

Hellgate 2024

This year's hellgate was one for the books. I would not normally talk about training, but for this year's race it is important. Early in the fall I decided that I was not going to run Hellgate because I just did not enjoy running. Talking with my parents and friends confirmed that not running was the best decision. I was very content with my choice and was looking forward to being at an aid station with my friends so I could still enjoy the environment of the race. All that changed though when Will and Emma Paxton asked if I wanted to run our annual Sunset Fields to Bear Wallow Gap training run. Because I had not seen them in over a month I agreed and was looking forward to it. As we drove through the Blue Ridge Parkway and passed all the well and not so well known roads that are associated with Hellgate, a feeling was welling up in me that I was not expecting, I was mourning. Mourning the trail, the aid stations and the competitions. Throughout that training run there were many highs and lows, but ultimately I love Hellgate so much that I decided I at least had to try to get in. Taking John Anderson's parody of "Last Christmas" to heart I contacted Dr. Horton praying that someone had dropped from the race so I could swiftly scooch in. To my surprise someone had and I was in. All of a sudden, as excited as I was, I was also anxious because this was **2 WEEKS** before the race was to start at the painful 12:01 AM start time. Anyone who has run this race knows how special it is, memories both good and bad rushed into my head as I started to mentally prepare. There had only been 2 weeks since September that I ran over 40 miles so I did not feel ready at all. In a last ditch effort, I put in one 55 mile week with the help of Will and decided I was just going to run Hellgate as best I could.

The day before the race I finished exam week with a Pharmacology final, which left all the drugs sitting in my head (we will get to those later). I left school packed for the race and headed to the finish line. After last year's GI fiasco, I was a little leary to eat anything other than

my own food. Some baked spaghetti went down just right and all that was left was time and Horton's pre-race briefing. After the briefing I was an emotional wreck, I did not feel like I was ready and I felt like there were 2 tons of expectations on me, all I could think to do was call my parents. Behind the gym at Camp Bethel I was indescribably fearful as I talked to my dad and mom. All I could think to do was ask my dad to pray with me. Christ can do some amazing things. I knew that it would take a miracle from God for me to finish based on my limited training; but after that conversation and prayer, Christ gave me a peace that I have only ever felt one other time in my life. I knew I was going to be ok. That was the first time I have ever slept the night before the race and I woke up refreshed with some pre-race jitters, but ready. With the first real creek crossing being so high, I planned something different - stopping to change some clothes. With my change of socks in my bag I shuffled my way to the Hellgate trailhead and awaited with the other 150 runners for Horton's "Bang". At 12:01 (Horton time) we were off.

My adrenaline was pumping yet I felt discouraged. Everyone around me was talking so easily which was the opposite of my emotions. I had to remind myself in those first miles that I needed to run my race and nobody else's. The first few miles consisted of me getting passed pretty regularly. A group of us crossed the final creek before heading to Petites Gap with **soaking wet feet**. Once we started the Petites Gap climb it did not take long to figure out that we didn't need a headlamp because of how bright the moon was. The higher I climbed up, the more beautiful it was, and part of me wanted to just stop and stare. You could see for miles as the mountains weaved in and out of each other and a soft blue light made them seem so close yet so far. At the top of Petites Gap I did the second smartest thing I did the entire race, I changed my socks. As I sat down by my friend's truck, I began to take off my shoes, but I was met with resistance, **THEY WERE FROZEN**. This entire time I had not realized how cold it was. After

barely getting my shoelaces untied with my fingers getting colder and colder, I watched more people pass me which once again felt discouraging. I struggled to get dry socks on, but man, after they were on my feet like they had not even run 8 miles already. With fresh feeling feet and some snacks, I headed across the parkway and dove down into the single track. Letting the weight of those who had passed me get to me, I was hauling it, trying to catch people as we all headed down to Hunting Creek Road. Once I got there though, I realized I was making a big mistake. I was racing way too early, so I took a serious chill pill and once again was passed by other runners. But the tiredness in my legs told me that I needed to calm down. Looking for Camping Gap aid station, I took it one step at a time up the climb. At Camping Gap, I was relieved to see my friends. Unbeknownst to me, I was sweating like crazy, but I felt fine. My friends later told me at that point they were a little concerned, but I am glad they didn't tell me. I quickly got what I needed and started to head toward the grassy road. I don't remember much about this section, but I remember I listened to my body whenever it told me to walk or eat. A group of us had reached Floyds Field together, but I didn't care. I was running my race. I got what I needed and didn't care who got out before me or passed me. Leaving Floyds I realized that I was going to be just fine because I was running how I wanted to. I did start to realize that this is the first time that I was not running with people. I was enjoying it, but dreading the solitude all at the same time. Both of my previous years I ran with a group for the majority of the race, now it was just me, myself, and I. I am not sure if it is just me, but I never remember much from Floyds to Jennings. Leaving Jennings though I knew I was about to start my least favorite part of the race. I don't know what it is about the climb out of Jennings, but I have always hated it. Once I got to the top, after thinking it would never end, I noticed a headlight somewhere it was not supposed to be. A quick shout and they turned around and we both headed down the

right trail. That is when I met Peter. Peter quickly left me as the soft gravel road begged me to go faster, but my legs said no. I was soon on the climb up to Little Cove and with that climb came some sunlight. I once again was delighted to see my friends and they told me everyone was hurting worse than me and to keep doing what I was doing. I quickly caught someone and was hopeful that maybe, just maybe, my friends were right.

At this point I was beginning to see my patterns for this race. Every aid station meant bananas, grapes, Cheez Its or Goldfish, and ginger ale. The trail meant occupying myself with humming the song “Test Drive” from *How to Train your Dragon* (a phenomenal movie if you have not seen it) or saying the most interesting and funny drugs names I could remember from pharmacology or praying and thanking the Lord for getting me this far. Inching further and further away from Little Cove I started to hallucinate and see people standing against trees who were not there, but in the back of my mind I knew I was headed to the Devil Trail. Let me tell you something too, this year the Devil Trail was extra devily (the worst I have ever seen it). I walked/shuffled my way through it and was super relieved when it was over. About that time I finally saw a familiar face, Sean Cate. As I shuffled past him I thought to myself, “man he looks bad” and headed to Bear Wallow. Upon entering the parking lot, I heard an all too familiar voice yell, “Bobby Lee!!!!” It was Horton. Soon after seeing him, he said, “How does it feel to be the first loser?” That made my blood boil in the most encouraging way possible. Leaving Bear Wallow I was still listening to my body, but now something changed, I was racing. After reaching the In and Out section, I eventually saw someone in the distance and I thought to myself, “He is mine.” I reached him, blew past him, and didn't slow down until I was sure that I had beat the idea of racing me out of his head. I slightly regretted doing this because my legs were talking to me, but I continued on. Upon reaching Bobletts Gap, I was greeted by Sean's

crew who selflessly helped me get what I needed to get going back down the trail. If that doesn't tell you how great the ultrarunning community is, I don't know what does. As I left, I turned around just enough to see Sean again. "What happened, he looked terrible" I thought to myself. Apparently that is what 200 mg of caffeine will do for you. Soon he caught me and we were pushing the pace together down the road headed for the Forever Section. Upon reaching the Forever Section, Sean started to pull away. I tried my best, but I was no match for 200 mg of caffeine and I was once again by myself. Although it was my 3rd fastest time on the Forever Section, it felt like the slowest I had ever completed. About this time my feet really started talking to me. At this point in the race I think most people can agree that you ignore what your body is telling you and know you just need to finish, and that is what I did. I finally saw the straight, down hill that led to Day Creek. "The end is in sight" I thought, "just one more uphill"... that uphill handed my butt to me on a silver platter. I was forced to return to the classic, "I will run to that rock and will walk to that stump" all the way to Black Horse Gap. Close to the top I saw and heard an all too familiar face. Jordan Chang, in his chipper way, encouraged me to catch him.

Looking at my watch for the first time since I pressed start I saw that I was going to break 12 hours. I was overwhelmed with joy, I had told all my friends and family that 12 hours was impossible. Upon reaching the top it was all downhill, granted it felt like the longest downhill of my life, all I could think of was how ecstatic I was to be where I was and how happy I was that I decided to run this race. As I hit the last bit of the run, a short stretch of pavement, I was excited to finish, but I was more excited to see my friends and family. I once again finished a "very special race" and would not change anything about it. I learned three things during Hellgate 2024. First, when Christ gives you peace, no matter what happens, it is going to be ok. Second,

listen to your body. Don't get wrapped up in what everyone else is doing because your body knows best. Third, a little time to change your socks is always worth it. Every year I learn more and more how special this race is. Dr. Horton made this race a doozy with a WHOLE BUNCH of good and a WHOLE BUNCH of bad, but it is a doozy that I cannot resist.