

My Race Report

My name is Leah Sutherland and I can now call myself an ultramarathon runner.

Until about a few months ago, I didn't know what an ultramarathon was. Before the first of the year, I had not even attempted to run anything over five miles consecutively. On January 1, 2023, I made up my mind that I wanted to challenge myself and run a marathon. I made a training program for myself, modeling it off of whatever I could find on google and pinterest. About a month into my training, a friend put a bug into my ear to run an ultramarathon. To me, the thought of a marathon was intimidating enough. Running anything over that was just for crazy people, in my opinion. After a couple weeks of him continuing to tell me how amazing, fun, exciting, awesome and wonderful these ultras were, my "fear of missing out" kicked in and I decided to give it a shot.

Due to the fact that I am from Florida and there aren't many mountains, hills or rocky terrain there, I had virtually no experience even hiking in the mountains, much less attempting to run. I started going on trails about mid-February, and almost every Saturday since, I've been attempting to run in the mountains. I did a lot of falling, twisting ankles, bruising and bleeding, but I kept going out there to attempt to prepare myself for what seemed like an impossible task ahead of me. I learned so much along the way. 1.) tips and tricks to get some speed going downhill without falling or twisting an ankle. 2.) eating and drinking the entire run is essential, 3.) compression sleeves aren't just for old people and pregnant women, 4.) Aquafor goes everywhere, 5.) never underestimate the weather changes in the mountains, 6.) and always carry toilet paper or wipes.

Friday night I arrived at the campgrounds feeling the full spectrum of emotions. I ate some pizza, had a full plate of desserts and listened to Dr. Horton tell the girls there was no way the female record could be beat this year. (which it was) To add to my nerves, I realized Friday night that my period had started unexpectedly, which, for me, typically brings pretty bad cramps and very low energy for about a day and a half. Until this point, the longest I had run was about 21 miles, so my mind was racing with questions like, "Will my legs be able to withstand almost 14 more miles? Will my cramping and low energy prevent me from adding this kind of mileage to my body today? I've heard of people's body and legs just giving out on them, what if that happens to me?" and on and on. I tried to quiet my mind for a night of sleep, but sleep was few and far between for the remainder of the night.

Saturday morning, I woke up about 4 AM to try to wake up, stretch, check in and get dressed for the race. My mindset going in was to have fun, encourage others, do the best I can do, and make it a good experience for myself and those around me. We sang the national anthem and were off. The first three miles were hot, sweaty uphill miles. I found a friend I had made on a training run and ran with her for a while. My spirits were high. I was making jokes, singing and feeding off of everyone else's nervous and excited energy. The sun started coming up and I felt great, until about mile 6 when I felt the all too familiar feeling in my stomach. I found the perfect hiding spot off the trail and pooped in the woods. For the sake of trying to be a lady and not dwell on this part too much I'll try to make this short, but let me tell you, I have never felt so wild and thrilled out in the woods before that. I was only six miles in, but I felt like I had made it at that point. Exhilarating. Freeing. Empowering. Anyways, I trekked on, still in good spirits and feeling strong. Didn't dwell on the miles I had gone or had left, just kept "hiking the uphills and running the flats and downhills". The scenery was beautiful. All of the leaves were a beautiful neon green that made some parts of the trail feel like a dream. It felt like such a blessing to have the ability to cover that amount of beautiful scenery in just one day. About mile 15, the rain came. It torrentially down

poured for a while. I came to an aid station and grabbed a few pierogis and French toast sticks and took off. One of the highlights of this race for me was running through the pouring rain, splashing mud, and eating my pierogis. Body exhaustion started to hit me right around what I think was mile 26, right before the hardest climb of the race. Three miles of steep hiking which I knew led me to a beautiful waterfall and overlook. I kept that in the back of my mind as I hiked with as much power as my aching ankles and knees had. I finally got to the last aid station of the race. A little over five miles left to go. My legs and coordination were shot and my stomach hurt, but I made it this far so there was no walking or stopping for me. The last three miles were painful with every step down the loose gravel descent. I kept a steady pace and ran for what felt like 17 more miles on this road until I finally saw the cheering crowd. I pulled what little energy I had left and picked up the pace until I was running at, what I felt, was the fastest sprint my body has every run. In reality it was probably not much faster than a slow jog, but at that point it felt like a record-breaking sprint. I ran until I reached the finish line and finally let my body come to a stop. I had finished the race in seven hours and twenty-two minutes.

Although I didn't finish in the astounding, record-breaking, first-time ultra runner, winning time that the competitive side of me wanted to accomplish, I finished something that most people in their life will never attempt and I gave it my all. I finished what I set out to do and I was proud of myself. I had a great experience and made new friends along the way. I learned so much about myself and how to push past what I thought were my limits.

Leah Sutherland