

Paavo Nurmi Marathon

Very much a Wisconsin tradition.

Over the past 40 years, runners from around the Midwest—and the country—have been making a summer migration to Hurley, Wisconsin, for the Paavo Nurmi Marathon. Named after the “Flying Finn” who dominated distance running in the 1920s and 1930s, the marathon is a tribute not only to Paavo (his likeness appears on the finisher’s T-shirt) but also to all of the Finnish immigrants who flocked to northern Wisconsin in the late 1800s to take advantage of the Homestead Act. They brought with them a strong work ethic and sense of family, two traits that can still be found throughout Iron County, Wisconsin, today.

Located “where Highway 51 ends and the fun begins!” Hurley is a small town with a lot of activity and energy. Situated along Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, Hurley was once known for the number of iron mines that dotted the countryside. Today it can be argued that the community of fewer than 2,000 is better known for the number of good hiking, biking, and

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the basics

NAME: Paavo Nurmi Marathon

ADDRESS: 316 Silver Street, Hurley, WI 54534

PHONE: 866/340-4334

WEB SITE: <http://www.hurleywi.com/paavonurmi.aspx>

E-MAIL: Hurley@HurleyWi.com

MANAGING ORGANIZATION: Hurley Area Chamber of Commerce

RACE DIRECTOR: Rita Franzoi

ONLINE REGISTRATION: www.active.com

YEAR ESTABLISHED: 1969

CERTIFIED: Yes

COURSE TYPE: Point-to-point

STARTING TIME: 7:30 A.M.

COURSE CLOSES: 1:30 P.M., although finish area stays open until last person is in.

AWARD CEREMONY: 2:30 P.M. at this year's site for the finish line, Riccelli Park. Includes free raffle, live music, and food and drink for purchase (or bring your own).

MARATHON AWARDS: Men: First through tenth overall and top three in each age category. Women: First through fifth overall and top three in each age category. All finishers receive a custom race medal and a personalized certificate (mailed).

SPECTATORS: Somewhat limited because of the open road course. Good crowds at small towns along the way and at the start/finish.

TIE-IN EVENTS: Five-person relay, two-person relay, half-marathon, and handcycle. All start and finish at the same time and location. Relays have six different categories.

EXPO: No

TRANSPORTATION: Shuttles from downtown Hurley to the start from 5:15 to 7:15 A.M.

AID STATIONS: 13 official stations with several homemade stops on the course.

MARATHON FINISHERS IN 2008: 270

MALE/FEMALE FINISHERS: 79 percent male; 21 percent female

NUMBER OF VOUNTEERS: 450

COURSE MARKINGS: Every mile

FUTURE RACE DATE: August 8, 2009

ENTRY FEE: \$45 for early registration, \$50 after early July

ACCOMMODATIONS: Several hotels, lodges, and bed-and-breakfasts in the area. Hurley Area Chamber of Commerce 866/340-4334

GETTING THERE: Hurley is located on the Wisconsin/Michigan border and is a very scenic drive from anywhere. U.S. Highways 51 and 2 are the main arteries from the west and south. Airports in the area include Mosinee and Ironwood. Hurley is a scenic five-hour drive from the Twin Cities and Madison.

WEATHER: Early August in Wisconsin usually means hot and humid. Be prepared for starting temperatures in the 60s to 70s and rising, although cooler conditions do occur.

ELEVATION: Starting and ending elevation differ by three feet. Lowest point on the course is 1,432, with the highest point at 1,685.

PACKET PICKUP/RUNNER CHECK-IN: Chamber of Commerce office, 316 Silver Street from 9:00 A.M. to 7:00 P.M. on Friday. Packets can be picked up at the starting line on race day, but runners must already be registered.

ATV trails in the summer and snowshoeing, skiing, and snowmobiling trails in the winter. Silver Street, which runs through the downtown area, is packed with restaurants, specialty stores, and entertainment. On the second Saturday of August, the residents of Hurley come together to celebrate the area's heritage with the running of the Paavo Nurmi Marathon.

Since the Paavo is a small race (in 2008, finishers included around 270 in the individual marathon and about 450 combined in the two- and five-person relays) and held in a small town, there is no race expo. Runners who get to town on Friday can walk down to the Chamber of Commerce building on Silver Street and pick up their bibs and race packets. Those who decide to run at the last minute can still register up to 7:00 P.M. on Friday for a very reasonable entrance fee. There is no race-day registration, but race packets can easily be picked up at the starting line on race day. The volunteers at the registration tables are very helpful in answering questions and efficient in getting people checked in. Along with the

standard coupons and area information, each runner receives a comprehensive booklet about the race and a T-shirt. Past results, photos, and letters make for a very interesting read.

Let the festivities begin

The weekend's activities begin on Friday night with the traditional spaghetti dinner, hosted by Vietnam Veterans of Iron Range in the basement of St. Mary's Catholic Church, only a few blocks from the chamber office (this year, the event will have a new host). The meal is just what you would expect and hope for—all-you-can-eat spaghetti, salad, bread, and homemade desserts, and all for just \$7. This event is a runner's first insight into the small-town, almost familylike feel of the upcoming weekend. In talking to several tables of runners, I found that most had run the Paavo before (several 10 to 15 times), and many considered it a reunion weekend. Everywhere I looked, friends were getting reacquainted. Hurley has the ability to draw people back year after year.

It is worth your time to hang around downtown until dusk to watch the lighting of the Kenneth Gustafson Memorial Torch, signaling the official start of the Paavo Nurmi weekend. Prior to the torch lighting, live music and Finnish dancers entertained the crowd that had gathered on Main Street. The torch was carried into Hurley (very symbolic, considering that the 2008 Olympic Torch was lit earlier in the day some 10,000 miles away in Beijing) by a group of area youth runners (the Easy Striders) from Upson, where the marathon would begin the next day. After the torch was lit, the national anthem was sung and a short program followed recognizing several people who have been instrumental in the success of the Paavo Nurmi Marathon.

Race morning dawned with cool temperatures in the 40s and a slight drizzle—perfect conditions for a 26.2-mile run. A summer marathon in Wisconsin is rare (Hurley is the only place to find a full marathon from June through August) because of the usual heat and humidity. However, 2008 was an exception—and much appreciated! Runners made their way down Highway 77 to the start in Upson (population 100) by either carpool or the efficient shuttles provided. Several businesses were open at the early hour—thank you Citgo and Hurley Coffee Company!—for those runners waiting for the 5:45 or 6:15 pickup. A third shuttle is offered at 6:45, but that is cutting it close to the 7:30 race start.

The start area is easy to navigate as runners pick up their timing chips, use the few porta-potties provided—are there ever enough?—and gather their items for the drop-bag truck. Once again, I noticed old acquaintances sharing stories as they stretched and warmed up in a very relaxed atmosphere. At 7:25, all participants (marathoners, first legs of the two- and five-person relays, and wheelchair athletes) moved to the starting line drawn across the highway and, under a clearing blue sky, embarked on the fortieth annual Paavo Nurmi Marathon.

must see/must avoid

MUST SEE

The Paavo Weekend. To truly experience the Paavo, runners should plan on spending at least the weekend in Hurley. The prerace dinner, torch lighting, and postrace party are all part of what makes the race so special. Arrive early on Friday and treat yourself to a drive of the course. The scenery is beautiful and will prepare you for the next day's main event. Check into your hotel or bed-and-breakfast (there are many good ones in the area—book early) and make your way down Silver Street to pick up your race packet. Stop in at any one of the many taverns for some carboloading and then enjoy the spaghetti dinner in the basement of St. Mary's Church. Hang around for the torch lighting before getting a good night's sleep for the race on Saturday. After the run, shower at the Hurley High School or back at your room, take in the postrace party, and make plans for dinner downtown (check out Iron Nugget, Liberty Bell Chalet, or Branding Iron restaurants for good food and atmosphere). Chances are you will have the opportunity to join some newfound friends. Getting to Hurley can take some effort—make your stay worth it.

Downtown Hurley. Hurley is a classic, small, northern community, and its main street is complete with a variety of retail and specialty shops. Taverns and restaurants are plentiful, so everyone should find something to like. Take time before or after the race to visit the stores and pick up a souvenir or two.

Outdoor Recreation. ATV trails, hiking routes, fishing, boating, biking, waterfalls (yes—there are over 30 in the area), and tubing—the list of outdoor activities goes on and on. If biking and hiking are out of the question after putting 26.2 miles on the legs, maybe a relaxing float down one of the 130 miles of river or a tour on a pontoon boat (150-plus lakes are waiting for you) will better fit your needs. Hawks Nest Canoe Outfitters (www.hawksnestcanoe.com) and Whitecap Kayak (www.whitecapkayak.com) are close to Hurley and are good places to start in planning a water trip on the Wisconsin River or on Lake Superior. The Hurley Area Chamber of Commerce (www.hurleywi.com) and the Iron County visitors Web site (www.wisconline.com/counties/iron) both offer many opportunities to enjoy the Northwoods.

Copper Peak Ski Flying Hill. Situated on top of a copper-bearing outcrop of hills, Copper Peak is the only ski-flying facility in the Western Hemisphere.

Rising 26 stories above the ground, the structure provides a 170-meter “hill” for skiers, allowing them flights greater than 600 feet. You can take the elevator up 18 stories and then walk the skier’s catwalk or hitch a ride on a chairlift for the next eight. An amazing 360-degree view of Lake Superior, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota is your reward. www.copperpeak.org

MUST AVOID

Not Much. It is hard to come up with things to avoid in this part of northern Wisconsin. Hurley is a town that is used to visitors and caters to them throughout the year. The Paavo Nurmi Marathon is just another opportunity for the town to show why this area is such a popular vacation destination.

A special approach to mile markers

Something special about the Paavo is that many of the miles are dedicated to individuals or families that have played an important part in the race’s history. Past winners, longtime aid-station volunteers, and many who have kept the race a part of Hurley are recognized. Those miles that are dedicated are marked on the course with a permanent wooden sign. A complete history of each dedication is included in the race book.

As the race begins, runners are sent east on Highway 77 and then quickly turned into Upton for a brief tour of the town. Heading north, the flat and straight course follows country roads toward Weber Lake. There was no traffic on the day we ran, other than the occasional cheering family members and vans of fans. The quiet stillness of the Northwoods is peaceful and calming as you contemplate what lies ahead. Before you know it, miles one and two are gone, and you’re veering toward the east, running below the Whitecap Mountain Ski Area. (Don’t worry about elevation—the term “mountain” in Wisconsin really means “hill” to everyone else.)

The first aid station is at about the three-mile marker and is well received by runners looking for water or Gatorade. Several runners carried their own water bottles, which I would recommend on a hot day since aid stations are about three miles apart until mile 19, after which they can be found every mile. The course continues along Weber Lake, eventually turning east on country roads. By this point, people are getting a bit spread out, with the relay runners pushing ahead and the marathoners getting into their groove. The countryside is classic Wisconsin—full trees sloping up on both sides of the road, filled in with lush vegetation, and the occasional creek or river is both visible and audible. Rock outcroppings pop into view, reminding you why this is called Iron County. This is perhaps the most scenic, and serene, part of the course.



Mile marker five is a relay exchange and really the first spot where spectators will be on the course. Times are given as chips are exchanged and a fresh group joins you. As with all of the relay areas (every five miles and at the half), porta-potties are available. The racecourse continues due east until meeting up with Highway 77 just before the seven-mile marker. Navigate a left-hand turn onto the highway where you will be running for the next nine miles. Traffic can be an issue, since the road is not closed during the race. However, many signs were posted along the route, and cars slowed down and moved well off to the side. As always, use common sense.

The next six miles take you on a slow and gradual uphill run before a slow and gradual downhill run as you near the halfway point. All along the blacktopped road, you can see evidence of the logging and iron-mining days that helped establish this part of Wisconsin. Old logging and mining roads, abandoned cabins, mine shafts, and rock outcroppings are visible through the forests. Curious and supportive fans can be found as you run through Iron Belt (population 500) at mile 7.5, Pence (250) at mile 10, and Montreal (850) at mile 12. The locals are supportive with fire hoses, homemade water stations, and words of encouragement. Soak in as much of the cheering and good feelings as you can, because the heart of the course begins after mile 13.1.

Gile competes with the gals of Wellesley

Just past the Montreal River, runners leave Highway 77 to cruise the streets of Gile (250), making their way to the edge of the beautiful Gile Flowage and the halfway point of the marathon. This is a busy place with water and aid stations, a relay exchange, and plenty of fan support. You will hear Gile before entering it because the Gile Fire Department will be out ringing its large bell in front of the fire house, welcoming the runners in, and then sending them back out a few minutes later over some small, rolling hills toward the highway.

The course continues back onto Highway 77 for just a bit until crossing mile 15, at which point you are turned onto County Road C and an immediate hill. Mile 15 was dedicated this year to Ann Heaslet of Madison, Wisconsin. Ann went on to win her eighth Paavo in a row, breaking the mark for most consecutive wins and tying the record for most wins overall. Although the hills that show up in the second half of the course are not particularly long, they rise suddenly and force you to knuckle down. The good news is that after the climb at mile 15.5, you are rewarded with an immediate downhill and flat section along the Gile Flowage for the next four miles.

The Gile Flowage stretch is similar to the early miles, with little or no traffic (race officials ask that all cars avoid this area) and incredible views as you head due south. The wetlands offer a variety of wildlife before a backdrop of rolling hills and forests. A few farms dot the road, some with self-serve water stations set up at the end of the drive, a nice touch through a section that can get hot, since there is little or no shade to be found. The road had a new topping of pavement prior to the race, which increased the heat but made for smooth footing. Eventually this long and quiet section will come to an end as you cross the dike over the flowage, turn east one last time, and prepare to knock off the last 10K of the Paavo.

Miles 19 to 21 are a very tough part of the course consisting of small, sharp hills. When you hear people in the early stages of the race saying, “Save something for the hills!” this is the start of what they are talking about. Physically and mentally draining, these inclines after miles 19, 20, and 21 are not long, but they require you to dig down a bit. This short section is popular with spectators, since it is really the first time they can see the runners after mile 15. Several homes on the course offer water, and there is an aid station at mile 21. A few more rock outcroppings and the “Hills of Oma” will carry you to a sharp left turn onto Highway 51. This is a symbolic part of the course, as you will run the last few miles of Highway 51, a road that starts at the Illinois border, acts as a main tourist artery through Wisconsin, and finishes just outside of the Upper Peninsula. Enjoy your time on the road to where the fun begins.

The reward for making it through mile 21 is a long and gradual downhill section of the course that will take you all the way to mile 23. This is a welcome

relief from the previous section. However, instead of considering this a chance to mentally drift and start shutting things down, you should view it as a chance to retool and gear up for the final set of hills waiting ahead. The traffic is heavy on this part of the course, and runners need to be aware of their surroundings. There is adequate gravel shoulder off to the side without too much of a slope that is not only nice on the knees but also offers a cushion from the oncoming traffic. Aid stations are at each mile marker and offer drink as well as ice, fruit, sponges, and very enthusiastic volunteers. There is very little fan support along the road, but there are a few bars and homes where family and friends can pull off for a bit of encouragement.

Let there be hills

The true test of any marathon is how you can handle yourself—or how your body handles you—in the last few miles. The Paavo offers up a doozy of a test from mile 23.5 through mile 26. As you make your way north and anticipate the aid station at mile 24, a rather long hill looms. The incline is just as much a visual challenge as a physical one, because it can be seen and focused on for a long time since the prior stretch of road ranges from quite flat to a bit of a decline. Fortunately, the scenery continues to be outstanding, and looking to the far west across the marsh, runners will catch a glimpse of the Gile Flowage and mile marker number 18. The aid station at mile 24 is actually past the mile marker, allowing runners to crest the hill, grab some drink, and start a gradual decline that will lead into the next hill.

By the time you hit mile 25, the adrenaline and excitement of running into Hurley starts to take over. The last full mile is tough, but the reward of your efforts is in sight. One last hill carries you up to mile 26, past the Hurley Cemetery and the Iron County Courthouse. A wonderfully gentle downhill on a curving road

runner's highs/ runner's lows

HIGHS

Wonderful scenery throughout the course

Great sense of history and tradition for the entire weekend

Knowledgeable volunteers

The halfway mark in Gile, and the finish on Silver Street

Plenty of activities for the entire family to do in and around Hurley

LOWS

No race expo

Not a race for those who require constant fan support

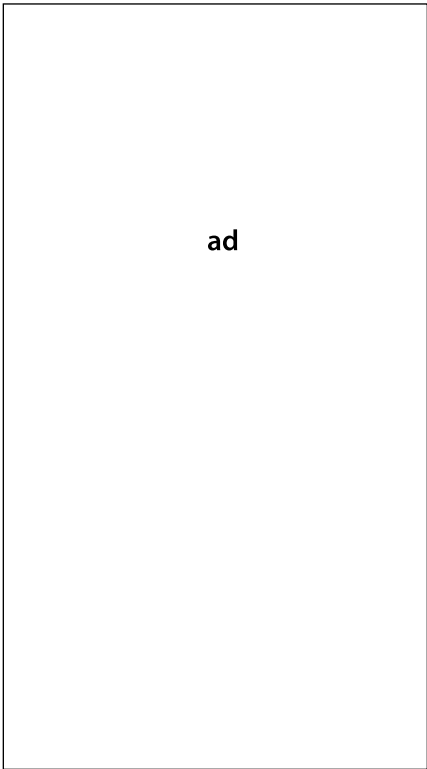
Final hills at the end

brings you into Hurley for the last two-tenths of a mile. As you turn left onto Silver Street, the noise of the crowd cheers you on as the finish line comes into sight. An announcer calls out everyone's name and hometown as you run the last few blocks, eventually crossing the finish line into the arms of many friendly and helpful volunteers. To your immediate left is food (including mojakka, a Finnish stew that may sound unappetizing after a 26.2-mile run but is really quite good) and drink—all easily accessible and plenty of it. The medical tent is just down the street, and the drop-bag truck is parked nearby. Runners are given a ticket that can be redeemed at the Chamber of Commerce office for a finisher's medal—a very nice custom medal that depicts the route of Highway 51 into Hurley and the Kenneth Gustafson torch. Personalized certificates showing name, date, and finish time are mailed to all runners two to three weeks after the race. Results are quickly posted in several locations.

Just because the race is over doesn't mean the fun is done. To experience the full race weekend—and everyone who comes to Hurley should—runners should make their way to Riccelli Park, a short drive from Main Street. Food, drink, free prize drawings, and live music will keep you entertained as the results are completed and the awards are given out. It is a great way to relax and enjoy the company of other runners and the many friendly volunteers.

Hurley certainly did things right to celebrate the fortieth running of the Paavo Nurmi Marathon. It was a completely enjoyable race weekend from packet pickup to postrace festivities. Runners were treated as special guests and given many reasons to come back again. Maybe that's why so many do. Check it out for yourself—the forty-first running is scheduled for August 8, 2009.

Postscript: As we went to press, we learned from Paavo Nurmi race director Rita Franzoi that due to road construction there would be some changes to the start and finish of this year's race. The specifics of the exact changes were not known yet, so please consult the race's web site for the latest information on this development.



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 (PNM = Paavo Nurmi Marathon). The results follow:

1. HISTORY/TRADITION

Evaluate the race's sense of history and tradition.

Possible points: 30 PNM score: 30

2. ENTRY FORM

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

Possible points: 20 PNM 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 PNM score: 30

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 PNM score: 44

5. REGISTRATION/PACKET PICKUP

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

Possible points: 20 PNM score: 19

6. PRERACE ACTIVITIES

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

Possible points: 50 PNM score: 48

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 PNM score: NA (no expo at this event)

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 PNM score: 347

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 PNM score: 219

10. VOLUNTEERS

Are the volunteers experienced and adequate in number?

Possible points: 100 PNM score: 92

TOTAL SCORE FOR THE PAAVO NURMI MARATHON

848 points out of 950 points*

*No expo at event, so the total possible points is 950.