

LAUREL VALLEY TRAIL RUN

August 11, 2007

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Laurel Valley is an infamous trail run put on by the Runners From Hell running club each August. This year, it felt like the venue was moved to Hell rather than the usual location in the upper northwest region of South Carolina as it has been noted that this was the hottest year ever. This race is unique in that it is purely about the run as Claude (the RD) provides no wicking t-shirts, goodie bags or even aid stations (the remoteness of the race precludes aid stations). The low-key nature of this race is a nice "break" from typical races and allows new generations of ultra runners to get a glimpse of the way the sport used to be (all about the running). You carry everything

you need to sustain you on your journey including food, water purification (you drink from the many streams along the course), electrolyte tablets and last but certainly not least, a heaping dose of mental resolve and a dash of stupidity. So what do you get for completing this race? Well, you get a t-shirt and some Coke and pretzels at the finish. You can also order a handmade wooden plaque but have to pay extra for it. What this race lacks in swag is more than made up for in scenic trails that challenge a runners limits forcing you to look deep within yourself for strength on multiple occasions. For me, I gained a new form of mental toughness and confidence that can only be developed by going through such an adventure.

On Friday evening John, Mason and I met up with Byron Backer, Mark Long, Jim Musselman, Stephen Morris and Mohammed Idibi at a local pizza place to fuel up. Afterwards we all headed to Byron's house as he was kind enough to let us all crash there. We spent the rest of the evening reminiscing and talking about past and future races and finalizing our preparations. Everyone turned in early as we had to be on our way before 4:00 AM to drop off cars at the finish and make our way to the start. Once there I talked with several others including Jeff McGonnell, John Teague and Bill Keane about the course. I wanted to be certain to show proper respect to a course I had little knowledge of. Key was to stay hydrated, eat properly and follow white blazes. How hard can that be?

We took off promptly at 6:30 AM and I ran most of the first 2 hours or so with John Teed. We pushed a little hard early to try and take advantage of the cooler temps and downhill terrain. Within an hour I began to feel a blister on my right heel. It didn't hurt too bad and there was nothing I could do about it anyways so I just pressed on. All went fine until I got off course and lost John for the remainder of the run. I rumbled around on the wrong side of some whitewater falls for about 25 minutes or so until I finally saw a backpacker on a trail above me and realized where to go. Next I realized that I was getting low on water so I tried to slow the pace. This wasn't too hard as I had to go under a number of fallen trees and had some nice climbs to conquer. Eventually I got to a water source, filled up and went along my way. Several runners passed me in the next hour including Richard Schick who was going for his 10th finish. He looked strong and had a good race on a tough day. I continued to make decent progress but was beginning to feel the effects of pushing too hard early and knew I was behind on fluids. I was eating well and taking an S! Cap (341 mg sodium) every 45 minutes.

My blister had stopped hurting and at my next water stop I found out why, my right sock was red on the heel from where the blister had popped. It looked unsightly but again there was nothing I could do so I kept going. Eventually as I was heading down some stairs I rolled my right ankle, which I had injured during a run up Mt. Mitchell last month. It hurt but was fine until I rolled it again as Mark Long and Richard Sexton were passing me. Mark asked if I was okay and I said I was fine and he moved on. He and Richard also had a good race. Fortunately I had no more problems with the ankle and ran alone for most of the next couple of hours until I met up with Bill Keane, Leon Harmon and Lynn DiFiore as I was getting water. The views to this point had been spectacular with several suspension bridges and waterfalls. I ran with them for awhile and we got off course again briefly but soon found our way back. We continued on but I was really starting to struggle in the heat. I was amazed at how strong Bill and Leon were despite the temps. I took it as proof of the benefit of experience. I hooked up with Lynn and we ran most of the rest of the race together. Eventually we caught up with Bill, Leon and Tyler Peek. Brian Beduhn also caught up with us. Bill, Leon and Brian ran ahead while Tyler, Lynn and I got some more water. At one point we encountered some backpackers who were really cheering folks on. That was a big help for me as I was pretty low on energy at that point.

When we got to the biggest river crossing on the course, the Horsepasture River, Lynn stopped to get in the water for a bit. I should have stopped but ran on to try and make up some time. We continued to leapfrog with Tyler for a bit until he finally left us for good. At this point I was having to stop and rest for a couple of minutes in an effort to cool down. Why I never got in the water baffles me. I knew that any hope of a good time was long gone but I didn't really care since I was using this as a good training run for the GEER 100K in September. I justified that the extra time on my feet would serve me well. Whatever; the things you say to yourself during these runs never ceases to amaze me.

I enjoyed talking with Lynn who now lives in Colorado and volunteered at Hardrock this year. She lives near the course and it was nice to get a first hand account of the scenery there. Eventually, we made it to an intersection in the trail that gave us an indication of what we had left (probably about 4 miles or so on mostly flat trail). We slogged our way through until we saw the sign indicating it was 1.7 miles to the parking area. Lynn mentioned that it was farther. It felt like it was 10 miles as opposed to the 1.7 posted on the sign. Once we crossed the final bridge over the Whitewater Falls, I was in awe of the beauty of that section. Next up was a scramble over some boulders and then several switchbacks up to the stairs that take you to the top. All told, you gain about 1,000 feet in elevation over the last mile of the course! I had to stop and rest a couple of times on the climb as I was whipped. Lynn ran on as I sat down and wheezed while I searched for energy. Finally I reached the top and ran down the asphalt walkway to the finish in 10:26.

After the finish when I took off my shoes I had some of the worst heel blisters I have ever seen. Others commented that they were the worst they had ever seen. Three days later and they still look like something out of a horror film. This was a very tough race, one that I underestimated but I learned a lot as a result of the experience. That alone makes it worthwhile. In my opinion this race is harder than Horton's Mountain Masochist which is 20 miles farther. Although very difficult, the experience makes me a better runner (a reward much better than any medal or finisher's award) and Coke and pretzels have never tasted so good.

