

Hellgate 100K++

12/13/2024 – 66.6 miles

Pre-Race

2025 had been a challenging year for me running-wise. All year I had only run one ultra, a 50K back in January. I injured my Achilles in June and then, while rehabbing it, picked up a hamstring injury. That derailed most of my summer and fall running. It wasn't until mid-October that I was able to start getting in some decent mileage and elevation gain. Compared to last year, I was down about 40% in total mileage. That being said, I did not want to miss Hellgate if there was any chance I could run it.

Like all of the other runners, I received an email from Dr. Horton on the Wednesday before the race stating, "Many of you have been wishing for a REAL Hellgate. You have one this year." I had a pit in my stomach reading that. Not only was I going into the race undertrained, but it was shaping up to be an exceptionally challenging year with regards to the weather. I spent the rest of Wednesday and all of Thursday thinking about how I was going to have to run through all of that snow.

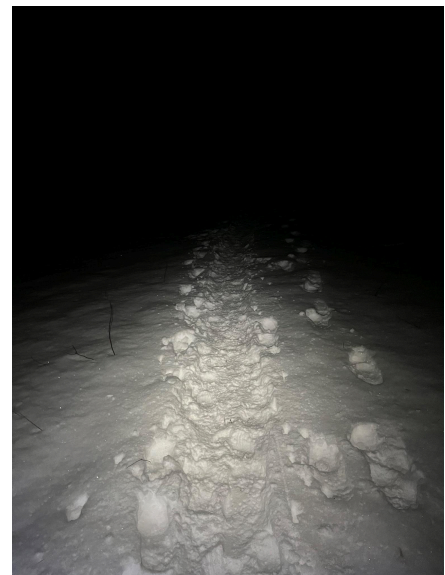
Friday morning, I drove down to Camp Bethel with my friend Matt, who was running the race for the second time. We arrived at camp around 4:30 p.m. and claimed a couple of bunks. We picked up our bibs and attended the welcome dinner. After the race briefing, I laid down for a bit. I think I managed to fall asleep for maybe an hour.

As usual, I was one of the more overdressed runners. I went with tights on the bottom and a heavy base layer, a quarter zip, and a Houdini jacket (my 2019 finisher award) on top. I planned to start with Altra Lone Peaks that had screws in the soles. I also decided to use poles for the first time this year and packed some Snickers bars, gummy bears, and GU chews in my running vest.

Start to Jennings Creek (AS 5)

Matt and I decided to start together, placing ourselves in the back third of the field. The first section was relatively uneventful. I reached the stream crossing shortly before the Petite's Gap road and ran right through it. When I got to the other side, I noticed some runners hopping across rocks upstream. I'll have to try that next year if I remember.

There was some snow on the road, but it wasn't much of an issue. I soon reached the relocated aid station, grabbed some food to go, and continued up the climb. Shortly after leaving the aid station, the road became snow-covered. The screws in my shoes worked quite well, and I was able to make my way up the slick tire tracks without slipping.

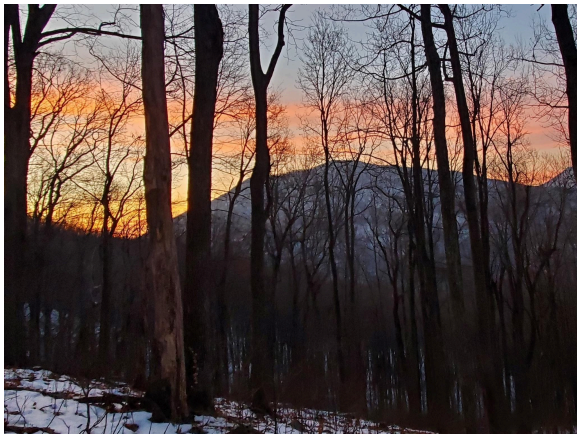


The descent after crossing the parkway was actually easier with the snow, as the trail had been packed down by the runners ahead. Eventually, I reached Camping Gap Road. I made a point to finish both of my Tailwind soft flasks right before the aid station. There, I refilled them and spent some time eating potato wedges and drinking a cup of broth. I took some quesadilla wedges to go. I was a little nervous for this upcoming stretch of 18 miles without an aid station.

I headed out on the climb up the road. At first, I was walking in tire tracks, but eventually they ended. Making my way along the snow-covered fire road was challenging, and I walked the entire uphill to the normal location of the Camping Gap aid station. Afterwards is a nice, gradual downhill along a fire road. Normally, I would run the vast majority of this section, but with the snow, I would run a few steps, stumble, and then walk. I just could not get into a rhythm. I was really struggling and questioning whether I wanted to continue. I was seriously considering dropping at Jennings Creek. The fire road seemed to go on forever, and I wasn't even in the forever section.

Matt took the lead at the start of the descent to Overstreet Falls. He was flying, and it was a struggle to keep up. I really had to push. At the falls, I considered filling one of my flasks, but it looked sketchy, and I didn't want to risk falling in. The climb up to the non-existent Headforemost Mountain aid station took a while. Some of it was snow-free, but the higher I climbed, the deeper the snow became. At this point, I just wanted to quit. I was struggling to make decent forward progress and was not having fun.

As I crossed the parkway at Floyd Field, I looked to my left and noticed some light in the sky. Normally, I don't see the first hint of dawn until much closer to Jennings Creek. I hadn't looked at my watch since the start, but I figured I was about an hour behind my usual pace. I generally



enjoy this section of the course. The first quarter mile after the parkway is uphill, but after that it's mostly downhill. Once I hit the downhill, I was able to settle into a nice running cadence despite the snow. Eventually, the course transitioned into single track, and I continued to make some good time. There's a stream crossing here that was particularly wide this year, but I was able to go downstream a bit and hop across on rocks. The snow helped, as I could simply follow the footprints to the easiest crossing. It was light enough to turn off my headlamp at the start of the long descent to Jennings Creek. With daylight

and decreasing snow, my mental state improved significantly. By the time I reached the aid station, I no longer wanted to drop.

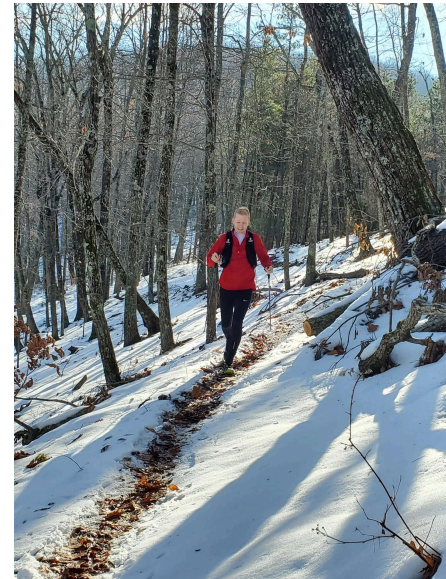
Jennings Creek (AS 5) to Finish

At the aid station, I decided to change into a pair of Lone Peaks without screws. A few times I had stepped on rocks, and while the screws weren't long enough to penetrate the sole, I could still feel them. Between changing shoes, refilling my flasks, and making a point to eat, I spent three to four minutes at the aid station, my longest stop of the race. I grabbed some pierogies and pancakes to go and ate them on the climb out.

With the new shoes, I slipped a bit, but as long as I avoided vehicle tracks, I was fine. This section features a long climb, a long descent, and then another long climb to the Little Cove Mountain aid station. The final climb was mostly snow-free. Normally, I run parts of it, but I just didn't feel like it this year.

When I reached Little Cove Mountain, I checked my watch and saw I arrived at 9:32, my slowest time. For comparison, I made it there in 8:33 in 2023 and 8:53 in 2024. I was annoyed with my pace and with myself for wanting to drop earlier. I figured that if I pushed myself, I could still break 17 hours.

After eating at the aid station, I took a breakfast sandwich to go. I ran much of the early portion of this section, knowing the trail would become significantly more technical later. Once the course transitioned to single track, I broke out my poles, which helped immensely, especially on the downhills.



At the Devil's Trail section, I found myself slightly behind another runner who was moving well. I pushed hard to stay with her. The snow actually made the Devil's Trail a bit more runnable, filling in gaps between rocks and smoothing out the trail. I was happy to reach the stream crossing that signaled less than a mile to the next aid station.

I arrived at the Bearwallow Gap aid station feeling relatively good at 11:36. Typically, the final 20 miles take me about five hours, so I had a solid chance of breaking 17 hours. There were several runners hanging around the aid station, and I did not want to join them milling about. I quickly refilled my flasks, grabbed a cup of pierogies, and ate them on the climb out. This climb is particularly annoying due to multiple false summits. I had my only fall of the race on the climb where I caught my foot on a rock. Fortunately I didn't land on anything too hard. In the swoops I caught up to and passed a few other runners which was a mental boost.

I was relieved to eventually reach the descent to Bobblets Gap Road. Once on the road, I walked most of the climb up to the gap. In past years I've run it, but I did not have a lot left in me and didn't feel like running up it. After crossing under the parkway at the gap I ran the descent decently hard and passed a few runners. I liked the location of the relocated aid station just before the start of the forever section. Like at the other aid stations, I grabbed food to go and ate

it while walking up the first climb of the forever section. A pack of runners were about a minute behind me, and I tried to stay ahead of them. I gradually pulled further and further ahead and lost contact with them. Since this section consists of three climbs and three descents, I focused on taking them one at a time. I was quite happy to start the final descent and eventually reached the Day Creek aid station.



At Day Creek, I drank a couple cups of Coke and took a baggie of tater tots to go. I power-hiked the climb, aiming to reach the parkway in under 45 minutes. I hit the yellow gate, about a third of the way up, in 14 minutes, which told me I was on pace. I reached the top in 41 minutes.

I stopped briefly to take a couple of pictures and then began the final descent to Camp Bethel. I ran as hard as I could. Once I reached the gate at the bottom and the smoother road beyond, I tried to open up my stride and increase my pace. I was

thrilled to see the one-mile-to-go marker. Soon after, I entered Camp Bethel. The slight uphill to the finish was painful, but I forced myself to run all of it.

Matt and I crossed the finish line together in 16:45:12, my ninth finish and third-slowest time.

Final Thoughts

This year was brutal, by far my hardest Hellgate. I thought the pouring rain in 2019 was rough, but this was so much worse. The snow nearly broke me. Had there been an aid station at Overstreet Falls, I'm fairly certain I would have dropped. It wasn't until I was nearly at Jennings Creek that I finally convinced myself to keep going. Once I decided at Little Cove Mountain that I wanted to push, I was all-in on getting to the finish. I ached, and at times it really hurt to keep going, but I had no desire to quit in the second half of the race.

Western States and Umstead (my first 100-miler) hurt more physically, but this race was far harder mentally than either of them. Will I run it again next year and go for my tenth finish? I'll definitely submit an application. Hopefully next year will be injury-free, and my fitness will be better come December 2026. I still want to break 15 hours one of these years.