

The Hunt for a Pink Puffy

Hellgate 2024 - Bridget Donaldson

This was my fourth year of running ultras after being a road runner for quite a while. In 2021, I came to the Charlottesville Area Trail (CAT) runners ultra training kickoff meeting, led by John Anderson, and on the first training run I kicked myself for not discovering the joy of long-distance trail running sooner.

Until earlier this year, Hellgate was never a consideration for me. Promise Land was my idea of an appealing race...challenging but packed with variety and stunningly beautiful sections, and with very little chance of getting hypothermia, being blinded with frozen eyeballs, or breaking ankles on leaf-covered rocks. Well, apparently 2024 was the year I resisted the voice that said I'd never do a 100 miler, let alone Hellgate.

The hype around this race piqued my curiosity. I'm discovering that race curiosity is like a parasite that I can't shake until I swallow the pill and run the dang thing. The way people talk about Hellgate is more about the experience as a whole, which seemed different than many races. The tough course and conditions are brought to life with the race's intangible qualities...its long history and the Camp Bethel experience, which starts with the vibration of nervous excitement and ends with an atmosphere ranging from ecstatic accomplishments to devastating disappointments. And then there's the powerful meaning it holds for Dr. Horton and the crew of folks who come year after year to prepare the trails and help organize the race. The joy in Horton's voice during the pre-race briefing provides the backdrop for all of these other big feelings in the air.

My fall training was peppered with injuries here and there, probably a combination of my first 100 (Old Dominion) in late spring and pushing the boundaries of what mileage I could handle for Hellgate training. After 4 years of ultras there's still a lot to learn. I came to the starting line with a nagging hamstring and a tweaked knee and truly no sense of whether my body would hold up for 66 miles. But I signed up for this race with a crew of CAT friends I trained with (and who crewed us) and I felt strongly about seeing what would happen. I kept in mind what Horton said: if we HAD to drop and didn't want to freeze to death waiting for a ride back to camp, do it at aid stations 2 or 4. My strategy was to start off slowly to give my body plenty of time to warm up, then just hope that mind over matter could get me through. It was comforting to start the race with my friend Christian, a kind and hilarious friend who was also dealing with a bum knee.

I decided beforehand that if my body cooperated, I'd tried my best to place top 10 (that puffy looked really nice). The women's field was intimidating, so I thought this goal was a stretch. But one thing about getting older is that I'm ok with voicing big goals and being ok if I don't accomplish them (there's always the next one!).

I granny-gear my way up the first big climb and decided to run up every hill that I could, knowing that I'd be more hesitant with my wonky knee on the downhills. I passed several runners on the uphill only to be passed by them on rocky descents. This kept me entertained for a while. At some point on the grassy road section, I got tired of my own thoughts. I had a song stuck in my head (Don't Go Chasing Waterfalls) that was driving me bonkers. I decided to focus on the aid station where I was hoping to see a friend or two. To be honest I couldn't really remember at which aid station Sophie Speidel would be despite her telling me 5 times (there was a lot going on!). I finally

made it to Floyd's Field and there she was. She asked how I felt, and I think I shook my head and grunted. She told me I was 14th or 15th woman - and at that point this information wasn't interesting to me since I was still worried whether my body would continue to cooperate.

But I trudged on. Then I got bored with my thoughts again an hour later. So, I focused on the sunrise...John Anderson had told me that the sun would in fact come up, but I began doubting that. "Is there going to be a sunrise? I don't think it's coming. Will this be the first Hellgate that stays dark the entire race? That will definitely cause me to get Hellgate eyes. Don't go chasing waterfalls..."

I kept granny-gearing up the hills where I caught my friend Marc. I urged him to keep slow-rolling up the hill with me; I absorbed the kind energy that he always seems to radiate and I felt optimistic again. I was so impressed that he was doing as well as he was after just running Rim to River 100. The sun did finally rise (hooray) and my body felt good (woohoo!). I was inspired to choose a new focus: Where are Those Women? That thought served not only as my sole entertainment for the next several hours, but more importantly it kept Chasing Waterfalls out of my head.

Since my new focus was on the puffy, I concentrated on trying to determine whether each runner way up ahead was a woman or a man. From far away it can be surprisingly hard to tell. I finally started approaching one woman at a time, with a long spread between each. They looked strong and as I passed them, and I figured they may be passing me back soon.

Then came the long rocky section before Bearwallow. Not a fan. It made me pretty angry, actually. More leafless gravel road climbs for me please! But I knew I had crew at Bearwallow who would lift me up. Mimi, Alex, Sophie, Cynthia and Eric were there, all cheery and encouraging. I was 10th woman at that point, and I left the aid station hoping to catch at least one more woman. But wow, that climb after Bearwallow was not nice...why had I been wishing for more climbs? This one was never-ending. In my dreams I'm still on that climb.

I didn't catch another woman; the 9th woman Kristen Kelman told me later that she heard I was a few minutes behind her, and she hightailed it to the finish (well done!). I was toast by that final climb, and somewhere in the forever section (not a fan of that section either) some fairly sharp knee pain kicked in. So, my final focus became finishing under 14 hours. I was hoping to make up time I lost on that torturous forever section by finishing fast on the final long descent, but my knee kept me from doing more than a jog. Still, I finished under 14 hrs with 3 minutes to spare. Hats off to the front runners (including my friend Molly) and all the women in this race who were a part of the fastest women's field in its history.

I told my friends Monica and English (who had just finished strong) to remind me next year that I don't want to run this race again. I'm overjoyed to have had this experience (and huge thanks to Dr. Horton and the volunteers!), but the course kicked my butt and one time is enough. And I know the Waterfalls song is waiting for me out there.

But I've said "never" before -- and I have a tendency to ignore my own advice.