

## Hellgate 2014 Race Report – Rebecca Weast

I remember finding Hellgate in a shady corner of the internet, back when I first moved to Virginia. I was hunting around for new and exciting running challenges and I stumbled across David Horton's extreme ultrarunning page. Seeing the profiles of those races absolutely blew my mind then, but it must have also planted a seed deep in the part of my brain that likes pain and blisters. After some begging and name-dropping in my race application, I found myself on the list of entrants for this year's Hellgate 100K++.

This fall I've only run one other ultra - the Mountain Masochist 50 miler – and I was very happy with how that day went. I saw the payoff of solid training that day, so I spent the lead-up to Hellgate tuning-up my climbing muscles, doing some miles with friends, and feeling confident. Until I got the flu.

This seems to be a common story this year (maybe it is every year), but just a week from race day, I found myself horizontal on the couch with a temp of 103, staring at the ceiling like it was about to share with me all the secrets of the universe. I did not feel good, and I spent my 'taper' eating chicken soup and sleeping. Little by little I got healthy, but both my muscles and my confidence still felt shaky as I listened to Horton's pre-race briefing (always a treat) and chatted with runners and crew in the hours before the race. I tried not to think about it. There was no turning back, after all: my spandex was on, my Nathan was packed, and before I knew it we were singing the national anthem at a dark trailhead. Here we go!

The first miles were like the first miles of any ultra. The fast kids go ahead, and everybody shakes out their legs and tries to find a groove. I was antsy to get to the meat of the course, so I think I went out too fast. This was probably not smart. Climbing up to AS #2 was beautiful and surreal, just as I'd been told to expect. The little ant-trail of head lamps coming up the road behind me, and stretching into the dark up ahead, made for a welcome distraction. I had no idea where I was or for how long I'd been going (I didn't wear a watch of any kind), I just tried not to think of the frankly absurd number of miles I had left to cover. Eventually I got to AS #2, paused briefly to grab some calories, and then cleared out in a hurry. The climb up to Camping Gap was unremarkable, although I did notice how much easier the trail had seemed during daylight hours at the Terrapin Mountain 50K. In the dark, with the leaves, it made me feel clumsy and awkward.

Heading out of Camping Gap (AS #3) on what I think is the longest section of the course, I took stock. My legs felt ok, but my hip flexors (which never give me trouble) were angry and one of my feet was cramping. Not a great sign, but there was nothing to do but push on. Eventually I fell into a rhythm with Marlin Yoder and about 6 other runners, and we stayed clumped together like this until AS #4. This is the section of the trail that overlaps with the Promise Land 50K course, and I was surprised at how familiar it felt. Granted, it was at the time of night when it feels like it will be dark FOREVER, and it felt like it was getting colder by the minute, so I don't know that I was having *fun* ... but there was something comforting about the familiarity of those hills. The meteor shower was also a nice touch.

Aid Station #4 was COLD. This was the coldest that I felt all day, while I shivered, perched on the driver's seat of my boyfriend and crew-man Stanley's car, munching on banana pieces and shivering. I was surprised when Jen Page, a Gaylordian and crew for another runner, told me that it was already 5:30. Where had the night gone? It would be light soon! Eventually I started off on the descent into breakfast. I was looking forward to breakfast.

I really dislike technical downhill, especially in the dark, and ESPECIALLY when my headlamp batteries are starting to go. I do not have too many fond memories about this section, but the runners around me seemed pretty happy. The sun came up and lifted my spirits, and by the time I'd had some breakfast (ok, I had soup and mountain dew) I felt pretty OK. I knew the next two sections would include the infamous DEVIL TRAIL, so I took off with a vague sense of foreboding. I locked in with a runner who was shooting to finish the Beast series, and who seemed good-naturedly resigned to the suffering of the day. AS#6 came and went without much fanfare, although I remember thinking that it took FOREVER to get there. I believe this is the halfway mark of the course, and I think I was relieved to be on the other side of it as soon as we rolled out. I don't remember much from that section, because I think my brain was on autopilot. Run. Hike. Eat. Repeat.

There's a deceptive little piece of trail at the start of the Devil trail section. You begin on jeep trail, and turn in to a narrow, slanted trail that goes on for what I think was less than a mile before it spits you back out onto another fire road. I remember coming out on the other side of this trail and thinking "wait, was that it? Is Horton just trolling us all?" That didn't last long. That devil trail was NASTY. Rocks, leaves, slanted trail, technical downhill ... the only positive about this section was that it wasn't dark while I was there. This section was rough. Eventually we got to the lunch AS, where I got some much needed expert crewing from Stanley, Bob Gaylord, and Michael Ludwig. Seriously, those dudes are wizards.

This next section, which I'll call the 'in and out' section, was the highlight of my day. I latched on to Bethany Williams and her pacer, and we merrily ran just about this whole section. It just flew by! I felt great! This section of trail, which many runners find repetitive and grating, was exactly what I needed at this point in the race. You run along the contour of the mountains, running in and down, then up and out, over and over again (about 20 times, I think). The predictability of this made the running much easier for me, but I can see how others can find it dull. I came into Boblett's Gap, ate ALL THE FOOD in preparation for the forever section, exchanged pleasantries with the crew, and left. This is when the wheels started to come off.

The effects of the pain I'd started having earlier in the race were catching up with me and I soon found myself limping along, unable to even run downhill. This precipitated the lowest point in my day, and it was a hard crash from the high of the previous section. I watched everyone I'd been running with all day breeze past me as I hobbled along, trying desperately not to cry (I failed), telling myself to just keep moving forward. A pair of very friendly runners stopped and offered me Tylenol which I gratefully took like candy, and little by little I made my way through the forever section. Incidentally, I think my preoccupation with my joint pain actually made this section go by faster. The trail here seemed very runnable with lots of rolling ups and downs, and I remember expecting it to go on for much longer than

it did. The cars at the aid station were like a mirage to someone stranded in the desert. I couldn't actually believe I'd made it!

The final section is very much the epilogue to the race. The hard work is over, and now you just have to work up and over the mountain. I really enjoyed the hike up – the road is well maintained and level, and the weather was stunning – but I was in such bad shape that I had to power-hike down the back side. Reaching the 1-mile to go sign was a surreal moment, because a part of me couldn't believe that I was going to finish. It would be over soon. This final mile, just like the rest of the course, is beautiful. The sun was just setting as I tottered through, and the road is lined with farms and open fields with sloping lawns. It's perfectly picturesque and serene, and really made the efforts of the whole day sink in. I really was almost done.

As I mentioned I wasn't wearing a watch. I had no idea what my time would be. So when I turned the corner to the final stretch, I was shocked to look up and see the clock still read 16 something. Then Stanley yelled "you have 20 seconds" and I read the clock again. I had exactly 20 seconds to cross the finish, to still make it in under 17 hours. So, with my grumpy face on, I sprinted my heart out and crossed the line at EXACTLY 17 hours. And promptly sat down. That was a wonderful feeling.



It can't be said enough how expertly these events are put on. I'm immensely grateful to David Horton and his army of dedicated volunteers who make these fantastic events go off without a hitch. I also owe a big shout-out to Sophie Speidel, from whom I've received all the Hellgate kool-aid, and some absolutely key early morning hill workouts, as well as all of the CAT and CRUT runners with whom I've trained since last spring. With such a great group, the training is almost more fun than race day (there's definitely less suffering). LOVE ALL AROUND. EVERYONE IS AWESOME. Also, I think I'm still riding that post-race endorphin high. Wheeeee! Until next time, folks!