

A Day at the Beer Mile World Championships

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On Wednesday evening, under a rapidly darkening sky, 27-year-old Tod Neer ran across the blacktop of the Formula 1 track in Austin, Texas, and crossed the finish line at the Beer Mile World Championships. He immediately went into the grass on the right-hand side of the track and vomited out about four cans worth of beer before raising his arms above his head, fists clenched in the universal sign of victory. With that very beer-mile-ish physical display and a time of [7 minutes, 40.93 seconds](#), Neer won the first-ever race at the first-ever Beer Mile World Championships.

Neer's race was the least competitive of the night. The event culminated in the running of two elite races, one for the women and one for the men. Elizabeth Herndon from Fort Wayne, Indiana won the women's in [6:17.76](#) (a world record) and Corey Gallagher from Winnipeg, Manitoba won the men's in [5:00.23](#) (the world record for men is 4:57).

A beer mile is simple in form: you drink a 12-ounce beer, you run a quarter of a mile, and then you do that three more times, all while trying not to vomit (doing so gets you an additional quarter-mile lap around the track). But the World Championships is the most formalized version of this race since [seven Canadian teenagers invented it](#) in 1989. There are a bunch of [specific rules](#), such as how much alcohol the beer must have in it, where you can consume it, and even how big the opening on the can or bottle can be. For the elite races at the championship, they collected the discarded bottles and cans and measured what was left in each one in a measuring cup; if a runner left too much beer in the container, they were penalized with added time. In short, nothing can remain informal forever if competitive runners get a hold of it.

Mark Floreani, chief marketing officer and co-founder of [FloTrack](#), the main sponsor of the World Championships, says that his company invested a lot of time, money, and resources into holding this event because "we need people to care about our athletes." Floreani and his brother Martin started FloTrack to cover competitive running and the Beer Mile World Championships serves as their hook.

"We need people to go to an event and have fun, watch an event and have fun," Floreani says. "The beer mile is kind of a quirky way to get people in the stadium, let people watch a race, and get to know some of the world's best runners." In trying to describe the event, he rolls off some possibilities: "The Olympics meet Old School. The Olympics meet Evel Knievel. It has that NASCAR feel."

That "NASCAR feel" is apt. In the way that people go to NASCAR events to see if there will be crashes, spectating at a beer mile involves waiting to see which runners won't be able to resist puking. Before the second open race of the night, as the runners stood with their unopened cans in hand waiting for the horn to sound, one competitor held up his beer and said, "Here's to not getting sick on the track!" At the end of the sub-elite race, a runner wearing a sleeveless American flag hoodie crossed the line just like Neer did in the first race, bent over, and vomited multiple times into the grass. A camera caught it all up close and it was projected onto six huge TV screens that lined the track. Each time he puked, the crowd of nearly a thousand people let out collective sounds of disgust and cheered loudly.

Markus Liwing, a 25-year-old elite beer miler from Sweden who now lives in Norway, said that in order to be successful at the beer mile, you must learn how "to get the burping right." And by "getting the burping right," Liwing specifically means, "you have to cut the burp before you puke." Liwing did not complete the race on Wednesday.

Nick Symmonds, a two-time Olympian who finished with [a silver medal at last year's World Athletics Championships in the 800m](#), described the beer mile thusly: "The entire event is just, 'don't throw up.'" He says that running while drinking is "way, way, way more painful than running [sober]. The pain associated with beer miling is right in your gut. You're fighting your gag reflex." Symmonds finished seventh in the Beer Mile World Championships with a [time of 5:41.71](#).

Katie Mackey, a professional runner for Brooks, echoed Symmonds on the pain. "It feels bad. It's a totally different type of pain than when I'm running a normal 1500. It's an uncomfortable feeling in the gut, in the stomach." She also came in seventh on Wednesday night, with a time of [6:55.34](#).

If gas is a problem, then it helps to have less carbonation in your beer. Symmonds says that "the lower the carbonation, the better, because that is what really kills you." Brian Anderson, a 22-year-old student at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, describes the beer mile as "painful," and said that chugging the carbonated beers in between sprinting laps makes you feel "like you are suffocating when you are trying to chug those beers while out of breath." He finished a respectable fourth with a time of [5:30.08](#).

And so, for this Beer Mile World Championship, the beer sponsor, local Austin brewery [Hops and Grain](#), created a special low-carbonation Beer Mile Brew. Josh Hare, owner of Hops and Grain, says that "the whole concept came a long time ago," Hare is himself a long-time runner and a veteran of many beer miles. When he met with FloTrack roughly three weeks ago, "I just like threw [the idea] out." The beer "meets all the rules and regulations," Hare says, "but carbonation is the major obstacle doing a beer mile. You're inhaling carbon dioxide. You're not getting any of the oxygen you need for your body and muscles." By the rules, the beer must be carbonated, but there is no rule on the level of that carbonation. So Hops and Grain created a beer that tastes good enough to get down ("flat beer doesn't taste good," Hare notes) and is "carbonated to about like half the volume below what our normal beers are carbonated at."

Hare first found out about the Beer Mile World Championships after someone sent him [a video](#) of a local Austin runner and his friend, Chris Kimbrough, setting the world record in the beer mile (Kimbrough did it in 6:28.06). While watching, Hare zoomed in on the frame in which Kimbrough was drinking a beer and in her hand she was holding a Hops and Grain Alt beer.

Kimbrough describes her record-setting beer mile run nonchalantly: "I went out that Sunday and just tried it." She had never run a full beer mile before.

Kimbrough is something of a local legend in Austin. She's 45 and a mother of six, who didn't start running until the early 2000s ("my mid 30s," she says). Her proudest moment was participating in the Olympic marathon trials in 2008 (she was a mother of 4 at that point). She won the largest 10K in Texas earlier this year. "I still think I can break some of my records now."

Unfortunately for Kimbrough, she couldn't break her world record on Wednesday night. Kimbrough finished fourth at [6:37.55](#). Andrea Fisher, a fellow Austinite, a mom in her 40s, and a former competitor in Olympic trials, finished

second, just milliseconds off of Kimbrough's previous world record time of [6:28.17](#). And Elizabeth Herndon finished first by setting a new world record at [6:17.76](#).

"I came out here today knowing this might be the only opportunity I had to accomplish something as amazing as this," said Herndon. "It's exciting to now be the one who holds the record that people are chasing."

At the end of the night, in the area just off the track where competitors gathered after the race was over, Kimbrough got a hug from her cousin. Pulling back with tears in her eyes, her disappointment was apparent. When I asked her if she'd be back next year, she said, "I don't know." Her cousin immediately said, "Yes, she will." Before the race, Kimbrough said that there isn't much you can train for, that "you just have to go do it." It seems competing in the World Championships might have changed her mind.

After the race, Kimbrough was clearly already thinking about how she could get better, about what area of her technique she would have to focus on most. "It's the beer chugging," she said. She's specifically going to work on those third and fourth beers, the hardest to get down quickly. Based on everything else we know about Kimbrough, if she shows up next year with the best chugging form in the competition, no one will be surprised.

For the rest of us, if we're going to go out and attempt a beer mile, don't forget Liwing's words: it's all about finding the line between burping and puking. If you cross that line, at least be kind enough to step to the side and vomit in the grass. It will gross people out, but don't be shocked if they cheer, too.