

## C&O CANAL 100 RACE REPORT

**“sometimes you eat the bear, sometimes the bear eats you”**

This past weekend I attempted to complete the C&O Canal 100 Race in Maryland. My goal was simple: complete the 100 mile challenge within the 30 hour time limit. Let me begin with the end: I decided to stop running at the 61 mile mark, and it wasn't because my body couldn't go any farther - - it was because my mind told my body not to go any farther, and I listened; I won't make that mistake again.

### **Build-up to Race Weekend**

My training consisted of running, biking and swimming. While running was the goal, swimming and biking helped me to build endurance and recover from long runs. The last 4 months of training have pretty much been structured like this: Monday run and swim; Tuesday run; Wednesday swim and bike; Thursday off (woohoo); Friday swim and bike; Saturday run long; Sunday run long.

In training I logged the following totals: 415 miles running; 438 miles biking; and 68,500 yards (39 miles) swimming. My longest training runs consisted of a 50 mile run locally and a 60 mile practice run in Maryland near the actual race course where I met Jeff and Larry (more about them later).

About two months before the race I began to feel tightness in my right calf. I found that the feeling went away shortly after starting a run, but that as time went by it took longer and longer for the pain to go away with each run. After my 60 mile training run something went very wrong and I couldn't get the pain to go away no matter how hard I tried. The worst day was when I went to a 400 meter track and couldn't get halfway around; that was one month before the race. My coach modified my plan to move all of my planned running into the pool because deep water pool running would not hurt my calf. I was beginning to think about deferring my race to next year.

About two weeks before the race my friend and multiple-time Ironman finisher Marlene suggested that I go to see a physical therapist that she had used in the past. She told me that he would understand what I needed and get it fixed in time for race day. I was a little skeptical but I went. I was in and out in 7 minutes, during which time he said I had peroneal tendonitis - - basically, he explained that there is a tendon that runs from the outside of my knee to the bottom of my foot, and that it was no longer sitting in the channel where it was supposed to be. He manipulated the tendon and muscle (painful!) and said I'd be fine in a day or two. As it turns out he was pretty much dead on accurate and without that trip to the doctor I wouldn't have made it to the start line on race day.

### **Race Weekend**



Cori and I drove to Camp Manidokan in Knoxville, Maryland on Friday. We arrived mid-afternoon and checked in at the cabin we'd reserved at Manidokan. I was one of the first to check in and get my bib so I went back to the cabin to relax for awhile. This is the check-in and as far as I could tell the only sign that there was a race going on...that is code for it was a very low-key crowd, no sponsors, no fanfare. I think that may be typical of ultramarathon events.

Many of the other runners slept in their cars or in small tents but I am glad that I had a “bed” to lay down on, as well as heat. This picture shows where people parked and slept in their cars and also the area where the race began.



After a few hours Cori and I decided to drive around to a few of the aid stations where she could later come to see me if time permitted. The race director did an excellent job providing driving directions to the various spectator accessible aid stations and after an hour or so we returned to camp for dinner.

Although I never do so, I attended the pre-race athlete dinner largely because there were no other options locally and I thought it might be low-key enough that I wouldn't get intimidated by the other athletes - - that's why I never go to the pre-race Ironman dinners. The dinner was really well executed, and I ate pasta with chicken, some bread and iced tea. I sat with Jeff and Larry and another couple. I was the only person at the table who hadn't run 100 miles before, but everyone was pretty relaxed and all were encouraging so it didn't get to me.

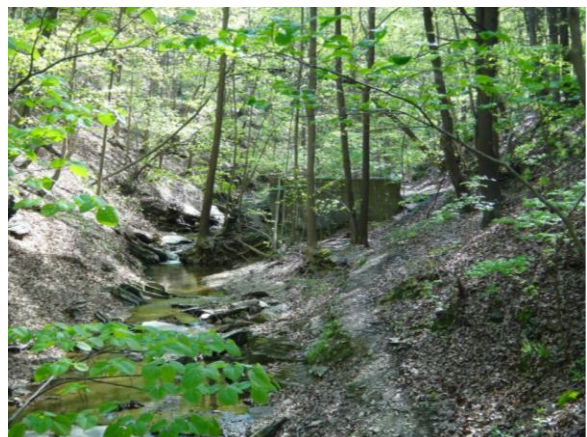
The race director made a short talk about last minute course changes, advised that some other events might be on the course at the same time, said that there was a 100% chance of rain in the forecast, and asked previous finishers to give brief advice about the race. The only thing that really surprised me were the questions about bears on the course; apparently it was a real possibility, and many people carried bear whistles and intended to play music at night to keep the bears at bay.

On my way out of dinner I was introduced to a few guys from the South Jersey area. While they certainly meant well, they threw a ton of advice at me in rapid fire fashion and a lot of it was aimed at how to win the race. My goal was to finish, not win, and the conversation was intimidating. I blocked it out of my mind as best as I could and went back to the cabin to go to sleep for the night.

## **Race Day**

I woke up to my alarm Saturday morning. I had already prepared my race day gear as well as the two “drop” bags that you are permitted on the course. I got dressed, put on all my gear and headed to the race start which was only a few hundred yards away. It was cold enough to see your breath but looked to be like it would warm up just enough to be perfect running weather during the day. A few short speeches, a 15 minute delay and then we were off.

The course consisted of a short run around an open field and then a descent down a steep hill and a stream crossing. This is a picture of the stream at the bottom of the climb down. In previous years they have allowed the use of a rope to get down and up the hill but this year they eliminated the rope and made it “easier” but creating “steps”. I never saw the previous version, but this version of the hill was hard enough



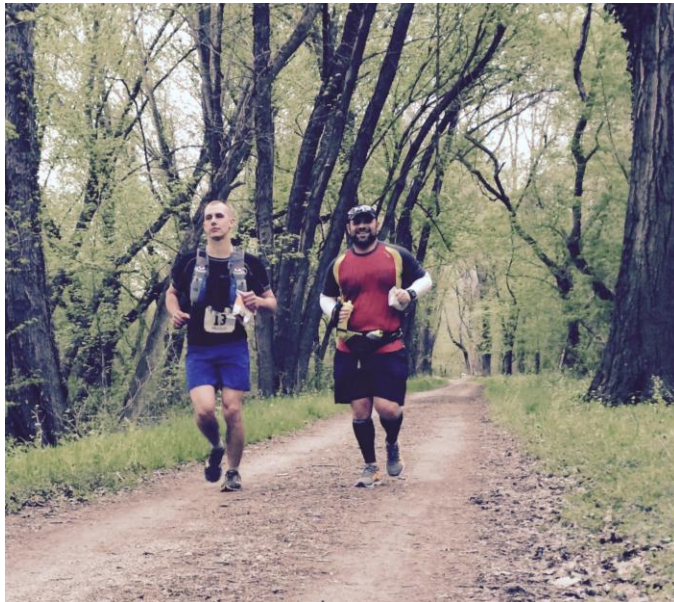
for me! After the climb down and stream crossing the race is pretty much 100% on the C&O canal towpath – straight, flat and groomed.

I ran the first five miles or so with Jeff and Larry (the guys I met on my longest training run). I knew Jeff would go out faster than I wanted, so I made peace with letting Jeff go on ahead and had Larry's company for the next 20 miles or so. It was great to have Larry there - - he was both experienced and an interesting person to speak with. Eventually I realized Larry was carrying me and I needed to convince him to go on without me. After a quick goodbye Larry went ahead to run his race and I added in more and more frequent walk intervals. Here is a pic of me at about mile 15...



For me it is almost like clockwork that miles 20-30 are difficult. It is almost like my mind and body think "OK, the marathon is almost over" and then realize that it is only 25% of the way to the finish. I was really arguing with myself about what to do, and one runner heard me talking to myself and told me to keep going (I didn't even realize I was talking out loud). About that time Cori showed up on her bike. I told her I was thinking of dropping and she let me talk through it out loud. I continued moving forward and eventually decided to go aid station to aid station, something like an hour or two hours at a time, and reevaluate at each aid station. It is funny how things work, I had mentally decided that I'd be dropping out at the next aid station where Cori was supposed to be, but when I got there, she wasn't there. Turns out I arrived sooner than she expected and couldn't get there in time, so I just continued on because there was no real way to get back without a ride. By the time I saw her at the next aid station things had taken a better turn...

At about mile 30 I started running with a guy named Lucas that I had been chatting with on and off for the first 30 miles. Lucas (or Luke as I later called him as we became fast friend) was part of a five man Navy SEAL team that started out together but were slowly dropping out of the race. Luke had attempted this race before but dropped at mile 70. He was going strong (he's a Navy SEAL after all) but beginning to suffer from Achilles pain. Luke was in a better mental state than I was, and I think I was in a better physical state than he was. We worked together for a while and he definitely helped with my spirits.



At mile 40 or so my friend Kerry arrived - - she drove down from New Jersey to run a few miles with me and ended up getting more than she bargained for!

Kerry, Luke and I ran for another 10 miles or so and then Luke had to drop. And then the rain came. And then the sun set and the

headlamps came out. And then the rain turned to sleet. And it was dark. And cold. And although I was on an upswing mentally just moments before, everything began to drain away as I became uncomfortably cold and wet. I'd been diligent about changing clothes and gear as necessary but it was impossible to stay dry and warm.

I rolled into the aid station at mile 53 and knew I had 7 miles back to Manidokan and the turnaround to go back out for the final 40 miles. Kerry made me a deal - - she would stick with me for 7 more miles if I promised to finish the race. I told her I'd do my best but just couldn't know how I'd feel 7 miles later. She understood and graciously continued anyway. And one mile later, as it was now pouring and sleeting and pitch dark, I told her I would finish those 7 miles and then call it a night. At first, she tried as hard as she could to change my mind. And then she too understood. It was no longer fun. The cost of the race was beginning to outweigh the benefit. Here is a picture of me just before the rain came...



And here is one of me just after the rain began but even before it got cold and dark.



A picture is worth a thousand words!

At about 10:30PM we reached Manidokan at mile 60 and had to cross the same stream and ascend the same hill I had come down 13 hours earlier. It was considerably more difficult in the cold and rain and dark and it took about 10 minutes to get back to camp. When I got to the top of the hill I knocked on the door of my cabin and told Cori I was dropping. She was relieved as she had apparently been worried for some time. I walked to the aid station and told them about my decision.

The race director looked at me and asked if I wanted to be talked out of it. I told him I just wasn't having fun any more and he said that's what it is all about and he could tell from my face that my day was over. He took my bib and my attempt was done.

I had run from 7:15AM to 10:30PM, traveled 61 miles and eaten who knows how many nutritional supplements, drank gallons of water and other fluids, taken many milligrams of salt tabs and Motrin, ate some bad tasting ginger soup at mile 25, and ate one very, very good sweet potato burrito at an aid station around mile 49.

### **Lessons Learned**

1. 200 people registered for the event. 125 showed up at the start line on race day. Of the 125 who made it to the start line only 69 people finished the race. I am in good company.
2. My family and friends support me no matter what the outcome.
3. Ultramarathons are much more about what is above your neck than what's below it.
4. A lot of things can go right but even then I may not make it to the finish line. A lot of things can go wrong and I may be able to get there anyway.
5. There's a reason they invented cars, but it is still pretty cool to be able to say that you can run from Philadelphia to New York City in just over a day!