

Hellgate 100k++ 2021 Race Report

Hellgate. The race. That race. It calls to both new runners and seasoned veterans alike. As I have learned over the last couple of years, it is truly a special and unique race.

I was first introduced to ultrarunning at Hellgate in 2019 when, as a freshman in college, I somehow got myself roped into working aid stations. I learned that it was a point-to-point 66.6-mile race in December that started at 12:01 EXACTLY. David Horton, the race organizer and resident running nut, makes sure of that. He is still sour about the one race he started 30 seconds late. I saw firsthand the atmosphere in Camp Bethel, and how there really is a "Hellgate family". Once the 2019 race got started, of course it turned out to be one of the nastiest years on record. It was filled with plenty of rain and disgusting temps hovering right at freezing, so it wasn't cold enough to snow but was definitely cold enough to be miserable. There was ice in some areas, and while trying to get to an aid station at Little Cove Mountain I was in a truck that slid off the road into the woods. I learned a lot about the race that night, and something about seeing those runners overcome adversity called to me. Although I wouldn't admit it to anyone else, I knew that one day I would be out there running it with them.

Fast forward two years and there I was, on the starting line belting out the national anthem with 150 other somewhat apprehensive but still excited runners.

There is always a short version of a story and then a long version. Well, the short version of Hellgate is that I started, I ran, and then I finished. That's the one I'll tell people who ask about my 5k Ultra (if you ever find one of these please let me know)!!!

YOU, lucky reader, get the long version! So, let's begin.

My race began just like every other runner's, except for the 20 or so who were unlucky enough to be on the wrong side of the gate when Horton started us. We began the race with an obstacle to go under, over, or around which totally affected my time (you know how important 30 seconds is in a 100k++ race, right?) After a quick prayer with Liberty University friends Emma and Kevin, the race got off to an otherwise uneventful start.

It was super cool to start the race the pre-COVID way in one big pack, because most races I've been in over the past year have involved wave starts. However, this was back to the chaos that I had missed. Within the first one or two miles we heard a pack of dogs which helped get the blood pumping. I was blessing Horton for not making it a wave start at that moment because there were plenty of people around me. The first few miles felt pretty fast, but I was just caught up in the moment, so I went with the crowd and as we got to the dreaded creek crossing, I kept hearing Horton's voice in my head yelling at me to just go through the creek and get my feet wet. However, I had been out marking that section of the course two days earlier and I got across fine then, so I decided to "risk it for the biscuit" and try to stay dry. After I made it across, I was very pleased with that decision because it meant that I wouldn't have to get wet feet and change shoes as quickly. As I was going across the stream, I thought back to the other time I hadn't heeded Horton's advice about streams. During a training run for the Dark Side of the Promise Land course, I had an unexpected bath in a creek because I tried to cross without getting my feet wet and ended up on my behind in the water and got soaking wet. Thank goodness this time went better (but still - listen to your elders!)

Pleased I hadn't fallen into the creek, Emma and I arrived at aid station one. Horton had warned us that there would only be water at aid station one and that if we needed more at that point we shouldn't even come to the race. Not feeling we even needed water, we decided not to stop and kept plugging away up the hill. We took it easy going up the hill, running and walking, and taking time to talk to some other runners. I took a second to look behind at the stream of headlamps and appreciate the other people willing to do a race like this. I felt confident the whole way up the hill, having run it with my other friend Sean a couple of weeks before. I was glad I chose not to wear a jacket because I ended up being comfortable without it.

The second aid station was a blur. My friend Jake and my dad, who were crewing for me, got me ready to go again super quickly. I just grabbed a bar and filled my bottles up with body armor, then Emma and I crossed over the parkway and past the lovely sign pointing to the trail.

I was expecting the start of the Petites section to be really rocky and nasty, but it was much better than I had anticipated. We got a little bit of light rain then and I realized the leaves would not be bad because the rain had compacted them.

Coming down from Petites, we got off the single track onto Huntington Creek Road. I was feeling super confident because I had run that section many times while training. I wanted to run more, but I knew I needed to save my energy so I alternated running and walking. I got to hang with Shane Midkiff for a little bit during this section, which was sweet.

We made it up to Camping Gap, which was also a blur, but was kind of awesome because I got to see my friends and drink some jet fuel (mountain dew), have some broth, and eat a few Oreos. My stomach proceeded to revolt almost instantly, and I was scared I wouldn't find a place to relieve myself, but once we reached the gate by the grassy road I scooted up the PL trail up to the parkway and resolved that issue.

The grassy road was such a lonely section for the first 3 miles because it was the first time I wasn't with Emma or anyone else. I could hardly see anything, because of the insane amount of fog up there. The reflective streamers were even difficult to see. I found myself stuck on repeat with John Anderson's songs about Hellgate but I kept getting them mixed up. "*5 Horton Miles*" came up a lot mixed in with "*Hellgate, every now and then I feel like starting a run after 12 AM*". I had no chance of seeing headlamps ahead of me or behind me but after a few miles I came upon a few people and met Ty, the other 21-year-old, and we shared some miles and it was great to talk to him for a bit.

Once we got on the single track down to Overstreet I left him and ran with Tyler Upham and was trying to catch up with Emma and kept thinking I would see her around the next turn but I got down to the gravel without seeing her. I kept plugging away up the hill and left Tyler. Looking back I think I may have pushed a little too hard up the hill to Floyd's Field but it felt decent during the race. I ended up catching Emma about a half mile before the aid station as she was coming out of the woods.

The aid station was super busy and it was really cool to see so many people there. I grabbed a grilled cheese and then found my crew who filled me up with body armor and water and I had a few bites of beef jerky and then found Emma and headed out onto the course again. Floyd's was the first part of the race where I felt tired at all. Up until that point of the race it hadn't felt like a hard effort and I had yet to take time to think about how much further left we had and how hard it might be. This was the first time any doubt seeped into my mind and I did my best to push it away but I had a bad feeling about the next section coming up.

I marked the section from Floyd's Field to Jennings Creek (aid stations 4 to 5) the Wednesday before the race. I knew what the course was like and what to expect so I thought it would be a good section for me but I started feeling pretty sick and dry heaved a few times expecting to throw up but I never did. I got my feet wet for the first time which isn't a big deal at all but in my mental state at the time it threw me off. I was feeling sorry for myself and got knocked out of the mental fight for a little bit. I knew the best thing I could do was keep plugging along to Jennings and once I got there I changed my wet shoes and socks. I also dropped my headlamp and changed shorts and put on a short sleeve t-shirt. I spent the most time at Jennings Creek but it paid off for me later because I started to feel much better afterward. I took some anti-poop pills at Jennings which helped a lot. Along with that I took tums for my stomach and had some caffeine because I was feeling so tired and beat down from the previous section of the race.

Feeling wildly drugged up and coupled with the sunrise I started to feel much better. It also helped that this section was gravel uphill which is one of my strengths as a runner. I caught up to Emma on the hill out of the aid station near the top and we ran together for a few miles until we were almost to the climb going up to Little Cove Mtn. I left her and although I wasn't expecting it, I didn't see her the rest of the race. I caught up with Shane Midkiff again because he was quicker at the aid station and got ahead of me. I was planning on attacking the hill with him but I felt decent so I started running ahead and I was planning on walking any second but my legs felt really strong so I took advantage of it and ended up running every single step up to Little Cove. I feel like that was one of my best sections during my race. When I got to the top I talked to the aid station captain Russ who told me that my buddy Jordan Cooter was about 20 minutes ahead and had said that I need to run "stupider" now that we were further into the race. I promptly took that advice and ran really well out of the aid station for a few miles. I ended up catching a lot of people including Jordan before the devil trail. I felt really really strong until I got there and then slowed up significantly but everyone else had as well so I wasn't too discouraged.

As I got into the Bearwallow Gap aid station I noticed that two of the people who I had passed right before the devil trail left before me *I took a mental note of that*. Jordan came into the aid station right after me and we left together but as I was still digesting that amazing burger they gave me (thanks jeff and john) he left me going up the hill to the in and out section.

As we neared the top I caught back up to him and the wind picked up like crazy. We started doing the in and out sections where it would go up really steep a few times. I was told that section would really suck but I actually thought it was the prettiest section of the whole race. I loved the views of the sweeping valley off to our right hand side. It was the only section I had never seen before so that quickly took my mind off the monotony of putting one foot in front of the other.

We kept walking for a while but then once a few girls I had passed earlier came around a corner and started catching us I decided to head off and that was the last time in the race I saw any of them. I continued down to the gravel road which leads up to Bobblet's Gap. Before I got there I caught one more person and then on that climb I ran the whole thing because my legs still felt strong on the gravel climbs. I passed both people who had gotten out of the last aid station before me *check*. Once I arrived at the aid station it was go go go. I downed some food and got my bottles refilled. It was my quickest aid station stop. I took two quesadillas and two perogies for the road. My dad found out that I was 54th in the race and one of my reaching and secret goals was to be top 50 so I quickly ran down the gravel towards the forever section with food in hand. I didn't want to slow down on the runnable gravel so I told myself that I wouldn't eat the rest of my food until the forever section started on the single track. They were looking

tantelizing and this meant I was getting perogie grease all over my hand. I contemplated slowing and eating many times but I beat my raging stomach and held out till the single track started.

The worst part of my race was those next 6 miles on the forever section. I felt terribly sluggish on the first-mile climb and sat down twice and prayed. I was hoping that once I reached the top the rest would be better but alas I was wrong. As I crested the top of the climb and tried to start running I noticed my Achilles was hurting like the dickens and it was pulling on my knee rendering me unable to run. I kept fighting and trying to run but the pain was too great so I accepted my fate and started power hiking as fast as I could. I grabbed a few sticks so I could sort of hop on the downhills to take some pressure off my left leg. I kept seeing one lady behind me and I was going at breakneck speed "for having run 58 miles and not being able to run" and she must have slowed because I lost her but then out of nowhere a couple came by me and I thought that was going to start the train of people passing me but thankfully I made it to the aid station without any others passing me. Walking into the Day Creek aid station I thought that I was just going to have to walk the rest of the race to the finish line. I was seriously reconsidering how much I wanted to do Grindstone next year but of course, sitting in a comfortable chair with my legs feeling decent again...

As I got to the aid station I could hear my friends cheering for me and I had an energy drink waiting for me there so I took that. (later Russ would tell me I was top 5 worst looking people coming into aid 9). I dropped my pack with my roomie who was working the aid station and took just my handheld bottle I had left with him and started limping out of the aid station. I didn't trust myself to get to camp bethel in one piece so I asked someone to come with me and praise the Lord John came with. This man has run a 3:01 marathon so he's got some serious speed and is a great runner. My Achilles was a 9 out of 10 on the pain scale and all of me just wanted to hike it into the finish but I just had to look at my watch and I realized that I had an hour and 5 minutes to make it in under 15 hours. I cursed my Achilles and weighed my options. Was I willing to make my foot worse and I said heck yeah why not I don't think I can do any permanent damage so I started to run a little bit slowly with hecka pain but after the first little bit I realized that my legs still had a lot to give it was just my Achilles that was holding me back. If I could get through the pain I could still run. I tried to focus on the parts of my body that felt good and disconnected from the pain in my Achilles. I couldn't quit and it still hurt while walking so I decided to try and run. As John and I continued to run I saw the couple who had passed me on the forever section just before the Day Creek aid station and I knew I had to go get them. I turned it on just a little bit more and as I passed them I saw another person so I kicked it up another notch. As I dissociated with the pain it got easier to run and power hike fast and once I saw the gate at the top of the climb I knew I was going to do it. I ran the rest of the climb and took a swig of John's coke on the parkway which was the best tasting thing I have ever put in my body. *Ba Da Ba Ba Baa* (this is actually a Coca-Cola commercial). I saw one more guy and we started blasting down the hill at around 7-minute per mile pace. We quickly passed him but he held on within sight so that kept me pushing. We kept hammering down the hill and I was praying my hamstring wasn't going to cramp because I had never run an ultra and had not dealt with considerable cramping until now. I didn't want it to start so I was praying that I could just make it to sweet camp bethel. As John Anderson masterfully writes "I've got my mind on camp bethel and camp bethel on my mind". I kept hearing that over and over during that last downhill. As we got off the fire road onto the gravel road I started to run even a little bit faster and I didn't think I could catch anyone else. Once we got within a mile of the finish I saw another person up ahead a little bit walking so I ticked one final person off the list. I knew that I hadn't passed enough to get top 50 but I was just so thankful that I was going to finish the race. As I rounded the turn and saw the camp I began to get emotional because I knew I had done it. I told John that I had been imagining this very moment for two years and it was everything and more than I could

have imagined. I saw my parents and my mom jumping up and down screaming probably losing control of her bodily functions even more so than me. As the finish line came into sight and I saw Horton and my friends waiting for me it truly felt real and as I crossed the "finish line" I fell to the ground overcome with emotion and I finally understood how truly special this race really is.