, no marathon that was Missoula's alone existed until 2007.

In 2006, Run Wild Missoula recognized the oddity of a community as active as Missoula not having a marathon. Bucking convention, the organizers opted for a mid-July race date rather than a spring or fall one. Playing with fire? Perhaps, but the summer date set it apart from other Montana and regional events. The July date also served to draw runners from across the country who might be looking to combine a vacation and race into a single package, a plan bolstered by the fact that there are relatively few marathons held nationally in July and midsummer is Montana's peak tourist season. They also had historical weather patterns on their side. Missoula does get hot in July, sometimes very hot, but high temperatures typically aren't achieved until late afternoon and are followed by significant overnight cooling. So, although the mercury might hit the 90s during the day, it typically dips into the 40s or 50s overnight and stays relatively cool through the late-morning hours. Therefore, it seemed conceivable that a race that started early in the morning could be completed before temperatures rose beyond the comfort point.

Missoula is not a city with the girth of others such as Chicago or New York, where it's possible to lay out an entire marathon course within the city's confines. Nor would doing so really fit in with the outdoorsy, wide-open-spaces vibe of Missoula and Montana in general. Original plans had called for a route that would end in Washington-Grizzly Stadium, home of the Montana Grizzlies football team on the UM campus. However, liability concerns eventually got the best of university officials, and a new finish location was identified downtown. (The finish line was moved after the inaugural year from Orange Street to Higgins Avenue and



the final few miles of the course subsequently altered slightly.)

The race starts in Frenchtown, a small town (population 969, give or take) located 16 miles northwest of Missoula along Interstate 90. From Frenchtown, the route follows the modern-day Mullan Road east across the broad Missoula Valley for the first 9.5 miles. A hard right turn takes runners west on Kona Ranch Road across the Clark Fork River for the first time and into the pine-covered foothills that line the western edge of the



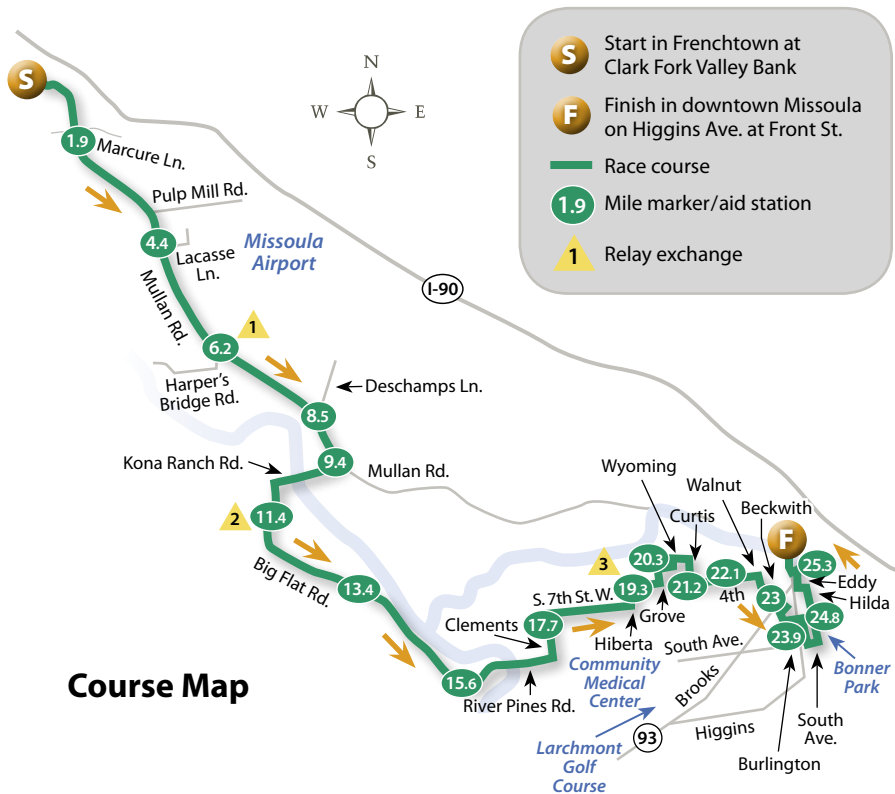
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valley. Two miles along Kona Ranch Road leads to the inappropriately named Big Flat Road at the 11.5-mile mark. The irony of the otherwise flat course is that the only significant hill along its entire 26.2-mile length is on Big Flat Road. The hill starts in earnest right around the halfway point and crests approximately two-thirds of a mile later before the course flattens out and then descends rather sharply back toward the confluence of the Bitterroot and Clark Fork Rivers. By the time the marathon and half-marathon courses merge at the 15.6-mile point, the hills are essentially over.

After crossing the second river of the day, this time the Bitterroot, runners are in the western residential area of Missoula. At this point, the course becomes a series of long, straight stretches along city streets with a handful of turns between them before reaching the 20-mile mark just before Reserve Street. A bike path takes runners under Reserve Street and into the central residential area of Missoula and several more straight stretches broken up by the occasional turn as the course makes its way toward downtown. The course comes within a handful of blocks of the UM campus before turning north and making a rough beeline for the Clark Fork River one last time. A final left, right, left, right series of turns deposits runners onto the south end of the Higgins Avenue Bridge, with the balloon arch marking the finish line across the river. The bridge slopes ever so slightly downward from south to north, affording the opportunity for one last finishing kick before crossing the finish line in front of the historic Wilma Theater in downtown Missoula.

Through the cooperation of the city, four blocks of downtown and the Higgins Avenue Bridge are closed to traffic the morning of the race to serve as the finish area complete with food, drinks, a medical tent, cooling showers, and a family meeting area. The awards ceremony, additional food and drink vendors, massage





therapists, drop-bag pickup, and musical entertainment are located in Caras Park, alongside the Clark Fork River just below the Higgins Avenue Bridge.

The Missoula Marathon made its debut on July 15, 2007. Unfortunately, July 2007 was notable in Missoula for another reason: the heat. By the time all was said and done, not only was it the hottest July in Missoula's recorded history, but it was also the hottest month *ever* in Missoula's recorded history. During that July, the all-time record-high temp was set at 107 degrees, along with the all-time record-high overnight low of 71 degrees. Eleven days had a high temp over 100 degrees, and 18 had a high temp over 95. This might be normal in, say, Phoenix, but it is far from normal in Missoula. On race day, the mercury sat at 62 degrees when the inaugural Missoula Marathon began at 6:30 A.M. and was well in to the 90s by the time the last finishers crossed the line six and a half hours later (the high that afternoon eventually reached 103). In a nutshell, it was not exactly the kind of weather you're hoping for if you're a race director in charge of an inaugural event. Fortunately, weather conditions returned to normal for each of the next three years, with starting temperatures in the low to mid-50s and finish

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# runner's highs/runner's lows

## HIGHS

Bus transportation from Missoula to the start line in Frenchtown is efficient and leaves you with plenty of time to prepare for the start.

The cannon start. It's always fun to watch runners who don't realize what's about to occur jump in surprise when that cannon goes off.

Aid stations are plentiful and well stocked. As you get farther into the race and the temperature gets warmer, stations are more frequent (approximately one mile apart).

The course offers a variety of views, from wide-open valley, to tree-lined hills and rivers, to residential areas. With just one significant hill and only 200 feet of net elevation gain from start to finish, the course can be a fast one, as the 2:30 course record suggests. Course markings are unique leg statues made easy to see with balloons.

The finish area is very well laid out. An announcer greets finishers, and food and drink are available immediately beyond the finish line, along with nice, cool showers. The finish area is fenced off, preventing spectators from entering and creating a dense crowd.

Parking in downtown Missoula is free on Sundays even in the large parking garage near the finish area (which is where the buses leave from for Frenchtown in the morning).

You can get a free finisher photo taken in the finish area. It will be ready to pick up within 20 minutes.

## LOWS

Spectators are sparse until the final six miles when you enter the heart of Missoula, unless you count horses, cows, and eagles.

The expo is small, with just a handful of vendors. Packet pickup can be either painless or somewhat long, depending on whether you arrive during a rush.

The past couple of years, some of the course markers in the first half of the race appear to have been misplaced, which can throw off your early pacing. There is no official pasta dinner or any other organized prerace activities

(although in 2011 we hear that Jeff Galloway will be featured on race weekend).

Heat is a possibility. The conditions in 2007 were much worse than the subsequent three years (which were more typical of July weather in Missoula), but the potential exists for hot conditions, especially for slower runners or walkers who are on the course longer.

line temps in the 60s or 70s, depending on how long runners took to complete the course.

In its four-year existence, the Missoula Marathon has seen its registration numbers grow by leaps and bounds. In its inaugural year it was already the biggest marathon in Montana, with 435 finishers in the full marathon. That number was slightly lower in 2008 (399), rose some for 2009 (605), and exploded in 2010 (1,278) after the race was named by *Runner's World* readers as the best overall marathon in the country.

## the bottom line

We have weighed various aspects of a marathon within a 1,000-point scoring grid. Besides the author of the article, two dozen runners at the race were randomly chosen to score the race for us (MM = Missoula Marathon). The results follow:

### 1. HISTORY/TRADITION

Evaluate the race's sense of history and tradition.

Possible points: 30 MM score: 19

### 2. ENTRY FORM

Is the race entry form clear, concise, attractive, complete, and easy to fill out?

Possible points: 20 MM score: 19

### 3. ENTRY COST

For most races, the entry fee covers between 30 and 50 percent of the cost of putting on the event. Rate the value of your dollar relative to this race.

Possible points: 30 MM score: 28

#### 4. LOCALE/SCENICS

Is the race held in an area that is easy to get to and scenic and that offers adequate food and housing services and nonrace activities for family and friends?

Possible points: 50 MM score: 48

#### 5. REGISTRATION/PACKET PICKUP

Is registration well organized and efficient? Does it bog down unnecessarily?

Possible points: 20 MM score: 16

#### 6. PRERACE ACTIVITIES

Evaluate activities, such as pasta feeds, parties, and so on, during the days before the race.

Possible points: 50 MM score: 22

#### 7. EXPO

Does the expo offer a fair number and variety of booths relative to the race's size? Are there quality exhibitors and good guest speakers?

Possible points: 50 MM score: 33

#### 8. COURSE

Take into consideration the following: degree of difficulty, certified, sanctioned, quality of road or trail surface, adequate mileage and directional markers, aid stations, medical coverage, race communications, accessibility to course for friends and family, typical weather, and so on.

Possible points: 400 MM score: 364

#### 9. RACE AMENITIES

This category includes race T-shirt, finisher's medal, finisher's certificate, adequate and efficient finish area, ease of sweatbag retrieval, showers, postrace refreshments, awards ceremony, raffles, results postcard, results book, and so on.

Possible points: 250 MM score: 219

#### 10. VOLUNTEERS

Are the volunteers experienced and adequate in number?

Possible points: 100 MM score: 99

#### TOTAL SCORE FOR MISSOULA MARATHON

857 points out of 1,000 possible points