

Hellgate 2021 — Hot and Foggy Fun!

Last year I should have nominated myself for the stupid award but decided my DNF was enough punishment for being dumb. What happened? See the addendum for the story, but suffice to say my 2020 performance was a disaster ending in a 45 mile fun-run due to water poisoning (hyponatremia). It was a long year in waiting, but a wonderful feeling to have redeemed myself with Hellgate number 12 in the books!

Fog-gate

Driving to the start we could tell it was going to be foggy. This is troublesome when your only light is a headlamp. Hellgate has taught me to always carry a handheld light as well as a headlamp. When it's snowing, sleating, or foggy, the ability to turn off the headlamp and have 'low-beams' makes it so much easier to see the ground. Fog may have been a challenging aspect for many, but at least the damp, moist air may have saved a few folks from getting those infamous Hellgate eyes¹! The worst area for fog was between Camping Gap and Headforemost Mountain (AS 3 to 4). Fortunately, most of this section is a really nice trail with gentle rolling terrain and very few hazards to contend with.

Dude, Where's my Phone?!

Oh where, oh where can my little phone be? Oh where, oh where could it be? Somewhere 'tween Petites and Camping Gap, silently buried in leaves...

The biggest dumb mistake was leaving my phone unsecured in my front race vest pocket. On a steep downhill, a rock gave way on my left foot, sliding down the side of the mountain. I sloppily tried to recover and saved myself from following it by rolling to my side, getting some of the trail under me to slow down enough for a lucky sapling grab to stop my momentum. Immediately I checked and saw the phone was gone. This was bad news! It was in 'airplane mode' to save the battery so 'find my phone' or calling it would not work. I searched the area for 5 plus minutes frantically in the dark before noting the location, which was pretty close to where the trail meets the road up to Camping Gap².

Abandoning my phone was hard, but nothing more I could do right there and then. This was not the reason to miss a time cutoff. Fortunately my work cell was safely back in the car, so at least I was able to call my wife at the end to tell her I finished safely (before falling asleep on the phone, but we've all been there, haven't we?) Hoping for a little 'trail magic' that wasn't to be, I hiked in from the road Sunday morning and found the location. I dug through the leaves for a good hour and a half before giving up. Maybe it fell out here, maybe it fell out further up the trail from a weird bounce. Either way, I won't be doing that again! Lesson learned, always secure the darn phone! At least I really like the upgrade to the iPhone 12 so far...

¹ People used to joke about getting frozen eyeballs. Its really a dried out cornea that becomes swollen, resulting in blurred vision and has caused a few DNFs from those easily afflicted every race.

² Get there (approximately): Hunting Creek Trailhead, State Rte 602, Big Island, VA 24526

How the Wind Blows!

There were wind-gusts that made the trees rattle and creek. Thumps off in the woods made me leery of something falling on me. "This would be a low-probability event, even in an area of elevated risk," my rational mind argued. Then the humorous part of my brain joked that "Having another DNF due to a 'tree-squishing' was not something high on my 'ways not to finish' list." Running through remote stretches of woods at night has always been an enjoyable aspect of my ultrarunning solitude. Despite the peace and quiet, that element of 'something lurking' out there is a bit of spooky fun. It was these very woods that inspired a poem that I wrote this past Halloween called 'Falling Trail,' included later in the addendum.

Grab-n-Go!

There are two very important aid-stations to 'grab-n-go': Headforemost and Bearwallow (4 and 7). Incidentally these are the time cut-off stations that are followed by enough uphill climbs to safely eat a handful or bag of food. Drob bag indecisiveness and other lollygagging such as sitting down is strongly discouraged. Come in with a plan and execute. The biggest pause for me was planned – I needed a shoe adjustment because the laces were a little loose on the right, my foot being too floppy for my liking on the technical sections. Take care of your feet (always)!

Small Victories

Getting past Little Cove Mountain and onto the section where I fell last year. There were many hours invested in training using this spot as motivation for improvement. Getting past this point in a healthy state this year was a little victory, but the race was far from over. My experience has always been that getting to Bearwallow mentally feels like 90% of the race. After that point, it's a slog up the hills to Bobblett's Gap (AS #8), but the miles do melt away. Then one can enjoy a nice downhill jog almost into 'single digits' territory during the 'forever-section.'

Rain, Rain, Please Stay!

Hot and where was all the promised rain?! It was in the upper 60's and I was hot. Instead of a good drenching, it just sprinkled, left me muggy and with 'steam' rising off my clothes when I paused. Something was better than nothing, but this was 'hotter than Hell-gate' weather for me.

Fortunately the 'forever section' aka the last five miles (especially the last mile!) before Day Creek (AS #9) is mostly mental. The exception is the first climb which always seems to make my legs and lungs scream naughty, unkind things back at my brain. Getting through this section is knowing that you are going to finish and be victorious soon. The 'victory lap' of a 2.3 mile climb and 3.5 mile downhill run is all that stands between me and the finish is the 'tacklin' fuel' needed to take on the last hill and getter-done!

Redemption

I gave it all I had in the last section, right down to the finish. When I called my number out, hearing David Horton yell out my name and that I had achieved "redemption" was the best

feeling in the world. All the hard work and hours spent leading up to this moment were worth every second. Hellgate was the first race that humbled me (2008 DNF, injury) and has proven to be a valuable teacher every year with something new. Redemption was achieved and the journey continues with new goals and aspirations to make it finish number (lucky) thirteen at the twentieth running of Hellgate!

Addendum:

What happened in 2020?

Failure is a wonderful teacher! Say it again. Believe it. It works especially well in practice too.

2020 was a disaster and it really (really really) sucked to fail. I was mad, upset, angry, disappointed, sad, and many other things at once. Experiencing all these emotions is part of a normal, healthy process by letting them pass and take the time needed for inquiry, introspection, healing, and personal growth. Even after thirteen years of ultrarunning, I still make new mistakes, albeit fewer and fewer, yet occasionally forget and receive refresher training from time to time.

For over a decade, I thought my 'puffiness' (aka electrolyte imbalance) was caused by too much salt and I needed to drink water. So many years I'd gotten away with it, until this Hellgate where hotter than normal temperatures would cause more sodium loss. This was compounded by access to 'normal' food, like pringles chips and pretzels that I would normally grab, but would be curtailed due to covid restrictions. There is irony in the fact that during the Stonemill 50 miler, my last 'training run' under similar conditions of heat and covid restriction aid-stations, someone noted my puffiness and asked if I'd been taking in enough salt. This was at the last aid-station wherein I replied that it was too much salt, gulped down two cups of water, but thankfully finished. No lesson learned.

Hence, drinking as much water as I could at aid stations 4/5/6 was incredibly stupid! Yet, it finally led to the lesson I needed to learn. My ears were ringing, stomach cramping, and then it finally hit me. Coming down the Devil Trail, I began to get dizzy, braced myself against a tree, took three steps forward and felt everything go as my vision went and I crumpled to the dirt. I tried to stand again, and my vision went so I got back down and crawled to the side of the trail knowing something was really wrong and my race was over. Medical staff at Bearwallow was alerted thanks to some fellow runners and they thankfully hiked in to meet me. I drank the fluid in my pack which had some electrolytes in it, which was the best thing I could do and didn't know it at the time. I was able to walk slowly, but dizzy at times. Bottom line – Not fun, a huge lesson learned and I'm lucky it wasn't worse!

Failure brings us the gift of lessons learned and the opportunity to try again from a position of knowledge and experience. Beating yourself up over it is not helpful – eat a slice of humble pie, graciously accept the lesson, and keep moving forward. I'm a lot smarter about my body and the race nutrition I need to race smart, or at least less stupid!

Hellgate inspired poem for Halloween 2021

Falling Trail

falling trail, thorns, thickets, tall grass
tumbling down this dimly lit path
icy cold fingers lick and scratch
dry leaves, roots, gnawing thatch

twisted branches rock, sway, and groan
lonely companions, old barren bones
following wind, moon lights the way through
sinister shadows crawling askew

pondering, wondering, what is it they're after
cracking sticks in the distance my heart beats faster
Is there something behind me that wants me dead?
or sitting there waiting on that stump up ahead?

piercing reflection, yellow eyes of the watcher
friend or foe, just who is that stalker?
malignant, persistent, entangling dread
was it really there, or all in my head?

with miles more to travel, I can not unravel
darkest till dawn, forge ahead through the battle
falling trail, keep moving, courage is the way
keep going, keep going! soon will be day

(Brock Webb, October 2021. CC by 4.0)