

My First Ultra

Keith straw sent out an email Sep 29th about the Hat Run

“This is the perfect event if you're considering your first ultra. If you've already hacked 26.2 miles of asphalt, then this scenic trail will delight you.”

“Perfect if you’re considering your first ultra “– my interpretation was it’s an easy course. So I registered immediately without further thought. It was weeks or months before folks told me it was a very hilly course and the trails were more like goat tracks. Anyone who knows me, knows that I hate running hills and avoid trails. Anyway I had already registered and I wasn’t aware of an alternative easy ultra, so I devised a training plan which involves 20 milers every three weeks, building up to 30 miles over a weekend.

Just as I was approaching the peak in my schedule, life got in the way, and I didn’t run for about three weeks. To get in the miles I rearranged my training schedule to pack in more miles by forgoing the taper.

Race day came and Niles and his wife Brinda generously offered to drive Deb McCould and myself to the race. I warned them that I would take 8 to 9 hours to run the course, so it would occupy their whole day.

The forecast said it probably wouldn’t rain until 1:00, four hours after the start – but the forecast was wrong. As we were driving down to the Susquehanna State park, it started raining and raining hard. We arrived early and sat in the car awhile. The rain became torrential but eased off just before the start. I’ve done many long runs in the rain and once you warm up it’s not a problem.

But what I had failed to realize was, that on a trail, rain creates mud.

We met Mel at the start line and for the first couple of miles we ran together.

My strategy was simple, walk up the hills and run the flats and the downhill. But the mud was deep and was everywhere – it was a mud slide. Just for fun the various hills were labeled as if they were ski slopes – blue squares and black diamonds. So I did walk the hills and ran the flats; but down hills were a matter of survival.

The first cut off was 4 hours at 17.3 miles. After 3 hours I had only covered 11 miles, I had to do the next 6 miles in an hour but under these conditions that was a challenge. But if I could do it the rest of the race would be a piece of cake. So I picked up the pace. I ran every section of flat and ran down those hills like a mountain goat. I managed to overtake 5 runners. After a while I knew I wouldn’t make the cut off, perhaps I could persuade them to extend it because of the conditions. I started rehearsing my arguments to the race director, but I also started wondering if I wanted to do the last 14 miles in these conditions. But while there was a chance I just pushed on.

I got to the check point after 4:45 and I was told that I was way past the cutoff; I didn't know at that point, but they had extended the cutoff by 30 minutes because of the conditions.

I persuaded the race director to let me continue. I told him the conditions were improving and the mud was drying out – which turned out to be an illusion. Nilesh had agreed to run the last 14 miles with me. I ate some potatoes, a piece of banana and a muffin, drank Gatorade and we set off.

I told Nilesh that my goal was to finish in 9 hours – that was the time taken by the slower runners in previous years. It seemed perfectly achievable. I just needed to run a half marathon in twice my normal time. Nilesh started tracking our progress, the first mile took 24 mins, the second took 22 and the third took 20. He pointed out the pattern to me, and indeed we did the next mile in 18. There are only two aid stations on the course and after 4 miles into the second loop we arrived at the first one. There was just one volunteer left and he pointed out that I may not get an official time. I told him I just wanted to finish the course with or without an official time. I assured him that I was OK and we jogged on.

The Susquehanna State Park is a very beautiful place. At the top of the mountains there were great views of the river and surrounding country side. There was a tall blue heron catching his dinner and some brightly colored ducks watching us cross a river. I must admit most of the time my attention was on the mud just a few feet in front of me.

Eventually we reached the second aid station. All the food had been cleared away but there was plenty of water and Gatorade. Again I reassured them that I was OK and I wanted my finisher's hat. They told me the hat was waiting for me and I just needed to keep moving. It was 5 o'clock. There was 5.7 miles to go. They agreed to take a message back to the finish line and tell Nilesh's wife that we should be back around 6:30; the past two miles had been covered at a 15 minute pace.

We moved on to the next hill. We took every opportunity to run, even if it was only flat for 3 yards. Occasionally we would see another runner about three hundred yards away, but the course consisted of loops and it would be miles before we got to that point. Those parts of the course which appeared dry on my first loop weren't dry any more. And, of course the trail had already been hammered by 500 runners crossing it twice. I was beginning to feel cold and hungry. I had food with me but everything I ate earlier just seemed to sit in my stomach. My mountain goat abilities had left me hours ago, and maintaining a balance didn't come so easy. Nilesh was my savior he grabbed me if I was slipping, he told me where to put my feet to find a firm footing.

When we thought we were just a mile away a truck stopped alongside us. It was the race director checking on me again! I said "there's only a mile to go and I can make that". He responded that it could be a bit further – it was actually another two miles.

I swore as we reached another hill, and yet another hill. My Garmin stopped – the battery only lasts 10 years and it was depleted. It was going dark quite rapidly, and I remembered that the park closes at sunset – how will we get the car out?

Eventually we entered a field, Nilesh told me we were at the finish area. On the other side of the field a car was shining it's headlights towards us. I had to run for the sake of what pride I had left. We reached the car and were told the park was closed, but we could run to the finish. There were 5 folks standing where the finish line was, they were shouting and cheering me on.

I had finished, I had done the Hat Run. The race director gave me my hat and insisted I took the time to change into clean dry clothes.

I apologized for keeping them so late, but they were incredibly gracious and insisted I took the time to change into dry clothes. I think they knew how important it was for me to finish. The organizers are ultra runners themselves, so I think they understood.

As I said earlier Nilesh was my savior, he looked after me every step of the way. Nothing was too much trouble for him. For five hours he gently pushed and encouraged me in his normal cheerful way. Nilesh I only hope one day I can return the favor.

Nilesh's wife Brinda was wonderful. She waited for hours and hours and drove us home.

In case you're interested this is the link to the course profile.

<http://www.hatrun.com/course.htm>