

Hellgate 2022

The pre-race jitters hit me hard. During the week leading up to Hellgate, I was able to look at the start and finish lines from Liberty University, and the distance horrified me. As for the hours leading up to the race, I was tired and wanted to sleep, but just like Horton said would happen, I couldn't sleep a lick. At 10:45 PM I hopped into my transport car and headed toward the start. When we arrived I just wanted to stay in the car and ride back to the finish line, but I knew I had trained for this and that one way or another I was going to finish the race. After signing in, I was ready to start, but as Horton's rule states, we start on his clock, 12:01, on the dot. Just before midnight, the 145 of us nutcases, as my family lovingly refers to us, lined up at the gate. A couple of songs were sung and then just a couple of minutes remained.

Finally Horton said "Go!" and all the adrenaline that had been rushing through my veins could go somewhere as 145 pairs of feet began to move. I had to continually tell myself that I should not be breathing hard during the first several miles because flat terrain normally equals booking it for me. As the group began to separate out, I was anticipating my feet getting wet in the first creek. Soon after the first creek was crossed, what I thought would be a good weather run quickly changed to rain. "Of course it would rain" was the thought on repeat in my brain since it was in the mid-30s and the weather app said there was a 10% chance. And of course I did not own a lite waterproof jacket to keep me dry, so it was just me and my cotton quarter zip as I started the uphill climb to Petite's Gap. I really didn't get as cold as I thought I would, I guess because I was climbing. Finally, in the fog and rain, I began to see the cars and lights of the first aid station. I saw people I knew, Horty and Mrs. Gage; I grabbed some aid and headed toward the parkway. I turned left, but quickly realized from the people yelling at me that I was supposed to take a right and then turn left.

Down the single track I headed but soon realized that I had to pee. In that process I lost my glove; even though it was a race, I was not going anywhere till I found it. Luckily, I found it pretty quickly and continued down the hill. Not long after that I began to feel pretty rotten. My legs felt heavy, my stomach started to turn, and my heart and lungs just did not feel as if they were working. My head began to spin and I just felt tired as if I needed to sleep, but that was not an option. Finally, I was off the single track and began the climb up to Camping Gap; I continued to feel lousy. Even feeling lousy, I was still passing people on the uphill. On one of the switchbacks I saw a group that I thought contained Sean, a friend that I had been challenged to beat. As I got to the top of Camping Gap, I saw all of my friends who were in charge of aid stations 3, 6, and 9. They confirmed my belief when they yelled that Sean was not far ahead. I knew that I could not sprint, but I really wanted to catch that group. Low and behold, I did catch them. The rain began to dwindle, and we started down the grassy road. The group I caught up to was Sean Cate, John Andrews, and Chris Roberts. From this point until Floyd's Field, I really don't remember much except that I did not feel good at all. At Floyd's Field, I loaded up on aid, saw Mrs. Gage again, and began to run towards Jennings Creek. I began to feel better but was far from feeling good; I did, however, think I could at least maintain. We didn't miss any of the tricky turns, and that section consisted of me coasting and learning from John Anderson. As we headed down towards Jennings, one by one people peeled off, but I knew that it would not take long

for them to catch up since I was going to change my batteries out at the next aid station and make sure I was ready for the next section. The section from Jennings Creek through Little Cove Mountain was the best feeling part of the race for me. I was just energized. On the downhill before the climb up to Little Cove Mountain, I felt amazing; up the climb I felt really good. Going into aid station 6 my friends cheered because I was in 4th place; honestly, I could not believe it, but I was only about halfway through the race so I knew I had a lot of challenges left. Toward the Devil Trail we all headed, and I made sure I was running smart. Even with running smart, I forgot one key element at aid station 6 - the aid. I did not grab enough food so as the group headed toward Bearwallow, I began to bonk. Luckily, I was able to hang on until I got to aid station 7. Between aid stations 6 and 7 something magical happened, the sun rose. Although it was cloudy, I no longer needed to wear that headlamp and luckily daylight appeared before the dreaded Devil Trail. Going into aid station 7 I knew I needed a lot of food to come out of the bonk.

Coming out of Bearwallow was hard. I did not feel well and Drew blew past me on the uphill. Apparently though, as bad as I felt during the in and out section, I did not feel as bad as the other guy because I began to catch him. On the road up to Boblets, I passed him, putting me back in fourth. At aid station 8 I ate two nutty bars, some blocks of cheese, and a bean, cheese, and rice quesadilla. Going into that aid station, my legs were destroyed - it felt as if I could not take another step. That quesadilla saved me, at least I believe it did. I knew from the 8/10ths of the race so far with both Sean and Drew that I was going to have to run quickly on the downhill and maintain on the uphills throughout the "forever" section. As hard as it was, I maintained and finally got to aid station 9. Honestly, the Forever Section did not seem to take forever. The forever section that lived up to its name for me was the climb out of Day Creek. I knew that it was only 2.5 miles, but that 2.5 miles felt like it took an eternity. I had to force myself to run sections and then allow myself only to walk others, because I knew the rest of the group could show up at any point. Once I got to the top, I knew it was all downhill which created both terror and joy. Beginning this downhill, I really began to feel how much everything hurt. My feet hurt, the skin on my calves had been rubbed raw, my left knee was throbbing, and my body was just exhausted. I began to sink lower and lower, and then the last mile line appeared. I have never been so happy to see a line on a road in my life. It began to hit me, I was about to earn 4th place in Hellgate, 40 minutes faster than I even imagined possible, and it made me want to cry. Coming around the turn into Camp Bethel, I could not wait to see those orange lines; when I did see them, they were missing one thing, Horton. I crossed the finish line at 11:23:21 but Horton was not there. Probably the biggest compliment I have ever gotten from Horton was, "You weren't supposed to finish that fast!" That made my accomplishment so much sweeter.

The best part of the race really wasn't finishing, it was watching all of my friends finish. After spending so many hours training with Will, Sean, Emma, Zoey, Kevin, Noah, and Josh, seeing them finish was amazing because I had experienced their excitement firsthand. Hellgate is definitely the hardest thing I have ever done, by a long shot. It has also been, however, the most rewarding thing I have ever done. Horton definitely created Hellgate to be a doozy. It truly is a very special race.