

## Race Report: Hellgate 100k++

If someone would have told me a year ago that on December 11th, 2021 I would be at the starting line of a 66 mile long trail race through the mountains of Virginia, I would have thought they were crazy. My longest run in high school was a half marathon and I thought that was the start and end to a short long distance running career. I mean come on, 13 miles?? Way too far. I should have known better when I signed up for a “beginning” running class for my second semester at Liberty. Dr. David Horton somehow convinced me to sign up for his famous Promise Land 50k with about seven weeks to train. I am still trying to figure out how he managed to do that. I suppose if you know Horton it would be no surprise...every year he manages to recruit more college students to the cult of ultrarunning. Fast forward and there I was signing up for his class again in the fall. Can you blame me? This time around, it was the Mountain Masochist 50k that I was training for.

The week of the race I found myself talking to Horton about the course and he was pointing out turns on the map that I couldn't afford to miss. After making sure I understood his “don't do anything stupid” policy he casually mentioned that if I ran well that weekend he would maybe let me run another “big” race. HOLD UP, WHAT?? It did not take me long to realize he was referring to Hellgate. I definitely did not take him seriously until the conversation we had after I finished Masochist where he formally invited me to run. Before I could change my mind I signed a check for what would be “the most challenging and most rewarding” thing I've ever done (according to Horton). He was not wrong. Challenging? You bet. Rewarding? Of course! Painful? Exhilarating? Intense? Yes, yes, and yes.

Long story short, that is how I came to be at the starting line of the Hellgate 100k on December 11th, just after midnight. I was beyond nervous and most definitely feeling that I was in over my head. *Emma, you've never even run more than 34 miles. How will you ever be able to finish this?* I was reminded at that moment of something a running buddy of mine had told me just hours earlier that night. He said, “*You belong here.*” Hearing those words calmed the sense of inadequacy that had been eating away at me ever since signing up for the race. I repeated it in my head a few times and was able to regain some confidence in myself. (Thank you Will!)

The start of the race was electrifying and as the first few miles flew by, my nerves gradually dispersed. When I glanced at my watch and saw five miles recorded I knew that I would be able to finish the race...nevermind the fact that I still had just over 60 miles to go. I was still feeling strong running into Floyd's field where I was able to change socks and see my crew. The section following Floyd's field went quickly as it was pretty runnable the entire time. Upon arriving at Jennings Creek I remember talking to Meghan, my roommate and crew leader of sorts, and realizing that my time at Jennings creek was ahead of Horton time. This meant I was pacing for a sub 15 hour finish, something that I had not even considered a possibility. My ultimate goal

was to finish but internally I really wanted to finish under 17 hours. With the knowledge that I was even ahead of my secret goal, I left Jennings Creek in high spirits and started up the long gravel hill. Will and I ran most of this section together and it was great having someone to celebrate with as I reached mile 35, the farthest I had ever ran. From then on, even when I was suffering, I could look at my watch and feel giddy knowing that my legs were taking me farther than I ever thought they would.

After exiting the single track trail onto a gravel road, I remember breaking out into song.

**\*Cue the Hellgate rendition of Total Eclipse of the Heart by John Andersen and Dan Spearin\***

*“Hellllllgate, every now and then I feel like starting to run after 12 am....Hellllllgate, every now and then I feel like running on trails that nobody’s been on in a year”*

I went on for as much of the song I could remember...which was not too much longer since my brain was starting to get hazy. After finishing my outstanding performance, Will said his legs were feeling stronger and picked up the pace. Now, was he actually feeling better or did he actually just need a break from my pitchy singing? Not sure...that was the last I saw of my running buddy during the race until crossing the finish line. (spoiler alert: I did in fact cross the finish line)

It was between Little Cove and Bearwallow Gap where I had my first mental breakdown of the race and truly began to rely on God to get me through. I spent a good amount of this section in prayer, especially when reaching the devils trail. I was tired of running and the aches and pains it was causing, especially in my right hip. Then, a mantra entered my head stemming from Horton’s time spent on the AT. ***This too shall pass.*** I said it out loud once, and then again, and then continued to repeat it until I was crying and could barely get the words out between sobs. This sounds quite pathetic reflecting on it now, but I know that I needed this breakdown to fully realize where my strength was coming from. I would not have been able to finish Hellgate without God. Sounds sort of silly, considering the name of the race. After feeling sorry for myself for a mile or so, I remember specifically praying for my other friends in the race. I knew that it was very likely that they were all suffering as well. I prayed for Sean and that he was racing smart. I prayed for Will and his earlier stomach issues as well as strength for his legs. I also prayed for Kevin that he would make the cutoff to Bearwallow Gap with time to spare.

I was able to make it to Bearwallow where my crew lifted my spirits tremendously. I felt much better as I got some food in me and refilled my pack. I was starting to experience a decent amount of discomfort in my feet and knew I was getting some blisters. I contemplated checking out the damage before leaving but I decided it was not worth it. It might have been worth it. Approximately 20 minutes after leaving Bearwallow I felt a sharp pain from the side of my left foot. I knew that it must have been a blister that I managed to rupture. OUCH! Of all the debilitating pains to have during an ultramarathon, a blister on my toe was going to be the end of

me. It slowed me to a walk and hurt even then. Bethany passed me while I was hobbling along trying to avoid putting pressure on the outside of my foot. Watching her run by with her pacer frustrated me since I was not running a section that should have been runnable. Naturally, I popped a couple painkillers and continued to run, ignoring the intense pain radiating from my toe. On the bright side, my toe definitely distracted me from the hip pain I was dealing with up to this point in the race. When the painkillers finally kicked in, I was able to enjoy the gorgeous view off the side of the mountain. I took many mental pictures. \*CLICK\* Although I did not have my crew waiting for me at Bobblett's gap, I was still elated when I finally reached the group of cheerful volunteers. I finally got to eat my first pierogi of the race before heading down the gravel hill to the forever section.

I remember reading a Hellgate race report saying the two mile downhill to the forever section took much longer and hurt much more than one might expect. I found this to be especially true as my knees started to ache on the downhill. Every time the gravel road curved I expected to see the streamers for the start of the single track. Looking back on it, I shouldn't have been so eager to get on that section. Even though I had run the section before in training and should have known what to expect, I still found myself struggling mentally on this section. \*Cue the second major breakdown of the race\* Romans 5:3-5 says *"Not only that but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."* During the forever section, my mind settled on the very first part of this verse that says "rejoice in our sufferings". In order to find joy in running, it is also necessary to find joy in suffering and it was during this low point in my race where I needed to be reminded of the joy that can be found in suffering. Even though my body was hurting and my legs wanted to give out beneath me, I tried to rejoice in the opportunity to be out in God's creation running simply because I could.

Running away from the forever section into the Day Creek aid station felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, and a major hurdle had been cleared. I knew I was going to finish Hellgate and I was beyond excited. My friends working the Day Creek aid station hyped me up even more by saying that I looked strong and could catch a few runners ahead of me. This was the first time I really considered passing people for a place. My inner competitive spirit took charge and after ditching my pack at the aid station, I continued up the three mile gravel climb.

The last six miles of this race included tears but mostly premature tears of joy. I was so thankful to be on the final stretch that whenever I was taking a break to hike I would just thank the Lord for getting me this far in the race and begin to tear up. I promise I am not an overly emotional person so I was not entirely sure what was going on with all the eye sweat. I continued to pass a couple groups of people on the climb and that only motivated me more. I turned the last corner and caught a glimpse of Bethany and her pacer ahead of me at the crest of the hill. That was the

final push I needed to pick up the pace. At the time it felt like I was putting everything into those last three miles. I passed Bethany after chatting for a little bit and continued on. I remember passing a painted line on the road and thinking that it probably meant one mile left. However, I did not allow myself to get my hopes up until Bethany's pacer confirmed that we indeed had one mile to go. I continued pushing myself as I felt Bethany coming up right behind me. I ran hard all the way to the turn into camp Bethel and I almost cried when I realized the finish was farther into the camp than I wanted. Hearing my friends cheer me on as I ran in and seeing Dr. Horton waiting for me filled me with so much joy! I felt extremely confident and also humbled by the way I felt God working during the race. I remember glancing down to pause my watch and then **THUD!!** I was on the ground. I was so focused on pausing my watch that I completely wiped out as soon as I crossed the finish line. I can still see Horton standing over me and snapping a picture and then more tears flowing as the reality of what I just did hit me.

I am immensely thankful for everyone who was praying for me during this race and for a merciful God who gave me the strength to finish. Of course, I am also thankful for the man who made the race possible, Dr. Horton. Thank you for pressuring me into running a 50k which ultimately led to me running this special race. Thank you for believing that I could do it...or at least convincing me that you thought I had it in me.

Looking forward to next year!

~Emma Schmideler

