

2014 Hellgate 100K Race Report

In Matthew 23:12, Jesus is quoted as saying “Whoever honors himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be honored.” This definitely held true at the 2014 Hellgate as I made my 1st attempt at dancing with the devil. The Hellgate 100K is an annual event held in the month of December in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Here approximately 150 crazy souls try to traverse nearly 13,500 feet of elevation gain and 66.6 miles all in less than 18 hours. Not only was this a special year for me as it was my 1st attempt. It was special in a way that I got to share this journey with my brother Dan who was making his 4th straight running of this special race and my running buddy Martin Short who was also fortunate enough to be selected for the first time.

Like most races I've had the privilege to toe the line for this one was no different in relation to the nerves department. With such a mountainous task at hand I have come to realize that nervousness is all a part of the journey. It's the pressure that we feel that causes us to question ourselves and our abilities. In this case it was the Hellgate 100K, but not everyone buckles and succumbs to doubt. There are those who step up enthusiastically to the challenge/ embrace the butterflies and use that very pressure to their advantage. On this very day I chose to be one of the devoted individuals and I felt confident for the task at hand.

Dan, Martin and I arrived at Camp Bethel in Fincastle, Virginia at around 5pm on December 13th after a 4 hour drive from my brother's residence in Maryland. Martin and I made the journey to Hellgate from the great state of North Dakota where an expressway overpass is commonly referred to as a mountain. To those who have had the privilege to visit North Dakota you will know exactly what I am talking

about. Here it isn't uncommon for someone to see a lighted match from well over 100+ miles away. Overpasses and incline treadmills have become a staple in our training regime and it's what we use to train for these exact moments.

The pre-race check-in, runner's meal and the pre-meeting were electrifying. It's not very often you are surrounded by so many gifted runners and to be in the presence of the one and only Dr. David Horton humbled me nonetheless. Throughout the night we ate, relaxed, mingled with other runners and attended the pre-race meeting before everything concluded at around 9pm. The conclusion of the evening's events could only mean one thing. It was t-minus 3 hours and 1 minute until my inaugural running of this special event. Even though the 66.6 miles of rugged terrain and 13,500 ft. of elevation is a task in itself. The event starts at 1201am so runners already have signs of sleep deprivation present and for those who are lucky enough to finish the race they will have been up for nearly 30-40 hours. This is just another twist Dr. Horton likes to throw into the mix to keep things interesting and to separate the weak from the willing.

For the next hour or so I rested in my bunk pondering on what was to come and how the night and early morning hours might unfold. I slowly dressed and gathered my gear and at around 1050pm we were on the road caravanning out to the start line as this was a point to point race. We arrived at Hellgate trailhead at around 25 minutes until midnight. We checked-in once again with the race director to make sure nobody got lost between Camp Bethel and the trailhead. Following the check-in the count-down was on as we were within mere minutes of the start. Dr. Horton gave the invocation and all 148 runners who had the privilege to toe the line joined in the singing of the national anthem. My brother Dan was feeling good and felt he had the ability to chase a PR on this very day. Martin, him and I gave each other some encouraging words and before we knew it we were off. I

only saw Dan for a brief few seconds as he blasted off into the crowd and darkness. Martin and I would not see him again until race completion.

Nonetheless, Martin and I settled into a comfortable pace as we tackled the first several miles of the course. We conversed a little while we ran, but mostly we were silent as we watched our headlamps dance in the darkness. Nearing mile 3.5 and aid station #1 we had our 1st real test of the course. A river crossing that my brother Dan told me to run right through days prior while conversing about the course. Dr. David Horton (race director) reiterated the same message just hours ago during the pre-race meeting. Having known this, I should have just waded right through the stream not caring if my feet would become wet as they would dry rather quickly. However, my stubbornness got the best of me. I spotted a few rocks strategically placed in the river and I was almost certain I could hop from one rock to another without any issues. I figured I could get across the river unscathed and could reward myself with a good chuckle seeing all the other runners feet wet and mine dry. Well, I made it to the 1st rock before falling victim to the river. I guess now I know that those rocks are quite slick and are no match for a rubber soled running shoe. I fell flat backwards into the river soaking my entire body up to my neck. My shoes, socks, gloves, backpack, tights, you name it were soaked to the bone. I struggled to my feet and rushed across the stream as quickly as I could. I stopped briefly on the other side in disgust and evaluated the situation. Temps were currently in the mid 30's and I was wet with no spare clothes to change. The only thought that popped into my head was to start running as fast as I could and to not stop for anything. So I did just that, I blasted off into the darkness somewhat dejected, but the important thing on my mind was that I was moving.

To my surprise even with the low temps as miles passed I started to dry off. Halfway up the 1st big climb of the race between miles 5-8 I was almost completely dry and there were no physical signs that I had taken a plunge only miles earlier. The constant running generated some much need body heat, which aided in the drying process. Being dry made me extremely happy and with a smile on my face I continued to pound the trail upwards and ahead. Martin and I played tag for the next several miles passing each other back and forth. As he was mastering the downhill I was powering uphill with all my might. The downhill's seemed too good to be true as the leave scattered trail warranted perfect conditions for letting loose and exploding down it at a rapid pace. It didn't take long to find out that our excitement would be short lived as we discovered millions of little ankle breakers or what most commonly refer to as rocks beneath the leaves. I lost count of how many times I rolled my ankles, but I distinctly remember Martin being in the 30+ range give or take a few. To be brutally honest the constant ankle rolling and lack of ability to explode downhill was sort of demoralizing at some points. But nonetheless we eagerly charged onward. I mean being in a race called Hellgate what else was to be expected.

Martin and I stayed rather close to one another for the first 40 or so miles of the course feeding off each other's energy. At times Martin would bust out ahead and I would chase him down and he would do just the same vice versa. We spent only seconds at a majority of the aid stations just staying long enough to get our water/electrolytes filled and grab a quick snack to replenish the energy source. We ran almost every single entire flat/downhill and pushed as hard as we were capable on the climbs. We met some very pleasant individuals along the trail and at times spent a few miles conversing, laughing and enjoying the pain as one.

At around mile 42 Martin stopped along the trail to the call of nature and to adjust his pack. I kept on running up ahead knowing that more than likely he would catch up to me in a matter of minutes. However, a strong sense came over me to push harder and to run faster. I was not in any way trying to run away from him, but I felt an urgency to exhaust myself. I've found throughout my ultrarunning career that moments like this happen quite regularly at least for me. I'm not sure if it's the endorphins kicking in or what, however I felt I had something to prove and I didn't want to have a single ounce of energy left when I arrived at Camp Bethel. I exploded the downhill like an antelope bounding down the side of a mountain, however I was already 10+ hours into the race so that antelope might have been in slow motion to the watchful eye. I attacked the uphill in the exact same fashion that caused me at some points to cease movement all together as I became dazed/dizzy from exhaustion. My heart raced uncontrollably, however I took random quick breaks to catch my breath/gather myself and once again I would be off to the races.

The next 15 or so miles I remember myself being extremely focused on one task at hand. That task being coming in under the 15 hour mark. Truthfully, before the start of this special event I had 3 goals in mind. 1) Not to Die 2) Finish the race at all costs 3) Come in under 16 hours. Well thankfully I was already over 2/3 through the race and I was still breathing and I had a good feeling I would be able to finish this race. The time I had made up since I left Martin around mile 42 made the sub 16 hour goal quickly turn into a sub 15 hour goal. Like all of my races I thought about my life, my father, my sister Terri and my daughter. It simply amazes me the motivation/drive you get from others and how just thinking about them can totally change your mood and add fuel to the fire. This is where you truly discover how very important these individuals are in your life and you can't thank God enough for the blessings that have been bestowed upon you.

I arrived at the mile 60 aid station in fantastic shape. I was happy, determined and feeling good. I took a few swigs of good ole' Mt. Dew for some energy and to feel that sugar rush. My water bottles were still nearly full so I decided against filling them up and I shot off like a rocket. The next 6 or so miles consisted of a nearly 3 mile continuous climb followed by a 3 mile descent. I pushed up the uphill portion with all my strength, however my legs were dead and throbbing. The sense of good I felt only moments earlier seemed to have vanished into thin air. My sub 15 hour attempt was in jeopardy and I was not at all happy about it. Nonetheless, I tried to stay positive and keep forward progress. You reach the point of pure exhaustion so many times in ultrarunning. It what you do at those exact moments that defines you. Dean Karnazes (world-renowned ultra-runner) said it best, "Run when you can, walk if you have to, crawl if you must; just never give up."

I reached the top of the mountain with approximately 14 hours and 30 minutes on the watch. With a little over 3 miles to the finish I was still somewhat doubtful that my dream of a sub-15 hour Hellgate would come to Fruition. On paper to most people covering a mere 3 miles in 30 minutes would seem like a cake walk, however to an ultra-runner who had just covered 63+ miles it felt more like an Olympic 100 meter sprint. Nonetheless, I told myself that no matter what transpired in the next 3 miles I was going to give it all I had, enjoy the journey and be thankful for being blessed by God with the ability to compete in these types of events. I started out ferociously downhill and at times I felt like I was in a dead sprint. After about a mile or so I was still clipping along. I was hurting, but it was no match for my determination. After another mile my pace still had not slowed, but my legs felt like logs and my knees were in agony. Having knee problems and a few surgeries dating back to high school I am amazed that at the ripe old age of 29 they are still functioning. At the bottom of mountain the trail turned into pavement, which made me assume Camp Bethel was within arm's reach. The one mile to go painted on the road only reassured me that the end was near. I increased my

pace even more and I staggered along as quickly as my body would allow.

At approximately 2:55pm I arrived at Camp Bethel to the greeting of race director David Horton. My official time being 14:56:50 on a tough and brutal course. I was exhausted, but as always my spirit was renewed. Running these types of races is very emotional for me. It's where I test the very depths of the human heart and soul. It's where I assess who I really am in life and how much pain and agony I am willing to endure. David Horton says it best when he says, "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional." This holds so true not only in running, but life. Life has its own set of challenges. We all at one time or another in life with face the steepest mountains and the deepest valleys imaginable, but you can chose how you will respond. You can chose to be consumed by the situation and stand a fearful watch from the sidelines or you can make a choice to rise to the occasion and give it everything you got. "Endurance is one of the most difficult disciplines, but it is to the one who endures that the final victory comes." I can't thank David Horton and his vast crew of volunteers for the amazing experience this weekend. You might have noticed I used the word "special" several times throughout my race report. This race, the volunteers, the runners and the course are nothing short of that and I can't tell you enough how fortunate I feel to have been a part of it all. It was an epic journey indeed and I hope I'm blessed to once again dance with the devil in 2015. God Bless!

Pursue life recklessly, live life abundantly and love like crazy

-----Trevor Uhlir

