

The weather was here, wish it was beautiful.....my first Ultramarathon experience

Near the end of 2006 I was encouraged by a friend(JT) to run a marathon. He kept sending me suggestions for my approval and based on my unusual requirements, I picked one that actually passed about 30 yards from a beach house in southern NJ that my family has owned for over 40 years. I signed up, trained and we ran the Ocean Drive Marathon on March 25th 2007, a point to point marathon that started in Cape May NJ and finished in Sea Isle City via Wildwood, Stone Harbor and Avalon. We had 30 miles per hour gale force head winds nearly the whole time with a few showers along the way. It was ridiculous but I did finish it in 4 hrs and 37 minutes. I guess it only makes sense that this friend also ran this year's Promise Land with me and the weather again turned out to be pretty much ridiculous. My criteria for doing it was also ridiculous and partially based on similar last names to people helping Dr. Horton(the Hesse's) and Dr. Horton and his wife have the same names as my Mom and Dad, Nancy and Dave. I was in and committed or maybe I should have been committed. I also had an affinity for Colon Creek after a thankfully uneventful colonoscopy.

Saturday morning, I woke up and did everything I do before a long run, not quite knowing what to expect. I had 3 goals: to finish, to finish in less than 10 hours(I wanted the shorts...) and to avoid sustaining a significant injury. As I stood at the start, I thought here we go, bring it. I shouted out to another friend and he said "this is the best weather we have had since 2007". The temperature was in the low 40s, slightly overcast and the forecast for the day did look very good at that time with only a slight chance of showers and expected highs in the 50s at that time.

We ran a short distance and then the road sloped up sharply and most everyone started walking and I started feeling pretty good about the whole endeavor. We fell into our stride and started plugging away the miles with a lot of uphill walking on some of the most beautiful ridge trails I have ever been on in my life. I was thankful for the experience and kept moving on like I was told to by my friends and from Dr. Horton the night before. Before I knew it we were already passing aid station 2. I ate, I drank and thought about what I needed before getting there as advised.

At the third aid station things got more interesting. I was finally separated from 2 friends (JT and Jimmy) after taking a little longer to apply some Bodyglide and I remembered this section being referred to as the dark side. It started going down steeply, kept going down and there were more rocks than I had seen anywhere else thus far. I was a little apprehensive as I lack confidence on steep down hills with rocks but settled in for the ride. Within 2 minutes I rolled my left ankle. I immediately knew I did not damage it after a right ankle break in the fall. I slowed down more and focused more. A short while later, I came upon another friend who was helping with the race because he was injured. He said "looking good Bentley" and almost on cue I tripped and fell, scraping my left knee. I got up trying not to look embarrassed and he said "got your fall out of the way", keep going in his usual supportive manner. I didn't hurt and barely noticed the little trickle of blood going down my leg.

The next few miles ticked by uneventfully and I remember going down a road for 2-3 miles and then getting on another trail and starting to climb back up on some horse trails, again some beautiful scenery.

At some point between 11am and noon, the sky darkened suddenly and I could feel the temperature drop rapidly. Suddenly it started pouring and thunder and lightning accompanied. I kept counting the amount of time between lightning and thunder and felt pretty safe based on the delay between the two. As the rain continued I kept thinking there is no way this can last long coming down this hard and then it started sleeting too. I started to wish I had not taken my gloves off but did not want to stop to put them on. I was not cold but my hands were numb and I could barely move them.

I stopped at the next station(I think it was number 5?), ate the obligatory PBJ and journeyed on upward. I asked a fellow runner Ed to grab my gloves out of camelback for me and he obliged thankfully. My hands were so numb it took at least 5 minutes for me to get them on. Meanwhile, the condition of the trail was getting worse the higher we went up, both from the weather and the terrain in general. I was having a little trouble with focus and depth perception and kept telling myself to focus. As I started the ascent approaching Apple Orchard Falls I was glad I had put my gloves on, it really helped and I reached a point in the climb with big rocks that I needed my arms to navigate. I was very cognizant that I am a soul in the vessel of my body and tried to separate myself mentally from the rain and the pain. I told myself and others to embrace the rain. It continued to pour torrentially and I felt like a drowned rat.

Finally, after a lot of praying and singing in my head (Grateful Dead Cold Rain and Snow) it seemed to be working and I powered up the falls. In retrospect, Fool in the Rain by Led Zeppelin may have been a better choice. The volume of water coming over the falls was amazing and I am sure it was probably 3-4 times the usual volume. I did not count the steps but just kept going up, up and up. I thought I had to be close to the top and saw a sign saying .91 miles to Blue Ridge Parkway. I made it up there, grabbed another PBJ and some GU water and my injured friend who was helping at the aide station told me it would take me about an hour to complete the last 5 miles. 2.5 miles of trails, 2.5 miles down the gravel road. I started the last two legs of the journey feeling pretty excited that I had made it this far and I was still coherent after nearly 8 hours, although these time estimates are approximate. I was wearing a watch but my timeline gets jumbled after so long on my feet.

The final stretch of trails were treacherous, it was either ankle deep sticky rock filled mud, traversing streams across the muddy trail, or like actually running in a small stream. All three proved equally difficult and slippery and I found myself slowing down as others breezed past. I made it to the final aid station in what seemed like several hours but it was probably less than an hour. When the volunteer told me I only had 2.5 miles down the gravel road to the finish line, I was elated.

I started down the gravel and it sank in, "I am going to finish" I shouted to myself. I savored the last couple miles, no cramping at all throughout the race and only some nominal discomfort in my left calf. I knew that I had gotten more than my money's worth that day. Turning into the field, seeing the finish line and smelling the grills was almost surrealistic. I crossed the finish line and Dr. Horton was there with a fist bump, 9 hrs, 29 minutes and 37 seconds total journey time. I was a little disappointed that I did not get a "Horton hug" after many "Horton miles" but I did get a hug from the toughest person in the group I signed up with, Deb aka the Warrior. She had finished 2 hours earlier but was waiting, along with the other cast of characters: Mongo (aka John Hurley), JT(Jim Templeman) and my main running friend Jimmy Manning(aka Dirty Pirate). Shout out to all of my friends for encouraging me to do this race, it was truly unique and a journey to the Promise Land. I accomplished all 3 of my goals too and am already thinking about what might be next. A great event!!! Thanks to all who were involved in every aspect, it was epic!!!

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