

Hellgate 100k++

A family affair

Disclosure: this is more of a memoir than a race report

My mom and I had just finished our dream summer back in mid September. We spent almost 5 months hiking the PCT doing around 30 mile days. While I now live in Colorado, we grew up in Lynchburg when my mom got into trail running. She has done this midnight start, 66.6 mile, 12,651 foot vertical foot gain race 10 times, and I was lucky enough to be able to pace her these last two races to experience a little bit of Hellgate. It has been a dream to finally be able to accomplish such a goal that she has talked about for years. After hearing so many stories and putting the work in myself, I submitted my application thinking my best chance for finishing this race was the "time on feet" training I had while hiking those PCT miles daily this past summer. I transitioned with the help of my running friend and coach, Sammie Lewis, who runs her own endurance company out of Golden, Colorado called Golden Endurance. We worked on leg turn over since I had not been running. For background, this was my fourth ultra! My first ultra was the Rattler 30k in Colorado Springs which was a fast trail course and I came in first female! I've done Pikes Peak Ascent and Marathon, Dirty 30 and Quad Rock 50 in Fort Collins which kicked my butt (and knees). One of the things Sammie helped me with however was running at an RPE (rate of perceived effort) instead of miles and pace. For training I would do 1-2 hours of running at a certain effort which was not dependent on heart rate or pace, just how hard I was pushing myself. I truly believe this aspect helped me. The more I've read about having more "easy" runs than hard I have become convinced. And this race was proof. It has been better on my body to not always feel exhausted and tired when I come out to run. It may end up being a run at a 13 min mile pace at a 4-5 RPE but when I would go to do my weekend long run at a 6-7 RPE, I had more in the tank. I used to think if I wasn't pushing myself to the max or getting faster or feeling tired at the end of the run then it wasn't that great of a workout or I didn't do my best. We also worked on nutrition, which is key and I feel like I have always had an edge up in that as I love to eat. I think I asked for a quesadilla at almost every aid station. I also eat before runs often with a full stomach! Speaking of those, I have a great appreciation for all aid station workers. I was so happy to see them throughout the race. It was like trail magic.

All the things I've heard and read of Hellgate mention how hard it is. Anytime I tell my mom I wanted to do something she usually says "Okay, go for it!" When I told her I wanted to do hellgate her face wiled up and she just said "it's haard". I just wanted to

experience this race and I figured I could do it even if all I did was hike fast uphill and maybe run a little downhill. I was so excited the past two years I paced her at the start. It was electric. The midnight start, the cowbells, all the runners taking off in the glow of their headlamps. I loved it. I wanted to go. I was hoping Horton would let me in. He said "get a few more big races under your belt". Well there wasn't really time for that when we ended up scoring permits for the 2023 PCT year and honestly it was more than enough for a lifetime to just do that but I thought myself, if there is any year I can finish this race, my best chance may be this year after the time on feet we have. Since I didn't have any more races to add to my resume I figured he wouldn't let me in and mailed in the check, expecting it to be ripped up. When I found out I had gotten in I had to quickly check my bank account, as you can imagine you only spend money not make money while hiking the PCT. I have a few east coast friends out in Colorado in my run group and when I told my friend Mike I submitted he let me know I was screwed. He had heard how hard Horton's Hellgate was and apparently had as much faith in me as I did at the time. We both knew it would be hard. Not to mention no one wants to spend Thanksgiving passing up on sweets. Especially for me as I have the biggest sweet tooth my fiance has ever seen. Anyways, I didn't pass up on them completely. I snuck a few in under my mom Sheryl's nose.

My goal was to come in under or around 17. I'm not good with numbers but this seemed like a doable goal and I was here for the experience. I know I have more fun in races when I don't put huge expectations on myself. I just wanted to finish. I knew there was a good chance my knees would not put up with this distance all at one time, as they did to me at quad rock 50 in 2021 where I walked the last 7 miles and even walked backwards downhill because they hurt so bad. So while I was doing well in the beginning this was all in the back of my mind. The last 7 miles.

The midnight start really was electric. I was so excited for this part and it did not disappoint. As a person who usually goes to bed at 8:30 every night, I did expect that aspect to be a little hard on me so I rested as much as I could before the race. I knew I would be too excited after Dr. Horton's pre-race speech to sleep but I at least laid down in the car. My friend Bryan drove down from Charlottesville to pace me the last 20 miles. He had done the race twice in the past and I actually met him in one of my run groups, Golden Trail Runners, in Colorado where we became good friends. He grew up in this area as well and I was so excited to have his help as well as my fiance who had flown in just to support me. I wanted so badly for him to see what all this Hellgate fuss was about in our family. I wanted him to experience it as well. It is a big deal in our family. We were all together one weekend for a wedding and I told my brother I had to wake up early Saturday before the wedding because "I'm training for

Hellgate” and he answered “oh my word there’s two of you now!” as my mom’s response to him for the last ten years of his life during the fall and holidays was always “I’m training for Hellgate”.

When we started out at midnight it was magic. During the first climb you can see all the headlamps going up like little glowing ants but I preferred to imagine them as Christmas lights. It reminded me of stopping through Yosemite on the PCT and seeing what I thought were stars in the sky, then someone told me they were actually the climbers headlamps on El Cap. I was amazed people were that high up there. In the middle of the night. And that’s where we were heading. Yes. You couldn’t see anything else but the lights going up the switchbacks to Petite’s gap and the stars in the clear sky overhead. It was beautiful. I emphatically noted to others what a clear and beautiful night it was. It’s moments like these that I love trail running. It’s so much about the people you meet as well, just like it was hiking the trail. The people are what make the experience. Shannon (first place female) ran past me in full on conversation while running up the hill. I was impressed. And I’m pretty sure she kept that conversation up for at least the first half of the race. I talked some to others around me and one guy mentioned this is a “run what you can” race and took off. That advice really helped me so I jogged up the first 3 miles and stopped to fast hike when I needed. The aid stations came sooner than expected as I was going much faster than planned. I was concerned for this as I didn’t want to fizzle out and have nothing in the end so I tried to keep it in check and run an RPE that only slightly above comfortable. But this was still a race. I was going to give it my best effort. And I have a lot of practice on dirt road (what we call fire road) climbs. Now the rocks hidden under a pile of slippery leaves I have no experience with as we do not have that in Colorado. I had never seen anything like it. I’d heard about it and even run the last 20 miles with my mom twice, but the first sections were different. I was really trying not to break my ankle. I already did this during training on a rock while flying downhill and I knew I had to be super careful or I’d be done. I got the brightest headlamps and strained to keep my eyes open for rocks and the terrain below me. I don’t think I blinked once. Well this came back to haunt me when a little less than halfway through my night my vision began to go blurry. I thought I had accidentally blinded myself with my 900 lumen headlamp and switched to my friend’s 600 waist lamp halfway through the night. It was harder to pick up the reflectivity of the streamers with the waist lamp than the headlamp but it was better for seeing the ground in front of you. Since I had never used a waist lamp I didn’t even know how to turn it off when the sun came up so I ran with it and my spares in the back of my vest all the way to Bearwallow. I made it there a little before 9:30 so my pacer and my fiance weren’t even there yet as they were not expecting me until 10 at the earliest. I think the fact this was another sissygate year for weather really helped

speed up the times. I can't imagine if there had been ice (although snow would have been fun and great for following tracks) or super wet with the leaves even slipperier. I enjoyed talking to those around me and was also relieved to see other people in certain sections which made it easier than always looking for streamers. I ran into Aaron Schwartzbard and eventually told him how I couldn't see that well and hoped I hadn't blinded myself and he said "oh no that's just Hellgate eyes. Happens to people every year" I felt better that this wasn't permanent as I was already running through my mind how long I could wait to get this checked out as my health insurance doesn't kick back in until January after taking off for so long to hike the PCT my work only paid for 3 months during my leave and then it lapsed. He eased my mind about my condition and about finding my way while we were in a difficult section as he could probably do this race blind as he has had 21 finishes. I was on course. When I was by myself I was grateful to the things I learned on the PCT while trying to find the trail under the snow. A line of tree clearings above helped when you looked up and if you looked down and saw a split log on either side that was most likely a good sign as well as it was chopped for the trail. I was grateful to have learned these things from my mom on the trail, who mentioned she actually learned them from her AZT hiking partner. My mom crewed me the whole way throughout. She was so great. She was at every aid station she could be so she didn't sleep either. I think she rested for 40 mins at one spot. She is the most supportive mom. This was new for her as well though as she has always been the one running not crewing. She remarked how the fast the experienced runner's crews worked like a nascar pit stop. They knew their jobs and were in and out. I had planned little more than giving her a bag of snacks, gels, change of clothes in case I wanted it and planned to give her my headlamps at bearwallow. She had all of it ready but more helpful than anything was just seeing her. Her energy brings you alive and she was so proud and confident in me as a runner. She has always been my biggest cheerleader.

It is always a great feeling to place but it's also always super special to even be a part of something like this and to be lucky enough to even be able to sign up for races in this caliber. There are plenty other races I still want to do just in Colorado alone such as High Lonesome and the San Juan Solstice that I would also feel honored to run.

The first three miles went by so quickly. And then the next ten. The aid stations were appearing quicker than I had imagined. Ultras are a mental game. This one is especially difficult because of what are called "Horton miles". This is longer than a 100k. Everyone knows that but only the people who have run it before (and there are a lot of those people) know exactly how much further each aid station is. So when the aid station workers tell you the next aid station is in aid miles, in my head I already said okay so it's 10 more miles then. This significantly helped me. By the time I got to

Bearwallow, I knew I had 20 miles left. I broke it up into just two easy ten mile runs in my head. I am also very proud of myself for not getting lost. Besides finishing, this was my biggest worry. Especially after Dr. Horton sent out an email with an attachment titled "tricky turns". I've never been the best at directions and often end up going off trail. I thought about downloading a GPX file from strava which you can easily find on the website version, I had it queued up, downloaded to my Garmin fenix and ready to go however it was too many waypoints to fit the whole race on the watch so I would have been missing half. And I also don't like that it beeps at you the whole time whether you are on or off the marked trail so I ended up deciding against it and I'm glad with the decision I made. There was only one point in the forever section down near the creek that I thought of having my whistle in my pack even emerged into my mind but then luckily I saw some orange streamers. I am very lucky to not have missed the hairpin turn around mile 32-33 that lead female runner Shannon Howell admitted she and another runner missed but quickly recovered. I was very worried about doing that.

The last 6 miles after the last aid station are essentially 3 up and 3 down. I took off after seeing my crew and shortly after didn't see any streamers. I had paced this part before but at this point I was like this could be any fire hill climb and I was in a fog (literally, with my cloudy eyes). I was hoping I wouldn't be that person who went a few miles without seeing a streamer like Horton warned in the pre race meeting. So I called out for Aaron. I called about three times with no response. I really didn't want to go to the top of this hill and have it be a wrong hill. I didn't want to have missed a streamer while I was lost in all the thoughts you have during a race when you zone out. Right when I was deciding I was just going to hit it up this hill and not think too much about it (like I had been doing since I partially lost my vision) I hear a "yeee" from behind. I called out and said "who's that?" and someone answered "it's Barry". Thank goodness another runner came along. The last 6 miles flew by with my found friend Barry. He was jogging up the hill in neon yellow shorts with only a handheld. I introduced myself and after a while let him know I couldn't see too well so I was relieved he was there. He was doing 1 min on 1 min off. I loved it. What a great idea. You don't have to solely run or walk the whole way but you can break it up. I was all for that. For a time. Until I wasn't when luckily we were about at the top of hill said Barry. I knew we weren't, from pacing but I didn't say anything. It was like a false summit but it made you run like it was the summit. When we made it to the top I couldn't believe I was seeing the blue ridge parkway and a patrol car that I had seen in the past when pacing. I was like this is it. It's all downhill from here. He yelled his mantra "lets go" maybe with some other words and we were amped. I told him don't worry about me push as hard as you can downhill. He still stuck with me (since I told him this reminded me the volunteer organization my mom worked with in Denver called running with the blind) as he called

out "log!", "rock!" And "watch out!" I was very grateful since we were pushing the pace downhill. Later when I finished my crew and fiance chance told me we put 15 minutes on between me and the girl behind me in the last 6 miles. This was due to Barry and his spirit. We were only 5 minutes apart at the last aid station with 6 miles to go. We pushed an 8 min mile downhill. I was worried for my knees and told him about this and he said "everyone's knees hurt. Don't acknowledge it" and that really gave me perspective. He didn't even mention how seasoned of a runner he was. It was only halfway into knowing him that he let me know he had done multiple 100s and some of the hardest races on the east coast. He was so humble about what he'd done and I was in awe that I was running with someone so seasoned. I was glad to have made him as a friend. And that was one of the greatest things about hellgate. The family of people you meet that have such a unique experience in common.

I finished in 13 hours and 43 minutes, second female.