

I've typically not been one to document my race experiences in writing, but rather I usually reminisce race stories at the finish line with fellow runners. After all, only ultra-runners understand things like pooping in the woods, avoiding rattle snakes, picking off ticks, paying \$100 to inflict hours of pain on yourself, and how to balance proper hydration and nutrition. I finally decided this year, after 30+ ultras in the books, to change that. As I sit here on an Amtrak to DC, beginning my days' long journey of flights and train rides home to Minnesota, so many thoughts come to mind about the race yesterday and my ultrarunning career to date.

I started running ultras when I was 19 as a freshman in college. What I thought would be a "one and done" has quickly turned into a love for the sport and a passion for the outdoors. Dr. David Horton, I can't put into words how grateful I am for all the ways you've invested in me as a person and as a runner. In 2009 you believed in this city boy from Minneapolis. 13 years later, the life lessons I've learned on the trails continue to motivate me in countless ways across many areas of life.

The scene at camp on Friday night was a very familiar one. As runners began to arrive it was great seeing old friends and meeting new ones. We feasted on pizzas and a table full of desserts. Afterwards, we sat and listened to the pre-race briefing. Shortly after, the redneck bonfire with dozens of pallets ignited the night sky. Around 9:30 I crawled into my sleeping bag and fell asleep. 6.5 hours later my alarm went off. 4 AM wake up call. Did I really just sleep through the entire night before a race?! That never happens. I walked up to the bathroom shack and there were no lines yet for the toilets. #Winning! Maybe it was pre-race jitters or maybe it was the questionable water I drank from a stream, but either way my stomach was not happy. I popped a few Immodium AD pills and that seemed to help. Moments later I changed into my gear and 300 runners sang the National Anthem as we all toed the starting line under the 5:30 AM moonlit mountain sky. Soon we were off, ascending a steep 3.5 mile climb to start the race.

My longest run at one time since October was 7.41 miles. WEAK! How was my body going to fare with virtually no training? When would I start to blow up? How would I handle an 82 degree and sunny day? Would my Orangetheory Fitness workouts that got me through the winter in MN suffice? Was I even a real runner anymore? All these thoughts and more raced through my head as I started the ascent up the mountain.

I felt great all through the first 21 miles. Many trail miles were spent cruising at a reasonable pace through the mountains as I watched the sunrise off in the distance. Seeing old friends at aid stations, making ginger ale and mountain dew cocktails, and slamming freeze pops were all a welcome reprieve every 4 to 6 miles. Then Colon Hollow hit. Appropriately named, this is where the race really starts and my infamous blow ups usually occur. Brenton, one of my long-time running buddies and I, worked together and got these miles done in a conservative yet steady pace. The legendary Apple Orchard falls climb was next. It's the hardest part of the course and also the most beautiful. It hits you right around mile 26 when your body is already trashed. To add to the fun, it's over 3 straight miles of straight climbing up a mountain. On a hot day like yesterday the one saving grace was the ample waterfalls to jump in and cool

off. Usually at this point my body is so trashed I barely notice how breathtakingly beautiful the falls are. Thanks to the waterfalls and my ghetto Spotify beats I made it up the tough climb. At this point I was running solo and I knew I had about 5 miles to go until the finish. My body was destroyed and my complete lack of training became painfully evident. I thought to myself "you got what you deserved for not training". It hurt to move but onwards I pressed. The rest was downhill. "Ignore the pain and suck it up you", I kept telling myself. Soon I was close the finish. Two girls flew by me. UGHH I felt so weak and untrained. I was just double-chicked. At least it didn't happen in plain sight of the race director/spectators. As I turned the corner past the half broken infamous black squirrel sign I saw the finish line. Moments later I had crossed and was picking out which color of Patagonia finisher shorts I wanted.

Running through the picturesque Blue Ridge Mountains on the breathtaking Promise Land course yesterday was special. I did a lot more personal reflection than in most races. Spotify stayed off until mile 27, and my conversations with other runners were limited. The wildflowers were out in full force, the trees were green with their leaves, and the waterfalls were rushing. I was reminded about how spring time inspires us to begin again. On a personal level, the past fall/winter brought many unforeseen challenges. Both of my grandparents passed away within weeks of each other, my sister moved permanently overseas, several unexpected changes at work, and a long, cold MN winter made training conditions tougher than planned. Was yesterday a fast time for me? That's a resounding NO. One of my slowest actually. Thoughts of gratitude were plentiful yesterday as I reflected on how grateful I am to have a healthy body to do this crazy stuff. It's a gift from God. Visiting my friends and trail community in Lynchburg is always a highlight. The sign of good friends are ones that you see once a year, but you can pick up right where you left off. The community behind ultra-running is what makes it so special.

There's nothing like an ultra-marathon to remind me that life isn't always an easy ride. There are times when things go well and times when they don't. However, we decide how we react to the highs and the lows in life. But one thing is for sure, keep pressing on and putting one foot in front of the other. You'll be glad you did and the finish line is always worth it.

Happy Trails! 🦶

-Chicken Boy (Chris)