

Thomas Cook

Target Time: 8 hours, which was really just a guess **Finishing Time:** 7:38

Seed: 286/308

Finished: 165/299

BLUF (Bottom Line Up Front): Very satisfying experience. Enjoyed some wonderful time with old friends and new friends, challenged myself with a distance I'd never run before and got a new pair of running shorts.

Intro and Weeks Leading Up to Race:

I have been a casual runner for many years, logging countless 3-4 mile runs, the occasional 5 and maybe once or twice venturing further until this past December. I had gained about 30 pounds after returning from a deployment and participating in only one physical activity, beard growing; I needed to run. A friend of mine, Joe Byron, helped immensely with introducing me to trail running and consistently encouraging me to run. My brother –in-law, Frank Gonzalez, was also encouraging and constantly gave me the excellent advice to "not worry so much" when I asked him countless questions about how many Gu's to eat per hour, target pace, trail etiquette, possibility of me DNFing, etc, etc, etc.

Pre-race day/night:

Arrived to camp site about 2:30 and found my sister and her family (Gonzalez's) along with some other friends already set up and enjoying a small fire. My wife and I quickly set up our tent and I commenced to kicking the soccer ball around with my nieces and some other kids. As far as I was concerned the slight chill and light rain was wonderful weather, the location was perfect and I enjoyed myself from the moment I arrived.

I easily ate my \$5 worth of pizza and was lucky enough to get some of my wife's amazing strawberry shortcake dessert before Jaime licked the bowl clean. I immensely enjoyed Dr. Horton's antics while passing out the prizes and nearly falling off the table while saving his precious cookies.

After a long day of packing, camping and generally thinking about the race I was perfectly content to crawl under my wool blanket and poncho liner before 10 pm.

Pre Race:

I didn't quite make it to the 4:30am wake-up-call. I was lying awake mentally preparing a little after 4, but didn't find the courage to climb over my wife and out of the tent into the cold rain until about 4:35. I immediately began eating. My menu consisted of a blueberry bagel the way God made it (dry), cinnamon cheerios (dry), peanut butter pretzels, 32 ounces of water (warm because I slept with my Nalgene), a banana, apple slices, salt pill, two advils, a couple sips of throwback mountain dew, a five hour energy and a pre-exercise Gatorade gel packet. I sat in my truck with the heat on and carefully placed specialized blister band-aids, a feeble attempt at preventative measures which possibly saved me some pain, but certainly not a complete success.

I had a very funny experience during the role-call. My name was called, I answered "here" and my name was immediately echoed by a shaggy-haired, bearded guy from the other side of the pavilion who was now making his way through the crowd to get to me. I had seen the name "Tim Ebersole" on both terrapin and promise land entrants list, which always struck me as somewhat odd because I had known a guy in college in Philadelphia (five years ago) with that same name. Needless to say without

that clue I probably wouldn't have recognized Tim, but it was great to see him and his wife (also from college) and although our convo wasn't long, it is always a cool experience to see old friends.

Start – AS1:

Not a lot to say here, after running with the pack for the obligatory first .75 of a mile I joined the arguably sane folks in walking the rest of the way up the gravel road. I enjoyed my conversations with several people from Blue Ridge Community Church, most of which were with Dave Hammock.

AS1-AS2:

I mostly avoided AS1, I think I grabbed a quick GU drink and left the small crowd of Blue Ridge runners when I continued my trek up the trail. I did lightly jog some of the flat spots here, mostly because the people in front of me did and didn't want to hold the people behind me up if they wanted to run. Once we got to the open trail I picked up a good tempo pace and enjoyed the views, rising fog and company of other runners. Felt good – ZEN was good.

AS2-AS3:

Filled up with water at AS, grabbed some PB/J, Pretzels and crackers and quickly exited. The next section blurs in my memory a little. The hike up the mountain seemed to pass rather quickly I remember a girl in front of me kept running the uphill and walking the flats – this was perplexing to me. My mind wandered to my secret goal of finishing in 8 hours. I had no stop watch, only the time of day and although I must have counted on my fingers ten times what time I had to finish to get 8 hours. I could never seem to remember what the time was, let alone determine where I was on the course and if I was on any kind of a pace to reach this goal. I also remember this time being full of thoughts that I could put in my race report, the only reason you have to run a race is to have some alone hours to think up what you will be writing in your race report and I was determined to write a good one.

Having seen the entire course was a VERY, VERY big comfort for me. I couldn't tell you how many times I looked at the map of the course, read race reports, and mulled over the course in whatever detail I could discover from conversations and info online. When I reached the parkway I knew the next set of miles were where I would make/break my race. I ran seemingly hard down the service road to AS3. Finding my stride, I relaxed mentally and enjoyed knowing that my favorite part of the course was coming up.

AS3-AS4:

My wife and sister and other blue-ridge folks were working an AS which I had always imagined as the sunset fields AS, luckily my wife had mentioned that it was AS4 that they would be working. Still, I was half expecting to see friendly faces at this AS and although there were the two Mrs. Henrys and some other people I knew, I avoided more than a quick wave and was quickly in/out of the station.

Downing several GU drinks, a handful of cheez-its (its own food group as far as I'm concerned) and several small bananas I commenced hurriedly down the section leading to Cornelius Creek Trail in full stride. I'm probably inexperienced, naïve, gutsy and stupid – but I do think that I excel at downhill running. Maybe the people I passed thought I was wreck less, but I kept my arms close to my side, lengthened my strides significantly and let inertia take over. AS3-AS4 was easily the high point of the race. I continued to sip water from my pack and stopped briefly in some of the deep creeks to rinse my head, legs and arms with cold mountain water but otherwise did nothing but run. ZEN was top-notch at this point, I felt great running into AS4 seeing my wife, sister and plenty of other familiar faces from church.

AS4-AS5:

My sister filled my pack with water while I greatly enjoyed the mountain dew, pepsi and conversation with my encouraging wife, who was snapping photos and smiling and throwing lots of encouragements my way. I was disappointed to find out Frank Gonzalez had beaten me to the Aid Station and even more disappointed when people laughed that I asked if he had already come through! Apparently all those people holding me up making me walk in the first three miles had put me in a difficult spot trying to beat him, maybe next year.

I continued my good pace and mental state while leaving the AS, running well down the gravel and into the hardball section. In my two previous times down the dark side I had taken the turn off the hardball back onto the trail a little sooner than the posted hiking sign, when I did this on this run several other runners accused me of cheating. So, I quickly announced that I still had a shot of winning this thing and I ran back to the proper turn off and continued my trek up the hill. I had ran the significant part of the last 10 miles and parts of it ran very hard, I was content to recover a bit during this portion walking anything that remotely had an incline and casually checking the creeks for Horton's alleged Easter eggs as I crossed them. At this point a bit of nausea had come on and I began doubting if I should continue taking the salt pills that I had been consuming every hour up to that point. I didn't feel horrible, but I certainly didn't feel great.

AS5-AS6:

Reaching this AS and the miles immediately following it were easily the low point of the race for me. In order to get the full promise land experience I ate an ice cream sandwich as well as several cups of GU, a mountain dew, and some crackers of some sort. Leaving this AS is the only time that I stopped, closed my eyes, mentally gathered myself and did not exert any energy at all for awhile. I knew I was over half-way, I also knew the most difficult portion was ahead of me. I enjoyed mostly solitude for a couple of miles, ran any flat portions at a pace probably in-efficient for running and felt heavy. I knew I'd be paralleling the creek at some point soon, but it never seemed to come! I also knew the next AS was the blue-ridge AS again and friendly faces would be waiting. When I reached the downhill portion that paralleled the creek I caught some momentum, I slopped through the mud and started to feel good, but also was conscious not to run too hard as the climb up the falls was next.

AS6-AS7:

This stop is a little blurry; as my sister again took my pack to fill up, I fueled up as much as I could, mostly with oranges and bananas. I also remember starting to leave the AS and Shea Foster having to stop me from going the wrong way, which would have really hurt my chances of catching Frank or winning the race. Perhaps that loss of time is in fact why I didn't win; yes, I'm quite sure that is what happened.

My climb up the falls was actually VERY un-eventful. I walked every last inch of this portion, but didn't stop. This differed from the other two times I've climbed the falls. On race day my pace for this portion was VERY slow, but also very static. My heart rate stayed in check and in all honestly Dr. Horton's evil little hill wasn't that brutal for me. I did slam SEVERAL GU's and a significant amount of water during this portion though.

It was also during this portion I continued my never ending practice of using my fingers to add up eight hours from the start of the race to find out what time I needed to finish in under 8hrs. All day I had been counting: six, seven...eleven, twelve and stopping on one as my target time. With only 9 miles left in the race I was able to decide that I would not be able to make it by one o'clock and was distressed to not make my goal time. The multiple packets of GU must have replaced some lost blood

sugar and jogged a distant memory --- the race started at 5:30! Although I no longer had any shot of winning the race (my ultimate goal) or beating Frank (secondary goal) I could still make my third goal of finishing in under eight! My spirits also rose as I approached the AS and saw a big white suburban driving down the adjacent service road. My sister and my wife! Although I found out later this was them and they decided not to stop at the AS, it was still nice to see them driving.

AS7-AS8:

I approached the AS in a hurry to replace the water in my pack and grab some food and carve up the last six miles to get back to the camp. I crossed the parkway knowing I was approaching the home stretch and downed the banana and last GU of the day while climbing that last uphill stretch. In my tired state my many mantras kicked in and I encouraged myself aloud to get this thing over with, there were carb-filled beverages awaiting me and I had hopes of coming in under 7:30.

My love of the downhill run kicked in and I loved hearing the wind in my ears as I lengthened my stride, relaxed my mind and lungs and envisioned the finish line for remarkably the first time of the day. I knew I was close, I knew I'd make it under eight and I was still, perhaps naively, holding on to hopes of 7:30!

I greatly enjoyed the last tactical portion and tried to remember climbing up this same path what seemed like so long ago. Going down is much more fun.

AS8-Finish:

I'm fairly certain I gave a casual wave and a half-smile to the volunteers at the final water point. Otherwise my stride only sped up as I reached the steep gravel road. I ran these last three miles which seemed to last forever. I certainly had hopes of seeing the camp around every turn and when I passed the one mile left marker at 7:30 I realized I should just be content to make my original goal of under eight. Crossing the finish felt great. Dr. Horton yelling my name and doing his little shuffle-dance was funny. I didn't quite know what to do immediately following this encounter, so I greeted everyone and went to the truck to ground some gear and grab some dry clothes.

Post Race:

I went and sat in the creek for awhile, ate a couple apple slices, drank some water and changed into some dry clothes. I realized after taking my shoes off that I had plenty of war wounds. Huge blisters on both heels and some others for good measure. Luckily, I didn't feel any of this as I ran. I then sat and enjoyed cheering in the other runners. I loved seeing all of the blue-ridge folks and hearing their tales from the trails. My wife was wonderful to me and encouraged me to eat and she even sat on the ground so I could sit on the chair!

I did feel very sick later in the day. Nausea really set in strong and my muscles really tightened up. All casual reminders of the feat I had accomplished.

Overall:

Again, great experience – I would love to do it again. The community is great and Dr. Horton is a wonderful and inspiring character. I did well eating throughout the race and I believe it is what kept me feeling good. Besides what I've mentioned that I ate at each AS, I also continually used salt pills throughout the first half of the race and averaged about two packets of GU an hour and went through about two sleeves of BLOKS. I never felt hungry and apart from some slight nausea around the 20 mile marker I had no issues. I've got no clue how much water I drank, but I drank at least one cup of GU and one cup of soda at each AS.

I believe the best thing I did in preparing for this race, other than running, was learning the course. The multiple training runs that Dr. Horton put on were great, as well as my minor obsession with the maps and stats of the course provided in the runner's packets. I constantly knew what was coming next, where I could make up time, where I would lose time and where the aid stations would be. Mentally this was a HUGE for me.

The Aid Stations were all great, the volunteers were wonderful and the spreads were remarkable. Any time bananas and cheez-its are offered, life is good, even if you do have to run a ridiculous distance.