

Hellgate 100k 2025 Race Report

By Egan McKinney

This year's race was the culmination of a five-year endeavor. When I ran it the first time in 2020, the infamous Hellgate socks weren't available. Despite telling Horton that it was the most difficult thing I had ever done, I knew I would be back for those socks.

Fast forward 5 years. I've trained, I'm accepted into the race, and I'm terrified. A few days earlier, Virginia was hit with a winter storm that closed the parkway, meaning several of the standard aid stations were moved or removed altogether. Any normal rhythm I could have gotten in was then thrown out the door. Temperatures were also expected to be bitterly cold (a high of 20), but just days before the race, the weather shifted to an ideal high of 45. Mind you, it was still cold, but running on a day with a high of 20 is very different from running in 20-degree weather for short periods in the race.

As with any race, you set tiers of goals. Depending on how the day goes, the goal you strive for shifts. Coming into the race, I wanted to push for a 16:30 finish as a true reach goal. The next tier was to run the race better and stronger than I did last time. And as always, no matter what, FINISH. DNF was not an option. The only way I was not going to finish was a time cutoff on the course.

The race starts at 12:01am, and we're off. The first few miles were normal. Running, hiking, and trying to pair up with some runners to pass the time. The trail is covered in snow, packed down by the runners ahead of me (thank you Hellgate lead runners for blazing the trail for the rest of us). It made running difficult but not impossible. It felt like running in loose sand on a beach. You're trying to gain traction and solid footing, but the snow shifts beneath your shoe, and you have to make tiny micro-adjustments just to keep moving forward. Any time I tried to pick up speed, I found myself holding my arms fully extended and couldn't help but chuckle at the thought that I probably looked like Jack Sparrow.

At AS 3, we were told there would be a long road ahead of us. AS 4 was removed, meaning we had a stretch of roughly 20 miles without aid. Shoved extra food in our pockets and headed out into the night. A flaw I had throughout the race was thinking this run would be like training runs and that I'd be able to move at a decent pace. So when I heard 20 miles, my mind told me, "Okay, about 4 hours," and that was not the case. That section took me every bit of 5 hours. It was a long and arduous time. What made it worse was that I had packed an extra handheld bottle for extra water. I

completely forgot. For the last 3 miles, I was rationing the little water I had left. I arrive at AS 5 in emotional shambles. My crew (my wife and my parents) pieced me back together and got me out. They knew if I was going to make it, I couldn't stay long. But it's finally daylight, and the new day brings new energy.

Hellgate hills are not your average hill. Most hills have an end in sight, no matter how steep. Hellgate hills have no end. You go up and up and up and up some more. Around every corner, there's a new hill. At the end of the race, when you've already spent every ounce of effort getting to that point, there's another hill begging you to give up. The hills were merciless. No training could have prepared me for them.

Around mile 36, I start having GI issues. For every race I've done 50 miles or more, that has been a consistent theme. This race was no different. The discomfort reduced me nearly to a walk, and I could not afford to lose those precious seconds. One pit stop later, and I'm feeling better. But I look down at my watch, and I'm 30 minutes past when I should have been at the next aid station. This was the fastest section for me. Urgency fueled me because I knew I had to make up a lot of ground if I was going to make the AS 7 cutoff. During this stretch, I took a tumble. Most of the course is mountain access roads, and for the most part, you'd be able to find a patch of dirt or packed snow to run on. But every now and then, you'd find tire tracks where the snow had melted and refrozen, making a super slick surface. Not ideal for running. Even as I was carefully crossing one, my foot slipped, and, trying to catch myself, I twisted around and ended up smacking my hip and chin. Shocked me more than it hurt, but definitely didn't feel good either. Luckily, this section was mostly runnable, but I still couldn't find the aid station. If you're unfamiliar with ultra-mileage, the distance to the next aid station is never accurate. In this case, the section was about half a mile longer; on other sections, it was closer to two miles longer. Hope is fading with every step.

At AS 7 is where I pick up my pacer, but it also has a hard cutoff at 12:30pm. My goals to hit 16:30 and running the race stronger were dashed miles earlier, and now, with a time cutoff looming over me, I'm afraid this aid station is where I stop. I pull in at 12:31pm. An aid station worker waves me over and says if I can stay in front of the sweeper, I can keep going. I was in and out in about 2 minutes flat. My pacer was a family friend who had run ultras before and knew what it would take for me to finish this. At this point, I had largely resigned myself to the idea that I wasn't going to finish under the 18-hour cutoff. I was moving too slow, GI issues were back, and the distance I needed to cover just seemed too great when running even a 100 yards left me gasping for air. Luckily, my pacer didn't accept that despite a lot of complaining on my part. At every flat section (and some non-flat sections), he was telling me to

run, shaving off precious seconds to get me closer to the finish. I thought it was futile, but obliged when I could. After another pit stop for some GI issues, several grueling hills, and lots of complaining, we make it to the last aid station.

I've got an hour and twenty minutes to climb another 2.5 miles and descend 3.5 miles to the finish. It was close. I could taste it. I had just now started to regain hope that it was achievable. But a 2.5-mile climb is nothing to sneeze at, especially when your legs have already put in 62 miles. My plan was to climb the 2.5 miles, hand my stuff over to my pacer, and then go as hard as I could down the last 3.5 miles, ignoring any and all discomfort that my body was yelling. My body was yelling pretty loud though. I was delirious. I definitely hadn't had enough food or water. Every fiber in my being wanted to collapse, but I tried to imagine collapsing across the finish line instead. For better or worse, I forgot to check the distance on my watch before I started the climb, so I had no idea when the climb would be done. Then I did the same thing once we reached the top and started to descend. I'm not sure I could have actually done the math at that point, though. I started at a good clip on the downhill, but very quickly the energy I had was spent, and what I thought was flying was actually a 12-minute/mile pace. Not fast enough. Another runner told us that once we reached the gate, we had a mile and a half to go. I prayed for that gate to come. With a mile and a half left, I knew I could push. To shed light on how my brain was doing, I thought to myself, "Oh sweet, with a mile and a half, I can coast in at like a leisurely pace." That was not so. I thought 1.5 miles could equate to a 15-minute/mile pace (hahahaha). Luckily, my pacer's brain was much fresher than mine and corrected me. We find the gate, hit the paved road, and sprint. Faster than I thought was possible. It was touch-and-go even then. Not guaranteed that I was going to make it. The only thing I can think is keep sprinting. I don't know how long I have to sprint, but I have to keep sprinting. We round the corner into Camp Bethel, and I know I'm close, but I'm too focused to look at my watch. Just keep sprinting. My wife and Dad are staggered along the way, yelling at me, encouraging me not to stop. I keep yelling back, "This is all I've got." I round one more corner, and I finally see the clock. And the funnel. And Horton. I'm almost there. I'm barely able to make out the time on the clock, 17:57, and I know I've made it. I shuffle my way in and collapse. Agony to pure elation and relief. Final time was 17:57:30. Two and a half minutes before the cutoff. Those couple minutes just lying in the grass felt so good. From somewhere behind me, I hear Horton say, "Egan, do you need medical assistance?" I said no, but it made me chuckle because I must have looked that rough. When my crew finally convinced me I should go inside, I told Horton that *this* year's Hellgate was the hardest thing I had ever

done. My legs are stiff and weak, and I might lose a toenail, but because of my crew, who pushed me to the very end, I now have my own Hellgate socks.

#forthesocks