

MONTANA CUP

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2006 Montana Cup Hall of Fame

Robert Sowers

Roseville, Ohio was a town with a depressed economy and less than 2000 people when Robert Sowers started high school there in 1978. Sowers joined track and cross-country in high school because there was little else to do, and because his older sisters had done so before him. One of his sisters had set a school record in distance running, so Sowers supposed that he might possess some family-based enhanced genetics for endurance. That assumption turned out to be correct. Sowers raced 880 yards, the mile and the two mile in track, and 3 miles in cross country, and he discovered that he placed better in the longer distances. But even in the longer races, Sowers enjoyed no great successes.

Sowers recorded no spectacular track times, and he did not progress far in the qualifying meets that led to Ohio's high school championships. Sowers recounts that his high school days were marked by "a lot of bad races," but it was one of those bad races that revealed a glimpse of what would perhaps become Sowers' strongest characteristic: A tenacious will for hard training.

At the start of one cross-country season, Sowers' team, the Philo Electrics, hosted a meet on their traditional course which Sowers described as "an ugly, shoe-stealing, swampy mess through an old gravel pit" and the finish of that course climbed a quarter mile of hill with poor footing. Sowers felt that he had faltered on that hill during his race, and his disappointment inspired him to finish all subsequent training runs over the same hill. And he did, again and again and again for the entire season. The result was that he slowly adapted to running the hill, and his racing improved slowly but steadily throughout the remainder of the season.

Sowers enlisted in the US Army immediately after completing high school. The Army offered Sowers an escape from the lacking professional opportunities of his home town. Sowers fulfilled several different military assignments, mostly in armored tank units, during his seven years of service including two tours in Germany. He was promoted to the rank of Staff Sergeant. Sowers also continued to run and race casually during his first several years of service.

Robert Sowers awaiting the starter's gun at the first Montana Cup in 1992 in Missoula.



Sowers "caught the bug" for more serious racing while participating in a German Games Day athletics festival which included a 5,000m race on the track. The track was set in the bottom of a sunken stadium, where Sowers entered the 5,000m and soon found himself in a tight battle with two German runners who were highly favored by a boisterous crowd of three to four hundred local nationals. Sowers' ears were filled with a growing roar of biased cheering, resounding from the stadium walls as he and his rivals entered the race's final lap, and he sensed that the audience desperately wanted to see a German victory, but to the crowd's dismay, Sowers thrilled himself when he found that he was able to gear up and to steal the win in a time under 16 minutes.

It was not long after this memorable race wet Sowers' taste for victory that he ended his time in the Army and began using his G.I. Bill funds to pursue a two-year associate's degree in Applied Business from the Kansas City, Kansas Community College. During the same time, Sowers attended a trade school to learn the craft of upholstery, and it was that skill that landed Sowers a civilian job, after rejoining his relocated family in Huson, Montana in 1990. John Hartpence would

arrive in Missoula not long after Sowers, setting all the improbable conditions in place to produce a kind of 'perfect storm' on the horizon of the first Montana Cup in Missoula.

Sowers immediately discovered that it was easy to get serious about training in Montana's dry air, which made fast running more enjoyable by taking the bite out of the damp cold winters and steamy summers of the Midwest. With a new goal of maintaining sub-six minute mile pace for the Governor's Cup Marathon (a goal that would eluded him), Sowers went to nearby Frenchtown to practice pace intervals on the track, and it was there that Sowers met Dennis Normand who coached track and cross-country at Frenchtown High School.

Normand was also president of the running group previously known as the *Missoula Road and Track Club* (now *Run Wild Missoula*), and it was his club affiliation that got Normand involved with organizing a Missoula men's team for the first Montana Cup. Normand quickly identified Sowers as a person who would eagerly help him to ferret out runners to create a team.

Robert Sowers' Montana Cup History

Year	Location	Ind. Place	Team Place (pts)	Notes

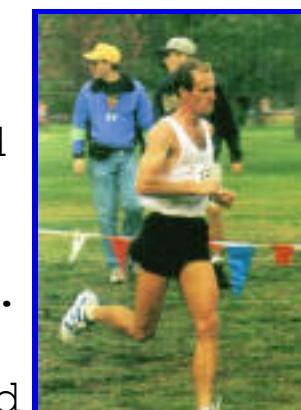
1992	Missoula	5	1 (8)	Joined Dennis Normand as the Missoula team organizers. Only 3 runners counted in scoring.
1993	Missoula	1	1 (29)	Started teaming up with John Hartpence as Missoula's co-team organizers
1994	Missoula	1	1 (25)	
1995	Missoula	11	1 (40)	Beat Great Falls by 2 points
1996	Butte	3	1 (22)	<p>Arrived at meet with "MOTANA CUP DREAM TEAM" banner on side of team van.</p> <p>"We didn't pay for that banner. It was just cobbled together out of junk that John and Ted stole."</p> <p>- Robert Sowers</p>

One of the first runners who Sowers contacted about racing in the Cup was Hartpence, who jumped at the opportunity. Missoula romped to an easy team victory in that first race, and although neither Sowers nor Hartpence scored for Missoula in that race (only the top three runners on each team scored that year), they developed a common goal: to claim the Montana Cup as their own for the long term. And they did.

Sowers and Hartpence held strategy meetings to decide which runners could possibly help them reclaim the next year's Cup, and then they set out to recruit those people with verve. Almost no Missoula-area runner was off limits for recruitment, except one class of runners who were steadfastly avoided by Sowers and Hartpence. They refused to recruit high school runners for their teams. Of course this discrimination would now be in direct conflict with the Montana Cup's mission statement which guides team organizers "to unite the state's widespread runners & running communities, to foster continued training & racing among Montana runners of all ages..." but Sowers and Hartpence would have countered that high school runners already enjoyed bountiful and exclusive opportunities to race cross-country, without being included in the one race that should have been reserved for open-division runners.

The issue of high schoolers racing in the Montana Cup came to the front in the third Montana Cup in 1994. Having won the individual Montana Cup title the previous year, Sowers was defending titles in the individual and team divisions. In what Sowers described as one of his finest moments of racing, he outsmarted a high school runner to reclaim his title. Coming off the trail that scales the side of Mount Sentinel above the University of Montana's cross-country course, Sowers realized that he was nearly alone in the lead with only one runner shadowing him. Brad Treat, Kalispell's sensational high school runner, was still within arm's reach, and Sowers was feeling some fatigue. Sowers knew that he was in real danger of being out-kicked if Treat got far enough along to sense the finish line.

Sowers responded to his threat by gritting his teeth and laying down a hard and sustained surge, hitting top speed with almost 2K still remaining in the 5K race. Sowers hoped his burst of energy would discourage the inexperienced youngster, and the ploy worked, carrying Sowers to a four second victory.



Robert Sowers racing on the University of Montana's Golf Course in 1994

Sowers' marathonizing interfered with his individual success in his last Montana Cup. Sowers' raced a marathon in the weeks immediately prior to that 1996 Cup in Butte. At that time, Missoula's Ted Zderick was the returning individual Cup champion, and

Sowers felt that his tired marathon legs would prevent him from challenging Zderick for the individual victory. A team-based decision was made before the race that Sowers would run interference for Zderick, to help ensure that a Missoula man would win the race for the fifth time in the five-year history of the meet.

Sowers upheld his team duties by running next to Helena's Patrick Judge. Sower's goal was to keep Judge, who was a pre-race favorite, out of sync and off guard at the time of Zderick's planned surge on the downhill 6K course. The tactic appeared successful, evidenced by the 17 second margin of victory that Zderick achieved over Judge. Sowers did run well enough to take third in that race, and the Missoula "dream team" won for the fifth consecutive year with a massive 41 point victory over second place Helena.

After the 1996 Cup, Sowers moved to Alaska to learn and then practice the financially rewarding trade of plumbing. The solitude of his Ketchikan home-life helped Sowers realize his highest running achievement, which came in 1998, when he set his PR at 2:36:45 in the Chicago Marathon. That time was a hand full of seconds faster than he had run in his previous marathon, and it was under his long standing goal of averaging better than 6-minutes per mile for the Marathon (6 minute pace comes out to 2:37:12). Sowers' training for this marathon was uninterrupted for six straight months. He followed the [Daniels' Running Formula](#) for Marathons, and his daily routine never varied from work 6 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.--go home--training run.

The '98 Chicago Marathon tasted even sweeter yet to Sowers because he passed two of his "training enemies" late in the race. Ted Zderick was one of those training enemies. Sowers defined a training enemy as

"someone who you train with daily, and who you want to beat in a race ... really bad. I just like to race."

Today, Sowers still typically runs fifty to sixty miles weekly, but he prefers to do a larger portion of his previous training volume on his cycle-trainer, especially during the snowy months. He calls it indoor group bike training which he says "is not like a spin class. It's more like three idiots on trainers talking trash to each other until one idiot's wife kicks us out of the house."

In his own words: "I know I need two of the three votes for me to get into the Cup HOF. I'm hoping Judge isn't still spiteful about me gouging him into the ditch in that '96 race, but if he is, I'm not above buying votes. Well, I'd pay Nicole for her vote, but John still owes me a bunch of money. Tell Judge I may have to come down to Missoula next year and race the Cup as a renegade. I don't think he wants that."

"As for this year's Montana Cup, the Missoula men had better win, and Tony Banannavich [Billings' long-time team organizer] didn't get near what he deserved. I heard that the Missoula guys recently tripped him up, and he broke some ribs. If John and I were still there we wouldn't have been so easy on him."

- Robert Sowers (10/21/06)

Judge's Vote:

"I hope that the record will reflect a unanimous vote [for Sowers' induction]. I did not recall the Sowers' jostling in particular from the 1996 race, but my training log says the following:

11/3/96 Montana Cup - Butte. Helena took second to Missoula; I took second to Zderick; awesome course, beautiful day; fast start, lots of elbows; Ted can too run downhill!

Emphasis added to note about elbows -- these were probably Robert's! I can't remember why anyone had the impression that Ted wasn't fast running downhill -- probably Missoula disinformation!"

- rick Judge (10/29/06)