

Hellgate 2014 – Redemption

Bethany Patterson

Let me start by saying that Hellgate scares me, seriously scares me. I know how hard and long it is. I know how much it's going to hurt. I've run it three times, finished it twice (I succumbed to Hellgate eyes in 2006), but every time it has chewed me up and spit me out at the finish line in a crumpled, wasted heap. In years past I've gotten to Bearwallow Gap (42 miles) and ended up shuffling along in a pitiful death march to the finish. I haven't run Hellgate since 2007; I was that scared of trying it again. I really had zero interest in running it until this year. I don't know why I signed up really other than everyone else was running it. It had been long enough that I'd forgotten just how bad it can be, so I sent in my entry.

I had a good race at the Masochist 50-miler six weeks ago, and I hadn't done much running in between Masochist and Hellgate. I'd been going to physical therapy for lingering plantar fasciitis and glute/hamstring problems. Basically, I just took it easy. I did a few good long runs, but that was the majority of my "training". I would rather come into Hellgate rested and undertrained versus tempting fate and ending up injured. The week leading up to the race was stressful. Two of my kids ended up getting double ear infections. They were miserable, and none of us got much sleep. This stressed me out more than anything. With the midnight start, Hellgate is the one race where coming in rested is the absolute most important thing, in my opinion. In previous years, I've struggled with sleepiness and fatigue during the race, so by Friday, I was exhausted and completely stressed out. At least my legs felt fresh and rested. I had only run twice since the previous Thursday, and both runs were short and easy. There was nothing left to do but show up and run.

I left Richmond at 2:30 Friday with my friend, Annie Stanley, who was attempting to finish the Beast series. We drove to Charlottesville to pick up Sophie Speidel and Andy Jones-Wilkins for the ride to Camp Bethel. I tried to let the friendly banter take my mind off of my worries, but they were always there in the back of my mind. Could I go the distance? Would my eyes cloud up again? Would my leg hold up with all the hills? Why did I want to run this thing anyway?! I could be getting ready to go to sleep in my comfortable bed in my cozy house; but no, instead I was about to embark on an epic 66.6 mile race and a night of no sleep. We arrived just in time for the pre-race dinner, which was delicious. I was ravenous apparently, and ate a generous helping of veggie lasagna, bread and salad. I was already tired and it was only 7pm. I seriously considered skipping the pre-race meeting and taking a nap. In the end, I stayed to listen to Horthy's talk because I love the people and camaraderie at these races. When the talk was over, I laid down in one of the bunks for an hour and tried to sleep. I didn't go to sleep, but at least I was horizontal. At 10pm the lights came on, and we all got our stuff together for the ride to the start. We got there around 11:30 and checked in. I huddled in Horton's car with Ryan and

Jennifer Henry while we waited to walk to the starting line. Finally it was time. Everyone sang the national anthem, said a prayer and it was time to go! I ran in shorts, a short sleeve shirt with a mid-weight Capilene long-sleeve top and gloves. I tucked a Patagonia Houdini jacket into my pack for good measure. This turned out to be the perfect combination for me.

The first 3.5 miles are easy and rolling leading up to the first aid station. I just tried to relax and settle into my pace. I had no idea what place I was in at this point, nor did I care. My goal was to run around 14 hours and top 5. My previous best time was 14:40, and I knew I could run faster if my body (and mind) cooperated. I chatted with Andy Jones-Wilkins as we ran along. I was happy to be running and let the pre-race anxiety melt away. I ran through aid station 1 without stopping since I was running with a pack. We started the long climb up the road to Petites Gap. I love this section. I love seeing the headlamps zigzagging down the mountain. It is still early in the race, so you still feel energized. If the moon is out, you can turn off your headlamp and just run by the moonlight. The only problem is not going out too fast. This section is so darn runnable, and it's hard to restrain yourself. Ryan Henry and I were running together, catching up on old times and pondering why we still do these silly races. Sophie and Alexis Thomas caught up to me here as we ran/walked up the mountain. I enjoyed the conversation with these amazing ladies as the miles ticked by. Sophie is Miss Consistency, so I knew she would run well. I was happy to see her, because it meant I wasn't running faster than I should be. I was glad to see Alexis looking strong and positive. I knew I would have to watch out for her if she had a good day.

At aid station 2, I grabbed some soup, and we started down a nasty little section of trail on the other side of the parkway. I don't remember much between Petites and Camping Gap (aid station 3). I tried to eat and drink as much as possible and run a relaxed pace. I was saving any caffeine for when I really needed it. So far, I felt ok and not overly sleepy. I could tell my brain was a little foggy, but I made it to Camping Gap without incident. I downed more broth and some PB&J. The next section to Headforemost is long, but I like this section too. If you just accept the fact that it is long and slow, I think it can be rather enjoyable. You run backwards on the Promise Land (my favorite 50K) course for awhile. The lights of the town twinkled in the valley down to our left. I leapfrogged with several guys through here. I caught up to Keith Knipling, whom I knew was having a rough day. If I catch him, he's having a rough day. I still felt pretty good through here, just cruising along on the rolling grassy trail. I could tell the lack of sleep was starting to take it's toll, though. I stumbled down the little rocky section of the Promise Land course leading to Overstreet Falls road. I think I took my first caffeinated shot at 4:30. I was trying to wait until at least 5am, but oh well. I really need the jolt. I caught up to my fellow CRUT teammates Dan (aka DANton) Spearin and Jeff Lysiak on the road climbing up to Headforemost mountain. They looked relaxed and steady. Headforemost is always the coldest part of the race. I pulled on my Houdini jacket for the first time, knowing I would freeze at the aid station otherwise. I kept it on all the way to Jennings Creek. I grabbed 2 grilled cheese

sandwich squares and some more soup at Headforemost (boy they tasted GOOD!). I knew the key would be to eat real food for as long as possible, which is usually a struggle for me. I was in 4th place for women at this point. I passed the third place female (Jen Edwards) in this next section leading to Jennings Creek. She said that she had twisted her ankle early in the race, and was being cautious. I loved the downhill coming down into the aid station. Have I mentioned that I love downhills? The rockier the better, although I do like the rocks more in the daytime than at night with no sleep. Overall, I felt strong and steady on the downhill. I passed a few guys in here, and before too long, I could see the lights to the aid station coming into view. I think I reached Jennings Creek right at 6am, which seems pretty good to me. I was soooooo happy to reach this point in the race still feeling good. Little did I know how quickly that would change. I came in, took off my Houdini jacket, and said hi to my friend Rosie, who was manning the aid station. I ate at least 6 sausages and some pancakes. I could not seem to get enough of the sausages, but I refrained myself from totally pigging out. Horton, of course, was there laughing at me as I stuffed my face. He told me to hurry up and catch the women in front of me, so off I went. He told me I might be able to catch the 2nd place woman, but that I had little chance of catching first place. You gotta love his honesty!

I started the long climb up from Jennings Creek to Little Cove Mountain. Here is where it all started to unravel. I had read Alexis' race report from last year about how the daylight sucked up all of her energy. Most people seem to get renewed energy once the sun comes up, but I found the exact opposite to be true. The sun came up around the top of the first long climb in this section. Jen Edwards caught up to me pretty soon after Jennings Creek, and she was moving very well. I, on the other hand, felt yucky and sluggish. I jogged/walked on the road trying to keep up with her. I started wondering how far back the other women were. Could I stay ahead of them? I felt so weak and dizzy. All the doubts I had in previous years started to creep into the back of my brain. Like I said before, Hellgate scares me. I was not confident at all that I would be able to hold my spot. I just hoped I could maintain any kind of decent pace and stay in the top five.

I had been wearing clear glasses from the beginning of the race trying to prevent my usual case of Hellgate eyes. I also carried eye drops with me and had used them throughout the night. Even with these precautions, the windy conditions coming down from the Headforemost started to take its toll. My vision was a little hazy, but still manageable. I just worried what would happen as the race progressed. I made it to Little Cove still feeling slow and groggy. I fumbled my way out of the aid station and realized I hadn't grabbed any gels. I also realized I had left my eye drops sitting on the aid station table. Crap! I knew I was in trouble. I also spent a few grumpy minutes trying to stuff my Houdini into my pack, only to find I couldn't zip it up. I finally just tied it around my waist, all the time worrying that I was just wasting precious time. Needless to say, I wasn't in a good mental place at this point. Somewhere around here I finally pulled out my music. I knew I needed something to get my mind back in the game. When we

got to the top of the climb, there was a long downhill section. Halfway down the descent, I started having excruciating pain on the outside of my right knee every time I extended my leg. It brought me to tears, and I seriously began to doubt I would be able to finish. My pace was reduced to a painful shuffle. If I couldn't run downhill, I didn't know how I could keep going.

By the time I reached Bearwallow, I was a mess. I was sleepy, nauseous, mentally drained, in pain and dizzy. I drank half of a can of Starbucks Frappuccino, took some ibuprofen for my leg, and restocked my pack. I walked out of the aid station and started the climb, trying not to throw up. I think Horton told me I was 27 minutes behind first place at this point, but I didn't. I was just concentrating on not puking. I didn't want to lose the ibuprofen! Looking back, I think I was actually over hydrated. I was peeing A LOT. I had been drinking mainly water, and probably not enough electrolytes to keep everything in balance. After Bearwallow, I stopped eating and drinking completely. I didn't consume a drop between Bearwallow and Bobblet's Gap. I knew I wasn't moving well. I kept expecting someone to catch me. I just accepted that yet again, Hellgate had won. Let the death march commence. Not to mention, my eyes weren't doing that well either. My right eye was pretty cloudy, but my left eye was at least clear enough that I could still see to run.

An eternity later, I arrived at Bobblet's Gap aid station at 10:53. As usual, Sam Price had a fantastic spread (none of which I could eat). I found out later that I was 33 minutes behind Justine (1st place woman) at this point. I'm not sure how far ahead Lori Cooper was, but I didn't really care. I was just trying to hang on. I was still nauseous, although I felt like my stomach was on the mend. I think all the stuff I ate and drank at Bearwallow finally started to digest. Sam handed me a cheese quesadilla (thanks, man), I grabbed some gels and took off. I only took a small bite of the quesadilla before throwing it in the bushes. I just couldn't stomach anything on the long downhill.

And this is where the story changes. Somewhere on the road leading to the forever section, I started to feel better. And by better, I mean "I feel like I haven't run a step" kind of better. I passed Jordan Chang and his wife running down the road. I felt fabulous. Suddenly I was loving life again. I had come back from the dead. I know everyone will hate me for saying this, but I loved the forever section. Yes, it was leafy and tedious, but I felt so good that it was actually fun. I'm sure I was not running as fast as I felt like I was. You never are after 50+ miles, but I knew that I was running well. Once you get past all the stream crossings, the last two miles before the aid station are much more runnable. I had my music on, and really pushed it into the Day Creek aid station. I hope this doesn't come across like bragging. I don't mean it to sound that way at all. I'm just trying to convey how much better I felt after feeling horrible for 20 miles. I wish every ultrarunner could experiences this type of transformation during a race. To go from a literal death march to effortless running was so invigorating. I felt like I could run

forever. Maybe the calories and ibuprofen finally did the trick. Whatever it was, I wish I could bottle it for every race. Sadly, I'm not exactly sure what did the trick, so I don't know how to repeat it.

I reached Day Creek at 12:27. I drank some Mountain Dew, grabbed 3 gels and took off. I was now 16 minutes behind Justine, although I didn't know that at the time. I wish had in hindsight. They told me that Lori Cooper had just left the aid station, which lit a fire under me. I knew then that I would get 2nd place. I just knew that unless she felt as strong as I did, that I could match whatever kick she had. I took off, and soon passed a whole slew of runners walking up the road. I ran a lot of that first mile. I think I passed Lori within the first few hundred yards after the aid station. I did feel a little guilty passing her so late in the game. Then Horton's voice popped into my head and I heard him saying "This is a RACE! You don't run in together. You RACE!" So I pushed on, and tried to get out of sight ahead of her. I was able to eat 2 gels on the way up, which really helped. Normally my brain shuts down at the end of races and I stop eating, even when I know I need it. I reached the top, and marveled at what a gorgeous day it was. I don't know my time at the top, but I had roughly 30 minutes to break 13:30. I knew I would never hear the end of it if I came in at 13:30:01 or 13:31. I ran faster and faster, and again felt no pain. Last time I ran Hellgate in 2007, each step down the mountain was torture on my destroyed quads. Not today; I ran with abandon, and thought just how much I truly enjoy running, particularly trail running. My body was made to do this. I was made to do this. It was exhilarating! The road flattened out, and I started looking for the one mile marker. I glanced at my watch when I hit the line so I could check my last mile split. I was so happy to see the camp finally come into view. I made my way up to the finish line for the final push. 13:25:47, good enough for 2nd female and 15th place overall. I did my last mile in under 7 minutes!!! Whoop, whoop. Horton told me later that I ran the last 6 miles in exactly an hour, the same time as Ryan Paavlova, and faster than the other top 5 men. I have to say that feels pretty darn good.

Overall, I'm absolutely pleased with my race. I was finally able to run Hellgate well. I think I can run faster, but who knows. Maybe if I had been able to run the middle section better, I would have just slowed down at the end. It's hard to say because you never know what problems you will face out there. It's one of the reasons I love ultrarunning. It's such a mental sport. It's all up to you and how much you are willing to suffer. Can you push on during the low spots? I love the mental challenge. What a great way to end the year. See you all in 2015!