

Hellgate 2024 - FINALLY

I have to say THANK YOU to Dr. Horton for the opportunity to complete this very special race. 2024 is the THIRD time I have attempted Hellgate. The first year I was accepted, 2021, I had a suspected miscarriage the day before the race and DNF'd at Headforemost Mountain. In 2022, I found out I was pregnant the week of the race and DNS'd. After having our daughter in 2023, it seemed fitting that Hellgate was the final race of my first year of postpartum running.

The race start was surreal and very emotional for me. I was standing next to my husband Erin and some of the most accomplished ultrarunners on the East Coast, in good health 16 months after a C-section, ready to compete. We sang the National Anthem, and we were off.

I had long ago decided the best race strategy was to stick with Erin for as long as possible. As a 9-time veteran, he knew the course and how to pace it and I wouldn't have to use my brain too much. Things were going okay until around Mile 12, when I started dry heaving. Evidently the tinkering I had done to my prerace nutrition had been a step back from my last race at MMTR. Erin stayed with me, forced me to down some food, and we soldiered onward, taking intermittent stops to dry heave. Every time I *looked* at my gels I gagged. I decided to abandon my carefully constructed gel plan and just eat as much solid food as possible. Our crew, Lindsey and Shane, took amazing care of me at the aid stations and with their help my stomach slowly improved throughout the race until it was no longer an issue.

After we left Headforemost Mountain, I spent a few enjoyable miles with a new friend Emma, who we realized had finished with me as part of the 5th-6th-7th place finish-line-dash at Grindstone in 2022. It was so nice to chat with her and the miles flew by. I could barely believe it when we got to Jennings Creek. After this was a real treat. Erin and I crested the climb after Jennings Creek just as the sun was rising over the mountains and we got to view the sunrise together.

Shortly after this climb, around mile 33 I started feeling better than good. I knew I was outside of the Top 10, and if I wanted the beautiful puffy that Dr. Horton had shown at the race briefing, I would need to speed up. Unfortunately, Erin was still recovering from Toddler Plague #5000 and had a lingering cough and chest congestion. He decided to complete the race as a fun run and our wonderful date night was over.

At this point I was running pretty well. Then suddenly the trail started to, in Aaron Schwartzbard's words, "suck dead goat". I had reached the Devil Trail. As I floundered through the leaves and sharp rocks, cursing everything, another runner, Molly, came flying by. She made the trail look so easy, I almost wondered if Aaron had been describing some even worse horror in my future. Luckily, just when I was about to lose my mind, we hit the road that marked the last stretch to Bearwallow Gap.

I do not remember much about the stretch from Bearwallow Gap to Bobblet's Gap, other than it was long and my legs were tired, and I fell once and I was starting to get whiny. I walked the entire road climb up to the Bobblet's Gap Aid Station, where I sat down and attempted to fix my nutrition woes, right as the Park Police showed up and informed us that the Blue Ridge Parkway was being closed due to impending snow. Lindsey and Shane told me not to worry, to get my nutrition and GTFO, so I did. I spent much of the next section worried about Erin and the aid station, until I realized a) I was in the Forever Section and b) I didn't hate it. In fact, I really enjoyed it. Gentle rolling hills, nice views of the mountains, and twisty curvy trails combined with my newly refueled body to make the Forever Section one of my favorites. At one point I even stopped and played in the leaves when they reached my thighs. I reflected on how the race had been using just one single trail and was in awe of the diversity of elements and terrains it included. I got very emotional realizing that, even though the race had been very difficult, my post-pregnancy body was doing it.

Having crewed this race a few times before for Erin, I was intimately familiar with the section of trail going into and leaving Day Creek. As soon as the trail widened tears filled my eyes. I knew exactly what lay ahead and I knew I was extremely well prepared for it. After a brief fueling stop at the aid station, I executed the plan I had been working on for months. Going into the race, I wanted to know I could hike 14-minute miles up that last climb. I ended up hiking a 14:21 and a 13:50 those last 2 uphill miles. I sped down the mountain and down the road into camp. Imagine my surprise when the runner in front of me turned around and started cheering me on. I had run 66.5 miles to find my neighbor from Germantown, MD, Andrey, who was also running the race.

At the finish line, I couldn't believe it when Dr. Horton proclaimed us the Fastest Women's Field in History. Or, maybe I could. I felt absolutely hunted by the women in 10th and 11th the entire last third of the race, and I was having Type 2 Fun trying to stay in front of them and catch the women in front of us. It was awesome to meet everyone at the end and swap stories. I also devoured some homemade vegetable soup that was reminiscent of the soup my mom made when I was a kid. I also got to see my husband finish his 10th Hellgate.

Immediately after finishing, Nelle Fox came over to congratulate me and said something about next year. I told her, "This is a one-and-done for me, I'm not doing this race again." She smiled and said, "That's what we all say, but you'll change your mind". And now, just two days later, I think I am already starting to change my mind. Thank you again Dr. Horton. Your race, including the trail, the athletes, the aid stations, and the finish line volunteers made my experience truly very special.