

# Ozark Trail 100-Mile Ultra Marathon

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## Saturday November 7, 2009 - Morning of the Race

I woke up at 2:45 am, 15 minutes before my alarm clock was set to go off. Guess I was a little anxious. I jumped in the shower, put my running clothes on that were laid out the night before with bib number already pinned on (Bib # 87). With the rest of the family crawling out of bed at 3:00 am, I ate a bowl of raisin bran, toast, a banana, grape juice and 2 cups of coffee. We were out the door at 3:30 am--2 ½ hours before race start. It is a 2-hour drive to Bunker (Hwy 72 and P)--the start of the race. We arrived at the start line at 5:30 am. I was surprised to see such a large crowd already there. Parked the truck and walked to the start, had to check in. Next, typical pre-race jitters, I had to use the Johnny on the spot. After waiting in a long line, finally got my turn, only to realize that they were all full. Well, this is the inaugural race and I am sure more Johnny's will be something addressed for next year's race. So...was off into the woods to find a log. Yep, this is trail running. At 5:50 am, all runners began to gather around the start line--still pretty dark at this time. It was a beautiful morning, perfect running weather, about 50 degrees and clear. I had a little bit of the sniffles and a scratchy throat. I was lucky to escape with just that. My entire family had gone through the flu and strep throat in the days leading up to the race. I have run with colds before, it doesn't hurt performance that much, just makes things a little uncomfortable.

## The Race Begins

So on November 7, 2009 at Hwy 72 and P at the Ozark Trail Head at 6:00 am, 126 runners headed off into the woods in the pursuit of the finish line. Running in one, long, single file line for the first mile or two, it then began to break off into little groups, with the elites breaking off into the darkness leaving the rest of us behind. I found myself running in a group of about 15 or so. We were moving along at a pretty good clip and from the conversations that were being exchanged, it seemed to be a mix of veteran ultra runners and first timers. I was all ears, trying my best to catch any tips or strategies from the more experienced runners in the group. Darkness had lifted around 6:45 am and I could not believe the devastation that the early morning sun had exposed. The storm that had went through earlier this summer had laid thousands upon thousands of trees over. The forest service and Ozark trail crews had done an incredible job clearing the trail for us. They didn't try to move the entire tree but simply cut a three-foot section out of the trunk and rolled just that section off the trail. Some areas where the tree was uprooted left a large void in the path where the root wad once resided. We'd have to jump or squirmish over them. Only a few times we actually had to crawl over or under logs. Again, I tip my hat to those folks that worked on the trail. Finally, our first aid station came at mile 8. Feeling really good, all was working fine. I ate, drank and off I ran towards Sutton Bluff Campground--mile 17.6. This is where I would see my crew for the first time. Still running with the group, we may have lost a couple and a couple faces changed, but it was basically the same group I had been running with for a while now.

## **Sutton Bluff-Mile 17.6**

Pulling up on to Sutton Bluff, I could see the river below. One of the perks of trail running is the beauty of the sights; this was one worth taking in. What a beauty! As I run on up the Bluff I could now see the campground below. I crossed the bridge and into the campground at 8:50 am--running for 3 hours and 50 minutes now. My wife, Tanya and two kids, Ben and Emma were there to greet me. They were a welcome sight! Feeling pretty good at this point. Found a small hot spot on my left foot so I decided to change socks and shoes. Ate, drank, and off I was again. Would not see my crew again for another 26 miles at Brooks Creek, but I had 3 aid stations before that. One pre-race decision I had made was not to carry water for the first part of the race. I didn't want the extra weight and thought I could make it from one aid station to the next and re-hydrate at each. This was to be a costly and almost fatal mistake. (Not fatal as in death, but fatal as in not finishing).

Made it through Stillwell Hollow Aid station feeling pretty good, but was nearing noon at this point and the temperatures were beginning to creep up. The original group of 15 that I had been running with had now dwindled down to about 6. Now nearing Johnson Hollow, mile 28, the temperature was steadily rising. The first signs of trouble were starting to show. I was no longer able to urinate. I felt like I had to, but couldn't. First signs that my kidneys were shutting down. I had picked up a water bottle at Stillwell Hollow, 5.2 miles back, but it was too little too late. I knew that I had to increase fluid intake and fast or I would surely falter. Not to mention, we just had two back-to-back climbs--the largest of the entire course and the temps were at the highest of the day. Not a good situation.

I pulled into Johnson Hollow, mile 28 and took in water and Heed (electrolyte replacement) like I was the Titanic taking in the North Atlantic. I ate some more, drank more, filled my water bottle and I was off again. Next aid station, Gun Stock Hollow, 6.8 miles away. Still running, feeling pretty good. My pace may have slowed just a bit but I could feel the temps start to ease a bit and that was a relief. The closer I got to Gunstock Hollow, I could feel my kidneys start to come back to me.

I arrived at Gunstock Hollow, mile 34.8 not too bad, feeling some fatigue by now, but my functions were all starting to come back. Drank, ate, filled my water bottle, and off I went. A little slower now, I found myself walking a bit longer up the hills. Somewhere around mile 37 I began to feel a twitch in my left shin, just above the ankle. Was thinking to myself, "Will this be the one to take me out?" Was really starting to feel it now and the group that I once ran with was no longer to be seen. They had all fallen back. Occasionally I would catch someone and occasionally some would catch me. It became common courtesy when a stronger runner came up behind you on the trail, you would step off for a bit and let them pass. Usually a short exchange would occur like "How you doing?", "Are you doing OK?" and the response would vary between "Great," "Good," "Not so good," or maybe just sort of a grunt of acknowledgement that you are still here.

## **Brooks Creek-Mile 43.5**

4:41 pm--Brooks Creek aid station, mile 43.5. 2<sup>nd</sup> time to meet with my crew. Tanya had taken Ben and Emma back to stay with their Aunt and picked up Hannah, my oldest daughter and Rachelle. They were to crew me the rest of the race, along with Rachelle's husband, Brad later in the day. Was sure glad to see them. They had all the makings of a NASCAR pit crew. As I sat

down, one was handing me a water while another was pulling socks and shoes off, checking my feet for blisters, and someone else was handing me food. Fresh socks, shoes back on and a full water bottle, I picked up a flashlight, for it would soon be dark and I was out on the trail again.

That was the first time I had sat down since Sutton Bluff at 9:50 am. It was now 4:41 pm. Sure didn't take my legs long to tighten up, especially my left hamstring, the same leg I had a twitch in at mile 37. Starting to see a pattern here. It took me about 30 minutes of walking before I could get that left hammy to loosen up enough to run on. But now was the time I'd been waiting for. Dark was setting in, temps were cooling and my body functions were all back to normal. I do my best running at night anyhow. It was a breath of fresh air. You might say I caught my second wind.

Another passion of mine is raccoon hunting. Been doing it since I was a young fellow. So being in the woods at night was like home for me. I was having fun now. Cruising down the trail. I was really covering some ground now and ran a long time out there in the dark not seeing a soul, but after a while I began to catch a few folks. Began to make a game of it. Would see their light on the next ridge, they would pop down on the other side and I would pop up every time getting a little closer, until I would finally catch them. Gave them the traditional "How you doing"? They would step to the side and I was on my way to find the next one. That went on for quite some time. It was beautiful night. Perfect temps and clear skies. On occasion I would turn off my flashlight just to see the stars and take in some of God's glorious creation.

Zippered through Hwy DD aid station, mile 51. Food, water and some salt. Picked up my head lamp that I sent out earlier in a drop bag and out I went again. 8.2 miles to next aid station, Martin Road. Everything still going fine. Occasionally felt that left hamstring pull and some pain in the feet from pounding on the trail. Passed one runner and a pacer. They were just sitting there off the trail. I guess the runner had nothing left. That is one thing out there, even if you decide to quit, you still have to make it to the next aid station before you can get a ride back. I had heard that we lost several runners back at the Brook's Creek Aid station, mile 43.5, but not me--not yet anyhow.

Martin Road, mile 59.2. I am feeling more fatigue now and the left hamstring is beginning to be problem. Food, water and on the trail again. Brad Austin was to join me at mile 68.5, the next aid station and planned to pace me for the next 13 miles. I started to slow and I guess my crew got worried because he met me about a mile before the actual station. I had just caught up with a runner as he hesitated to cross a creek, when I heard a voice from the darkness on the other side say, "Are one of you Mike?" It was Brad. He had come looking for me. It was good to see a familiar face at that point in the race.

### **Hazel Creek--Mile 68.5**

We ran back to Hazel Creek Aid station, mile 68.5. Tanya, Hannah, and Rachelle waited for us there. I think Hannah was sleeping at this time. Another fine job by my crew. Dry socks, shoes, food and water, put on some warmer clothes, a sock, hat, and gloves and we were off--Brad with me this time. It took me about 45 minutes this time to get the hamstring loosened up enough to run on. Finally back to running some and walking a little more.

Continued on to Machell Hollow, 75.1 mile aid station. Pretty slow at this point, but still in forward motion. One thing I stress to my adventure racing team and it works for ultra running or any endurance event as well is "forward motion". I don't care if you're running, walking, crawling,

stooping or puking, as long as you do it in a forward motion, you will find the finish. Well, no matter what, I was going to keep that forward motion. Brad was doing a great job at keeping me going. He was encouraging, told some funnies and even sang a little. I had requested some Bee Gee's, but he said he didn't know any. See, when I was a young teen I used to workout to the Bee Gee's and still today when I hear them, I get a little hop in my step. May have to be a pre-req for my next crew to know some Bee Gee's. Machell Hollow, mile 75.8 aid station. Water, food and a little bit of salt. In and out. Then on to Berryman Campground. Hamstring bothering me now. No doubt it is going to be an issue. Thinking this could be the one to take me out. Doing more walking now, but getting a good run in on the more gentle terrain.

### **Berryman Campground--Mile 81.5**

Finally at mile 81.5, Berryman Campground. 5:40 AM. Sunday morning. Been going for 24 hours straight. My crew doing another fine job. This is where Brad stops and Rachelle is to take over. I was a little nervous with Rachelle pacing me. All those energy bars and protein gels and liquids that I had been dumping into my system for the last 24 hours were really having an ill effect on my stomach and was coming out in an obnoxious form. It is one thing to do this in front of Brad, but this behavior was just not acceptable in front of a lady. Now folks, my daddy would come up out of his grave and get me if he knew I was acting rude in front of a lady. He had taught me all my life to be gentlemen in front of the ladies. Sorry Dad, this is ultra running and the race must go on. Brad pulled Rachelle off to the side and explained the situation and I apologized beforehand for my rude behavior. Hoped she would still respect me when it was all over. Well, the sun was coming up and I was going down, really feeling it at this point. I had some in the tank yet, but my left hamstring was really slowing me down now.

We made it into Henpeck Hollow at 10:12 am, mile 93. This is where Rachelle was originally going to stop, but decided to baby me on in for the final 7 miles. Around 11:00, the temp had began warming up again and still in my fleece and sock hat from the night run, I was starting to warm. At this point of the race I was needing all the help I could get and the heat was not helping. I had only one choice, lose the fleece or lose the finish. Now mind you, I am still running with Rachelle. I have been real honest with you all up to this point and I am not going to change now, so I will paint this picture for you. I am a 44-year old man and yes I run a lot and am in pretty good shape, but I no longer have those chiseled 6-pack abs I once had as a 20-year old. I don't carry a tan very long in July and this is November, so you get the picture--white, pudgy flesh. A sight only my wife needs to be seeing. But, I am desperate at this point and I have already thrown out all the dignity I had earlier in the race, so the fleece came off. Again, I hoped Rachelle would respect me once it was all over. That last 6 or 7 miles was the toughest of the race. I lost several positions, but with Rachelle's encouragement (although she didn't know any Bee Gee's either) I made it through.

### **The Finish!!**

What happened next was totally unexpected. With 300 yards to go, Rachelle said she was leaving me to finish alone. It only took me a second to understand what that meant. She had brought me this far but it was not her race. It was not her finish. Not here. Not today. It was mine and we both understood that. She will get hers and I hope I am there for it. But today, it was my

race and she wasn't going to take anything away from that. So with a mutual glance and a respectful nod, she scurried off to the sideline to let me have my finish. Although my hamstring was excruciating at this point and we had been reduced to a walk, I was determined to run through that finish line. So with one last push I was able to muster up enough to run the last 300 yards through to the finish. So at 12:42 PM on Sunday November 8, 2009, I crossed the finish line. 30 hours, 42 minutes, and 9 seconds after the start of the race. My first ultra marathon in the books. 126 runners started the race the morning before, but only 56 found the finish line.

### **Closing Thoughts**

So.....I guess you are all wondering, after all that agony, the pulled hamstring, the tweak in the left shin, the blister on the foot, the dehydration, the total exhaustion and pain.....will I ever run another.....You betcha! I am an ultra runner now, pain is to be expected.

P.S. So, if you think you would ever want to pace or crew an ultra runner there are a few things you may need to consider. You will need to be able to run 10-15 miles in hostile terrain, at night, in inclement weather, not afraid to cross streams, know a little bit about hydration and nutrition, and be able to not only put up with, but motivate one tired and cranky ultra runner. (And it wouldn't hurt to know some Bee Gee's.)