Event: C&O Canal 100

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This is my first race report. I have written it with a focus on volunteers, runners, spectators and the ‘ultra’ spirit. I hope those I am thankful for will give this a read and know how much their support meant to me during this event!

Another 100 mile DNF! The streak is alive☹. The difficulty of completing a 100 mile run cannot be overstated for this guy. I am zero for four so far and I don’t see that changing! Of course I opined the same sentiment two years ago when I was zero for three! In each of my DNFs, I have found the upside and this DNF had the most upside by far. This time, I failed to complete the 100 mile distance at a race in my own backyard in front of so many running friends and family, all of whom were so supportive and committed to seeing me get it all together and finally claim that elusive 100 mile belt buckle! Their passion and commitment is the focus of this post.

The unselfish spirit of community so prevalent at all ‘ultra’ events was amplified for me during this event because I have some level of friendship with nearly everyone at each of the top-notch aid stations. I am fortunate to live in Frederick, MD where there is a wonderful, active, supportive, and selfless group of runners of all types – casual, hardcore, road, trail, ultra, speedsters, and whatever other kinds there are. The C&O Canal 100 race director, Lance Dockery, and volunteer coordinator, Bill Susa, both experienced ultra-runners, have been part of the local running scene for a long time. They, along with the enthusiastic, supportive, experienced, and uber-knowledgeable volunteers at the aid stations, are building the C&O Canal 100 into a stellar race! The race website provides the basic details – course description, weather statistics, logistics, etc…, but check out below for a personal and personalized account of the 2015 edition from the view of a back-of-the-pack and eventual DNF’er.

I know without doubt I cannot recall and comment on every person who had an impact on me during this event. Fear of excluding someone often prevents me from thanking anyone. Not this time! I want to thank those I can recall and I know those I may omit will know it is due solely to my ultra-induced fuzzy memory. Certainly not for a lack of appreciation.

My pre-race jitters were calmed by chatting with 100 mile veterans Jim Treece, Lisa Johnston, Eric Eller and John Godinet as well as first time 100 miler, Susan Erikson. They were inspiring and gave me confidence from the first step. All of them went on to finish this race. Lisa was first female and crushed her previous PR as did Jim Treece! Eric, John, and Susan finished despite the tough conditions. Because this course has some out-and-back components, I was able to see each of them multiple times on the course which was energizing! Too bad I didn’t see them at the finish☹

Between aid stations, I met many other supportive runners out on the course, a difficult thing to not do at an ultra. Some were acquaintances from previous races and some were new faces. Two Johns, one I last saw at Brunswick with a bum leg (hope you recovered) and one I stumbled with for our last 3 miles into Keep Tryst where we both benefited from the awesome volunteer crew (detailed below). There was Charlie, always ready with a little reassuring comment, who I leap frogged with for a long time until he pulled away with his slow and steady pace that my run/walk method couldn’t match. Keith, a longish-grayish-hair guy with an obviously good vibe kept me going with a friendly greeting each time I saw him. The first place guy was impressive and friendly. As he blew by me on his way up the last hill toward his 100 mile finish as I was rolling in for my 59 miles he thanked me for helping him find his way as he started to go off course. Can’t say I’ve ever been that close to the finish line with the winner☺ Ray Jackson was there on the towpath with some motivation, first with a startling shout from the shadows under the bridge at Harpers Ferry and then again at Keep Tryst aid station.

While the camaraderie on the trail with other runners is always helpful, the real nature of an ultra-event is on full display at the aid stations and the aid stations at this race are as good as it gets! In this race, I am so fortunate to know just about every person at every aid station which made each arrival special for me, but I could plainly see I didn’t get any unique or special treatment over any other runner. The volunteers in this event received each and every runner with enthusiasm, expertise and compassion.

The layout of this course lets the runners pass by the same aid stations multiple times beginning with Keep Tryst at the 25.7 mile mark. This is where my memory of aid station volunteers begins and ends for this event. Because I didn’t spend any time at Antietam and Dargan Bend in the first 25 miles, I have no memories about which to write. I can say I know these aid stations were as expertly staffed and committed to runner support as all other aid stations.

As the day wears on, time spent at an aid station tends to increase (at least for me). Thus my first visit to Keep Tryst was simply a quick food grab and hello to Gil, Paul, Telly, and Jeff. Little did I know I’d be there later that evening for a much longer visit. Rolling into Brunswick at 28.8, I was starting to fade a bit and beginning to think about what I needed to do when I arrived. I was slightly ahead of the planned schedule I had given to my daughter, Jillian, just in case she wanted to find me at Brunswick or Manidokan which I was not sure she would do. As I approached Brunswick, simultaneously I saw Jillian with her friend, Brianna, waiting for me and I heard volunteer Leah Perry shouting my name quite enthusiastically! You can’t not hear Leah if she wants you to hear her☺. That was a double shot of energy! The Brunswick aid station was a model of efficiency. They handed me my drop bag and began filling my pack with Tailwind within seconds, literally. They would have delivered my food as well, but I hadn’t yet decided what I wanted. There was just about everything you could need, but I only took a hand full of pretzel rods for the road. Rob Perry eyed me over and suggested a shot of coffee which was perfect at that moment!

Brunswick was a bustling area as this is one of only two places along the course with ample parking for spectators and crew. I was out quickly with new life thanks to the Perry’s and all of the volunteers. Also, I was excited that my daughter was getting into the event more than I expected. Turns out they had just missed me at Keep Tryst before meeting me at Brunswick. They were now planning to meet me at Lander Road! I was quite surprised and happy at that prospect. I did caution her on parking at the other locations, but since she is a local, I think she felt entitled to be anywhere on the canal she wished to be.

Even before I knew Jillian would be at Lander Road, I was looking forward to this aid station because I knew many of my trail friends were going to be there with unique food offerings and sincere encouragement. I was executing a particular run/walk time-based schedule during this section of the race and my arrival was spot on with my projection. I had talked the run/walk strategy over with John Leonardis, aid station captain, a couple of weeks before the event and he was obviously glad to see it was working so far. This was another brief aid station stay. Brendon topped off my Tailwind. Siobhan detailed the ingredients of the different, homemade food items of which there were so many. It was hard to make a choice, but I took the “sweet potato, maple syrup and something else I can’t remember” wrap to go. It rocked! Everyone had words of encouragement for me and off I went toward Noland’s Ferry.

My pace plan held true during the leg to Noland’s Ferry, the 1980’s themed aid station! I had some notion that I would be welcomed noisily and warmly there, but never would I have expected the enthusiastic reception I received from Crista, the Capella’s and everyone else! I kept my entry into this race on the down low which did create some surprise when I showed up at certain aid stations. Turns out nobody at Noland’s Ferry had any idea I was running, but since Jillian and Brianna had showed up ahead of time looking for me, the word was out and they had a little time prepare! Boy, was it loud as I approached! And boy, was it the 1980s when I got there☺. You’ll see what I mean when you check out the posts on Facebook. They took the 1980s theme seriously and they also took runner support seriously.

As at Brunswick, I was being catered to efficiently and thoroughly by Craig Capella and others. Drop bag in my hand, Tailwind in my pack, and food needs were the first order of business for this group of expert volunteers. Food was abundant here, but I have simple needs. I spied the grilled cheese sandwiches and had eyes for no other food! I did a shirt change here and I am fairly certain it was the first time Jillian and Brianna have seen someone apply body glide all over their chest and stomach! Thanks for not taking that picture, Crista! Once the hydration and food needs were taken care of, the group really focused on words of encouragement. Deb, Craig and Crista sent me on my way with optimism and energy!

On a very personal note, I really need to say how genuinely thrilled I am that Jillian and Brianna got the opportunity to get a glimpse of the support and friendship our local running community provides. While this fellowship is to be found at every aid station, I think it was most evident and hopefully impactful to them here at Noland’s Ferry. Thank you!

About a mile out, still on schedule, I started sensing my confidence and strength fading. This is the zone where the aid stations start to take on more importance. I was glad to be headed back through familiar territory. As I approached Lander Road, I saw Jillian with a different friend, Lauren, waiting for me! This time, I spent a bit longer at Lander Road mostly talking to Siobhan about what to eat. Usually not a good sign if I can’t figure it out on my own. We settled on a bag of watermelon and peeled clementines for me to carry and eat between small pieces of Cliff bar which I carried with me all day. Fruit was a great call! It provided refreshment and an energy lift. Jillian and Lauren walked with me for about half of a mile to discuss my arrival time at Brunswick. I was slowing just a tad.

As I approached the 50 mile mark at Brunswick, about a mile out, the dreaded rain began. It was still only a drizzle and I was still fairly warm when I arrived at the aid station. This time, in addition to Jillian and Lauren being there, Kelly Schultz was there. Kelly was to be my pacer later that night from mile 70 to mile 90. From mile 90 to the end Jillian and Brianna were planning to walk it in with me. With the three of them there and with everyone kind of jammed up under tarps to protect from the rain, I lost a little focus of who was actually working the aid station at this time. I saw the Perry’s and Tracy Machen, but I know there were others I can’t recall. The efficiency was still evident here despite the rain. Tons of food, drop bag service, sheltered chairs if needed, state of the art!

This might be where I made my mistake. I chose not to put on a long sleeve jacket and went with a vest. I think Kelly, Jillian and Lauren questioned that call. Probably should have listened to them! We all agreed I wouldn’t see anyone at any aid station until I hooked up with Kelly at mile 70 sometime in the middle of the night. Although the pizza Rob Perry offered looked quite good, I stocked up on grilled cheese and headed down the path not sensing just how cold and wet it would become.

At this time, I really believed I’d be back at Brunswick (miles 70 and 90), Lander Road (miles 74 and 86), and Noland’s Ferry (mile 80) in the wee and mid-morning hours of Sunday. Had I made it, I know I would have had the chance to see what these skilled crews of veteran volunteers had to offer the weary, suffering runners as they came through. I know they would have been awesome. In fact, I know they were awesome based on reports of runners that made it that far.

The leg between Keep Tryst and Brunswick is the shortest on the course, 3.2 miles. I made good time despite the deteriorating weather. This visit wasn’t much different than my morning pass through. This time I was colder, more tired and hungrier, but stayed just long enough to say hello and have Paul hook me up with a baggie full of cheese quesadillas for additional fuel on the long haul up to Camp Manidokan.

The final approach to Camp Manidokan required a rock-hopping, triple crossing of a wide stream followed by a half mile climb up a steep, muddy hill. Saturday morning, this was a piece of cake. At night, it was very well marked, but on spent knees in the rain, it was challenging! It just so happens as I made the turn off of the canal to handle the stream and hill, I bumped into the always upbeat Bill Susa! He was there marking the turn from the canal so it could be seen from space! He is always encouraging, but rarely more so than at this moment! We both felt if I could get to the top, eat and get out quickly, this was my day to complete a 100 mile run! I made it to the top, which was not at all easy, but the climb did my core body temperature some serious good. I actually felt warm, except for my hands, when I arrived.

Manidokan was a busy place full of help! I needed something to eat so Shaunte prepared a boca burger for me. She also let me put my cold, wet, gloved hands on the warm teapot as long as I could take the heat…that was nice! I needed someone to text Jillian and let her know the time I departed Manidokan so that she could let Kelly know when to be at Brunswick (mile 70) to pace me. Emily Clay was kind enough to handle that task. Emily was also the one to point me in the right direction as I departed☺. Someone else topped off my Tailwind again and I headed back out…down the hill. Turns out it took about twice as long to descend as to ascend because my knees were shot, so shot I couldn’t run much at all once I reached the canal.

After reaching the canal, as I was power walking my best around the puddles with cold rain and maybe even a little sleet coming down, I kept telling myself, “just get these 10 miles to Brunswick done and you’re good. Kelly is there. A jacket is there. Just get there!” My mind was pushing me, but my body wasn’t responding. I couldn’t maintain enough of a run/walk combination to keep my body heat up. The colder I got, the slower I moved and the sloppier my actions became. I knew I wasn’t eating or drinking, but I was too cold to do anything about it except keep putting it off. About this time, I caught up with a guy named John who looked even colder and was moving as badly as me. This, I think, was a fortuitous crossing of paths. He had already kind of decided to drop at the next aid station, Keep Tryst. I, at this time, was still thinking if I could get to Brunswick I’d be ok. We walked together for the last 3 miles. He admitted he had been hoping to find someone to walk with and I realized I needed that as well. Neither of us was eating or drinking and both of us were not walking terribly fast or straight. The more we talked, the more I could tell I wasn’t altogether lucid. If not for hearing myself talk, I might have thought I was in better condition than I actually was.

We entered the aid station together (mile 66) and it wasn’t long at all before I could sense John and I were receiving a bit more ‘observation’ than what I am accustomed to at an aid station. Sheri saw I needed another layer and quickly created a trash bag poncho for me and helped me put it on. I asked for some vegetable broth and I couldn’t hold the cup still enough to actually drink it. Then I asked for a cheese quesadilla and I simply couldn’t eat it. I took a small bite and chewed and chewed, but it seemed my body wasn’t going to even let me try to put it in my stomach. After a few minutes of standing and shaking in front of a heater, Jim and Sheri convinced me to go ahead and sit in a chair. Immediately, they covered me with a space blanket and another heavier blanket on top of that one. John was in the chair next to me. Jim and Sheri were very attentive to both John and I while they dealt with the other runners and pacers entering the station. I got to see some interesting and impressive things while I was sitting in that chair deciding to drop or not drop.

Paul and Gil did some serious blister repairs on someone’s foot. In my dazed state, it seemed like surgery! The way the entire crew engaged with each runner was very caring, yet I think somehow strategically focused on truly ensuring no one would leave in danger. That is a tough thing to do and from what I saw, this group did it flawlessly. I have to believe if I had decided not to drop, they may have had to make that decision for me. I am glad I did not put them in that spot!

I did decide to drop after about 30 minutes of shivering under those blankets in front of the heater, but now I had the issue of my pacer, Kelly Schultz, waiting 3.2 miles away in Brunswick. Bad planning here as I didn’t have her number☹. I really needed her back at Keep Tryst to take me back to Manidokan. Jim was able to get a text out to the aid station captains and after a while - I lost track of time at this point - Kelly was standing in front of me! I felt horrible for messing up her overnight 20 mile training run (which would have been a walk anyway!), but she was ultra-cool about it, because she does ultras too! She hung for a few minutes before John and I could muster the gumption to leave the warmth of the chairs and take a walk to her car. As we walked out of the aid station, every one there was just so supportive. I want them to know how thankful I am for their efforts, skill and dedication.

Kelly drove us to Manidokan with the heat on full blast. She must have been roasting, but she did it for us. She dropped John at the pavilion so he could call his wife and she drove me the 150 yards to my car so I didn’t have to walk. She remembered to text Jillian so she wouldn’t show up in a few hours to do the last 10 miles. Not the way she planned to spend her evening, but she kept her focus on the runner as all of the volunteers do and I thank her for that!

I sat in my car with the heat on high for about 20 minutes, then drove up to the pavilion to find Lance Dockery so that I could tell him that the race and volunteers were awesome. I also told him Sheri and Jim at Keep Tryst might have actually saved my life. That is not hyperbole, I was in bad shape and they knew what to do and they executed perfectly. I imagine the crews at each aid station may have had similar experiences during this race and I bet they executed perfectly as well. I know I would have been in good hands had this occurred at any aid station on this course. All of the volunteers are simply the best.

If I ever decide to try another 100 mile run, this will be the one. If I am not running, I’ll be volunteering!