

Cherry Shot on the Animal's Course: A First Time 100-Mile Adventure by Bedford Boyce

Late Fall 2006 – Two of my good friends and I decide that we want to go for a 100-mile finish in 2007. After a bit of research we decide that Massanutten is the place to try this. Many would say: “What are you thinking?” or “That is not a good idea” while others would say: “That was my first 100” or “Just keep moving and you will be fine”. That last quote turned out to be quite prophetic...

Newbie Goes the Distance

To some extent, I am a bit of a “newbie” to ultra running having run my first ultra in late July 2006 (Big Butt 50K in SC). However, since that first race in July, I have managed to complete three more 50K's (Frosty 50K, Holiday Lake and Bel Monte), GEER 100K and Mountain Masochist. Though relatively new to the sport, I felt that I had learned a lot and was ready to attempt what I viewed as the ultimate challenge. John and DC, two of my friends who were planning to run this with me were more experienced endurance athletes so I knew I had my work cut out as far as training goes. Unfortunately, DC would get injured in March and be unable to run with John and I. Being the trooper that he is, he agreed to make the trip and crew us for the entire race.

I am not going to bore everyone with all of the aspects of my training but will share a “mistake” that I made. Although unavoidable, not making any of the training runs on the course was a mistake on my part. This would have benefited me (although it may well have scared me away) by preparing me for the unrelenting nature of the course.

I am amazed at how quickly the months flew by and before I knew it, we were on the way up to Front Royal on May 18. As we drove up the weather continued to get worse as the dark clouds in the distance never got further away. Weather was bit of concern for me as it can be so unpredictable in Virginia this time of year. I figured it would be very humid during the day and cooler at night so I prepared accordingly.

We arrived at the Ranch, attended the briefing and socialized with some other runners. The weather report at the briefing was not promising – thunderstorms possible from midnight to 9:00 AM. Couple this with the rainstorm commencing outside and it looked like we were in for a muddy, slippery and wet couple of days. We grabbed a bite to eat in town, attended to a couple of last minute details and then headed back to the Super 8 to finalize our preparations. We talked a good bit with other runners including David Snipes, Mohammed Idibi and Brian Beduhn. Mo and Brian were also from North Carolina and would also be going for their first 100 mile finish. Eventually, we crashed and before long it was time to head to the start. John and I caught a ride with Mo and Brian so DC could sleep in a bit since he had a long day and night and following day ahead of him.

Let's ROCK!!!

The weather turned out to be perfect for running. The high would be about 68 on Saturday and warmer on Sunday but no rain!! I was not near as nervous as I usually am before the start of a

race. Perhaps because I couldn't comprehend the enormity of what I what I was about to undertake. Perhaps because I truly had no other goal than to finish. Sure, I had certain times where I wanted to be at various points in the race but truly, 35:59 was the goal and anything under it was gravy.

I don't really recall the start other than everyone started running at precisely 5:00 AM. John and I settled into a steady pace and planned to run the entire race together. We figured (hoped) that ones low point would be overcome by the other energy and so forth. Either way, at this point all we had to do was run.

The first several miles went by uneventfully as we were trying to take it easy on the climbs but really hit the flats and downhills. Our thought was to try and "put some in the tank" so that we would have a bit of cushion later. This proved to be a very good idea for us and it felt good to really run some early on. I was amazed at the sheer beauty of the views along the course, particularly at sunrise. Seeing the sun come up along the ridgeline confirmed that I made the right choice in choosing MMT as my first 100 miler.

Habron Gap (24.4 miles) to Camp Roosevelt (33.3 miles)

We would not see DC until AS 5 (Habron Gap) at mile 24. We knew there was a big climb after this AS and planned to spend some time at this AS to really fuel up and hydrate well. I also grabbed my sunglasses and Ipod and we were off towards Camp Roosevelt. As we climbed, a variety of music filled my ears: punk rock from my skateboarding days including the Dead Kennedy's and Sex Pistols, other alternative bands including Flogging Molly and Primus and even a little ska which reminded me of my college days. The music really helped in this section. In my opinion, this is the hardest climb of the race. It IS the first major one, it is in the heat of the day and it just seems to go on forever. I have wavered on which was the hardest climb (they all seem hard) but I really think this was the toughest. We made pretty good time though and really had a lot of fun on the downhills after the climb. We began holding back some since we knew we had a long way to go. This was the only portion of the race where my stomach started giving me a little grief. As for hydration/nutrition, I had a simple plan: 2 GU gels per hour and 30 oz. of diluted Clif drink per hour. I maintained this (avoiding solid foods) through mile 58 and then planned to switch to water and E-caps with some solid food mixed in.

I wasn't sure what the problem was but I decided to visit the toilets at Camp Roosevelt and hydrate really well. I also put some Icy Hot on my legs as they were starting to ache just a bit.

Beware of the GRIM SWEEPER

One odd occurrence in the early part of the race was my fear of the cutoffs. I had read that Bill Van Antwerp (aka Van Animal and Grim Sweeper) was responsible for warning/pulling runners who were close to or over the time cutoff. I had read that when you see him at an aid station, beware and get going. While we were at Camp Roosevelt, the Van Animal showed up and put me in a panic even though it turns out I was over 3 hours ahead of the cutoff. This "Mania" of mine would stay with me all the way to Bird Knob. Not sure why I couldn't shake it but it had to be incredibly annoying to John since he had to listen to all this crap.

Camp Roosevelt (33.3 miles) to 211 East (48.0 miles)

I left Camp Roosevelt feeling like a new man and although we spent a long time at the AS, I was glad that I did. John and I began running with David Snipes in this section and would do so through 211 East. On the way to Gap Creek, Sniper showed us where we would rejoin this trail later after leaving 211 East for the second time. We noticed the trail was pretty muddy here and expected it to be much harder when we came back in a few hours. Eventually we came to the Gap Creek/Jawbone AS (38.9 miles). We noticed that Jay Finkle was dropping due to injuring his back in a fall. It was unfortunate because Jay looked to be having a strong race. I also had DC call my wife Joy to let her know that I was doing okay since the website update likely had not begun yet. I also went ahead and took a couple of Tylenol both for a headache and for some minor pain in my quads. Eventually, we began to make our way towards 211 East.

On the way we came across Gary Knipling, a VHTRC legend of sorts. I had emailed with Gary but had never met him and it was great to finally meet him as we started up Kern's Mountain. I was feeling pretty low at this point and it was all I could do to keep moving. I recall thinking, how can I feel this bad with not even half of the race complete? I managed to just put my head down and kept pushing on to one of the "highlights" of the race – Waterfall Mountain. The good news was it was a downhill, the bad news was it was a STEEP downhill. So steep, you couldn't walk but were forced to run. My quads screamed at me as I made my way down but eventually we made it to the gravel road and headed to 211 East. At this point we were passed by a couple of runners including Mike Mason and Brennen Wysong. I have gotten to know Mike since his move to Charlotte and he would go on to a strong 10th place finish. The notable thing about his performance was that he has been somewhat consumed by his new job so his training has been on the light side. Brennen's report from 2006 was one of my favorites and it was good to see him have such a strong race. We rolled into 211 East and met up with DC a little before 6:00 PM.

I met Sophie face to face finally and she offered me a fruit cup and tons of encouragement. While I was still worried about cutoffs she assured me I could walk it in and break 36 hours. After a bit of rest, John and I headed out to Bird Knob.

211 East (48 miles) to Bird Knob to 211 East (58 miles)

This 10 mile section was really tough for me. The first 2 miles or so (and last 2 miles or so) is runnable as is the fire road into the aid station. Progress was sooooo slow for me in this section. I think it seemed so much harder due to the other runners coming back by you. Faces I recognized were Byron Backer, Ed C. and near the top, Brian Beduhn. John went on ahead as he was making much better progress than I and eventually we met up at the top of Bird Knob. I had some very tasty soup and some Gatorade, then topped off my bottles and we headed back. We had our flashlights with us (we grabbed these instead of our headlamps) for the trip down. This proved to be a big mistake as we were unable to run the last section since we could not see clearly enough. We probably cost ourselves a good 15 minutes or so here but we got back to 211 East where we would pick up Eva Rosvold, my pacer. I changed my contacts, grabbed a long sleeve shirt and my headlamp here and switched over to water and e-caps for hydration. We spent a long time at this aid station but it was probably necessary looking back.

Midnight in the Garden of ROCKS! – 211 East to Edinburg Gap (75.9 miles)

The nighttime portion was here and for the next several hours, we would traverse the course by the light of headlamps with glow sticks as our beacons. The trip to Gap Creek II was pretty laborious given all the mud and the funk I was in. We definitely walked more than we ran, costing us precious time we could have used later. I tried to remember that these things are supposed to be hard and that I was in uncharted territory. Nevertheless, I was getting tired and decided that I would drink a cup of Coke at each aid station to try and give me a boost. Eventually we rolled into Gap Creek II where again, we spent a ton of time in the aid station. I ate some quesadillas and drank some water, filled up and then we were on our way. I forgot to drink the Coke but the next aid station was only a couple of miles away.

We began the climb up Jawbone again and new that we would go straight at the top rather than bear left towards Kern's like we did earlier in the day. We again met up with Gary Knipling and ran with him some as we headed to Moreland Gap. My feet were bothering me a bit as were John's so we again made an extended stop. I cleaned off my feet, powdered them (thanks for Zeasorb Mo) and changed my socks. It felt so much better but I could not pull myself from the chair. We sat for probably 30 or 40 minutes here. Part of me was "scared" because I knew that Short Mountain loomed. I did drink a cup of Coke to try and wake up and eventually we started on our way a little after 2:00 AM.

The section over Short Mountain had been on my mind all day. This was the one section that I thought I would need my Ipod. However, after about two hours earlier in the day, the Ipod became an annoyance and I never used it again in the race. I knew this would be a tough section because: a) it was at night, b) I had almost 70 miles on my legs and c) this is MMT where every section is tough.

We started to make pretty decent time and lugged away over the rocks. The sky was clear at first but then we did start to get a little rain. Mercifully it did not last long. For a good hour or so we were part of a "train" comprised of about 10 runners/pacers, including Hans Dieter-Weisshaar. It was fun talking with him about his many races (he is scheduled to run his 100th 100 miler at Hardrock this year). He had a tough day but went on to an emotional finish in spite of a severe list to his right side. In this section I became very discouraged as we were moving at a snails pace. Eventually, Hans and others passed us and went on. John latched on and followed them all the way to Edinburg Gap. Eva was a bit of a saviour here. She had me sit down, eat a gel, take an E-cap, drink some water and just RELAX a bit. I guess I was being a bit hard on myself. I also changed the batteries in my headlamp and we soon began moving again. Eva was using her pacing duty as a nighttime training "run" for her upcoming 100 mile run at Bighorn.

Soon enough we could see daylight coming up and I did get some sense of renewal. It was hard to believe that I had been going for over 24 hours and still had a marathon to go. I ate some of the yummy potato soup at Edinburg and drank a couple of cups of Coke. I kept my long sleeve shirt as I was a little chilled. My spirits were high for a bit until I realized we had another 8+ mile section to conquer.

Edinburg Gap (75.9 miles) to Woodstock Tower (84.1 miles)

This was another tough section for me. It was hard for me to find the strength or willingness to run much at this point. It was starting to get warm and I knew that Eva would need to leave soon since it was taking us much longer than I expected. She hung in there and said that she wanted to try and make the finish with us. I didn't think this section would ever end but finally (exactly 3 hours after starting it) the aid station came into view and we trotted into the aid station. I was becoming a little concerned about the cutoffs and it had nothing to do with the Van Animal being there. I knew that we had to start moving quicker since we burned up so much time on the last four sections. I dropped my long sleeve shirt, filled my bottles and dropped my hydration pack and we were off. To my surprise, Eva came trotting down behind John and I. She decided to get a ride back to 211 but then realized that DC would not be able to get to Powell's Fort in time if he took her so she ran this next section with us.

Woodstock Tower (84.1 miles) to Powell's Fort (89.3 miles)

This was the section where I gave the most pathetic effort. It was extremely runnable and I walked almost all of it. I also complained a lot. One thing I learned is that I get very grumpy after about 24 hours. I was convinced that I was a wimp, a wuss and a pathetic mass of nuttin' (pun intended). Eva finally told me to shut the %&*\$ up and quit complaining. She said: "how can you be a wimp when you have gone over 85 miles?" "I suppose you are a wuss because you didn't break 24 hours?" This made me realize how ridiculous I was being and from that point on, I quit complaining. John ran on ahead to get a blister looked at and eventually Eva and I joined him. I drank some ginger ale and ate bacon and sausage with a pancake wrapped around it. We bid Eva goodbye and thanked her for everything and John and I headed for Elizabeth's Furnace.

Powell's Fort (89.3 miles) to Elizabeth's Furnace (96.8 miles)

PANIC! That pretty much sums up how we approached this section. I finally realized it hurt to walk as much as it did to run, so might as well run. Also, resting at aid stations wasn't helping either so might as well keep on going. We ran the entire road section here as hard as we could, trying to make-up some time. The climb was pretty tough but we were rewarded by a long downhill that we could "attack" (to the extent we can attack anything at this point). I had stated earlier that I would like to hit the last aid station by 2:00 PM. In order to do so, we would have to run every flat or downhill and march strongly up every climb. We did just that and passed several people in this section. As we passed more people, our confidence grew and we ran even harder. We came into the aid station at 1:57 PM which was "Freaky Fast" for us and we were thrilled. Even the Van Animal said he was impressed by our effort in this section. At this point I could "smell the hay in the barn" and knew I would finish.

Elizabeth's Furnace (96.8 miles) to Garden of Eden (AKA Finish)

We still had a doozy of a climb out of Elizabeth's Furnace (remember what I said about an unrelenting course). It seemed like it would never end. I even tried cussing at the rocks but that didn't help either. We finally made it over and started the descent, which we were able to trot fairly well. I thought that once we hit the road it was about .25 miles to the finish. Turns out I was wrong but so was the guy that told us 1.5 miles. We were trying to break 35 hours but held back because we couldn't do 1.5 miles in 10 minutes. Shame on us, if we had kept running at our pace we would've broken 35 hours. But, alas who cares. Being a first 100, any finish is a

PR. As we rounded the corner and the ranch came into view, John and I did our best to pick up the pace. It was amazing hearing our names called out and surreal when it was all over. I have never been so happy at the finish of any previous race.

Lessons Learned

I truly felt like I “grew up as a runner at this race. I learned the importance of staying positive and the delicate balance of confidence and cockiness. The confidence boost one gets from finishing this race cannot be explained. Even though I was way in the back of the pack, I feel like I could accomplish just about anything. Although I still have been running ultras for less than a year, with a finish at MMT I feel like I have graduated from the “newbie” school. Another critical lesson is to limit the amount that you listen to others to just the basics. Every race is unique for everyone that runs it and what works for person A could be disastrous for Person B.

I remember a runner chastising me after my first ultra last year. Initially I was pretty discouraged since I kind of “looked up” to him because he was so experienced. Funny how in the last year, and particularly after this race, I have learned that his “experience” is not something I want to emulate.

Looking back, I really didn’t have any problems at MMT except for the minor stomach issue early on. Hydration and nutrition worked very well, shoes worked great and my feet held up pretty well. Part of me wishes I had a “problem” to blame my tough spots on. The bottom line is MMT is just HARD! It tests you beyond any limits you deem possible and then tests you even more. Glow sticks really are that high up further down the trail. The rocks are literally everywhere.

True Friendship

I have NO doubt that I would not have been able to finish without the help of others, particularly DC. The original plan was for him to run with John and me but due to his injury that was not possible. Rather than sulking about it, he charged up there with us and stayed up both days to crew us and think about all the details we were incapable of. He even washed off my nasty and rank feet at Moreland Gap, talk about a true friend. In Peter Bakwin’s Double Hardrock report (which I re-read for inspiration a couple of days before MMT) he talks about feeling supported during his impressive run. I would say with DC there, I definitely felt supported.

After I finished, several people have remarked “welcome to the club” as a form of congratulations on my finish. Well, what a club it is and I am proud to say that **MASSANUTTEN ROCKS!!!**