

The back of the pack in Haliburton Forest

by Clay Williams

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There are a few very quick runners who lead the field, and compete for the podium positions and series titles. As a relatively new Ultra Runner, my responsibility is to fill out the field, and simply try to complete the races with respectable times. I'm probably the perfect example of the guy who should have given up long ago. I quit smoking in 2002, started "running" in 2003, ran my first 5 km race in 2004, first marathon in 2005, and first ultra in 2006. I have a very busy lifestyle with a major home renovation project in process, a hectic and stressful job, a significant responsibility with my church, and a wonderful wife whose company I cherish. That I find the time to train for ultra runs is a miracle in itself; add to that the arthritis, my "middle" age, and the damage caused by 30 years of smoking, and you'll find it's simply stubbornness that keeps me going.

I got to Haliburton Forest with my son, Carter, around 2pm on the day before the race, registered, and picked up my goodie bag (ok, prerace packet). There was no weigh-in at check-in, which surprised me a little. Carter checked in and got his volunteer assignment, he was going to be my Crew, but first spend some time helping out as a volunteer around the base camp. I opened my race pack and found that I had the same race bib number as last year, #3, which I thought was kind of cool. We set up the tent, and had a chance to talk with some of the other runners that I knew as they arrived. Joe showed up a couple of hours after we did; he had been my crew last year, and decided to run his first 50 mile run this year. We had worked together for a while, so we took the opportunity to get caught up. We prepared a game plan for the next day's run, and put our drop bags at the Boiler Room so they would get to the aid stations on time. Carter got his car set up as sleeping accommodation, computer gaming station, and portable aid station. He would be tracking my progress, fluids, calories, etc during the run.

The mandatory prerace Pasta dinner started around 6:30, but unfortunately the cookhouse ran out of pasta early, so I ate more bread instead. There was a brief introduction by all of the participants and crew that were at the dinner, then a weigh-in after the meal. I had my ritual pre-race chocolate before going to bed. After getting under the blankets in my tent, I got a chill (kind of a whole-body shiver), so I re-wrapped, then slept very well. I had prepared EVERYTHING well in advance, including setting my alarm time, batteries in the clock, etc., but did not turn the alarm on when I went to bed. I woke to Joe's alarm, 15 minutes past MY set time, and had a moment of panic, but there was still plenty of time to get ready. I got dressed, hit the washroom, had a quick breakfast, then all of the runners gathered for the opening prayer and the start of the race. All 100 mile, 50 mile, and 50 km runners started at the same time, with a loud verbal count-down to the start. I ran with Joe for the first while, an easy run along the East road, and at a moderate pace, but a little faster than Joe's pace. After about a mile, he told me to go ahead, he would have to back off a little. I got to aid station 3 about 10 minutes ahead of my target pace, and then after the Normac trail I got into aid station 2 at 18 minutes ahead of my target.

The next section, Poachers trail, had pretty good footing but some pretty steep hill sections. I was feeling pretty good, and when I got to aid station 4 about 35 minutes ahead of target pace, I made the decision to start slowing down. The next section through The Pass,

Redstone, Ben's and Krista, is a real tough technical section in this direction. The Pass and Redstone both have some very steep long sections with difficult footing, Ben's has a newly opened route with plenty of hazards including a lot of short stumps. Krista has a long uphill with moderate footing, then a steep downhill with really treacherous footing. I was very happy to put these 10 km behind me and run into aid station 5 at target pace.

Marsh Creek and Black Creek trails start out with a few hills and good footing, then a section of corduroy road requiring a lot of concentration to avoid turning an ankle or stepping into a hole in some of the rotting logs. It's not a really tough section in either direction and I was able to continue through this section at target pace. The section from aid station 6 to aid station 7 is a fairly long section of road with good footing but gradual uphill, followed by a long long uphill trail with a little tougher footing. It seemed like it took forever to get to the last aid station, but I still continued at target pace and finished the first 40 km about 35 minutes ahead of plan because of my extra speed at the start of the race. I took the opportunity to change shoes and socks, and because of the sunscreen and insect repellent, my ankles and lower legs were picking up a lot of dust. By the end of the race this would be caked on mud that proved difficult to wash off.

Before getting into aid station 7, which is the turn-around point, I was able to see some of the people who were ahead of me. After leaving the turn-around, I was able to see some of the people who were behind me. There were some familiar faces and some new ones. I saw my friend Joe about half way between stations 6 and 7, he was regretting his decision to change shoes at station 6, and asked if I could get some painkillers to his drop bag at 6 for him. I accidentally told him he was about 2-1/2 km from station 7 when it was actually 2-1/2 miles. When I got to station 6, my son was not yet there, so I had no chance to get painkillers into Joe's bag. As I left station 6, I was looking forward to a relatively short leg. The footing was mostly easy, the day was warm, and I was able to maintain my target pace. Reaching aid station 5 around 2pm is when I first saw my son setting up to help me out. We chatted a little, I told him about Joe, and asked to get some ibuprofen to him, before I headed out toward aid station 4. I wasn't looking forward to this section after running it the other direction a few hours ago, but found that it was much easier in this direction. The down hills had much better footing so I could maintain a decent pace without too much fear of rocks hiding in the long grass. The last couple km on The Pass were brutal long steep hill climbs, so I was happy to get into aid station 4 on my planned pace. On Poacher's Trail, I was able to keep a pretty decent pace, and even made up a little time on this section. The muscles that were already sore at this point in last year's race were not sore at all, so I was feeling very good about the race. The sun was starting to get lower on the horizon so there were more shadows on the trail, and more areas where the sun was in my eyes while I was running. After leaving station 2, the Normac trail in this direction seemed like an unending series of steep, rocky hill climbs. Just as I thought I was getting to the end of the hills, there was another one, and another one. My pace was slowing down, but I pulled into station 3 about 30 minutes ahead of the plan. The part from aid station 3 to Base was a relief to run, slow undulating hills on an easy dirt road. I was able to get some real running in, and less of the trudging I was doing on the Normac Trail. I made a quick stop at station 2 and continued into the turn-around at the base, turning around 42 minutes ahead of schedule. I was still feeling ok, and I recall thinking I felt much better than I did at this point last year. With half of the race behind me, I headed out from the Base not feeling as energetic as the first time I ran this section, but feeling confident, and able to maintain a steady pace. I was slightly dehydrated, but I was also sure that I could make up the deficit once the sun went down and it cooled off.

I picked up my lights at station 2, changed socks, dropped off my camera, and put on a long sleeve shirt to protect against the cool evening, grabbed a cup of corn chowder and a piece of corn bread, and got on the road toward station 3. After leaving station 3 and getting onto the Normac Trail, I started to have some stomach trouble, and it was starting to get dark. I met Joe on the East Road after I got off of the Normac Trail, asked him how he was doing and he simply said: "I'm beat". He went on to finish his first 50 mile run in 17 hours. At aid station 2 I put on a light jacket, then got onto Poachers trail in full darkness, I saw a few bats, almost got hit in the head by one.

When I got into station 4, I heard that my son Carter was gaining some notoriety as my fully connected I.T. Crew. Once again, The Pass, Redstone, Ben's and Krista were a tough tough section. I lost about 15 minutes on this leg. My stomach troubles continuing, I had to make sure I refilled with toilet paper at each aid station, so to try to reduce the problem, I cut back on gels. I met the front runners on their return leg coming through this section, they were looking very strong compared to me. I got to station 5 and was told that the previous two runners to sit down at that station threw in the towel after sitting down. I sat down anyway, absolutely certain that I would get up again and go. Marsh Creek and Black Creek trails were a little easier than the previous section, but I still lost a little more time and finished on my original target pace. I was feeling pretty tired, muscles on the front of my shins were getting sore, but I remained mentally alert and positive.

The stretch between station 6 to station 7 was again a fairly long section. I saw a lot of people that were ahead of me, after their turn-around; it was nice to see anyone at all in the darkness and solitude between aid stations. The previous clear and star-lit sky had become overcast and pitch black except for the light from my head lamp and my hand held light. After turning around at station 7, I had the opportunity to see the runners who were behind me, and was a little surprised that a couple were missing. One would later pass me. I started to feel mentally very very tired, and found myself often "starting" or jerking to wakefulness as I walked up some of the long gradual slopes. I think that in order to get rid of my stomach troubles, I had picked the wrong remedy by choosing to reduce the gels intake, and I was starting to "bonk", or physically crash. I got into station 6, and sat down, and kept breathing really hard for a good two minutes, having a hard time getting enough air. This was at about 4:15am, and I knew that this would be the toughest time for me. I was physically exhausted, mentally tired, and now I could barely get enough air to stay conscious. I started to think this was the place I would throw in the towel. I was thinking about how much worse my condition might get if I headed out onto the trail, and everything in my body and soul was telling me to curl up and go to sleep. But I knew that if I quit, I would forever regret it, this was going to be my last 100 mile attempt, and I absolutely could not quit. I grabbed a gel and a power drink (caffeine and B12), stood up, and walked out of the aid station into the darkness. As I left the aid station, I recognized that I was a little dehydrated again; I was avoiding the energy drink that I had chosen to use because the flavor was unappetizing. I decided to switch to water, drink a little more than previously, and keep mindful of potential hyponatremia. I also started using more gels and boost, which was absolutely the right decision because my stomach troubles ended on this section. I jogged into aid station 5 feeling fantastic, all things considered. I took another couple ibuprofen at aid station 5 because my right ankle was getting sore after rolling it over a couple of times, and both of my shins were pretty sore. Krista and Ben's Trail were really long on the way to the finish. I saw a few more bats, then saw the sun come up, which brightened my spirits more than I could have imagined, and gave me a giant mental boost. I passed a young man who had earlier introduced himself as Scott, and he immediately passed me again and disappeared into the

distance. I staggered into station 4 after the brutal hills of The Pass, and was told that the finish line was within reach, I should have an extra hour or so, and the toughest part was over. But I hadn't forgotten the Normac Trail. Just before leaving the aid station, I was passed by a runner with a pacer.

I was able to keep a reasonable pace to station 2. My muscles were willing, but I was having increasing difficulty getting enough air into my lungs to keep the muscles going. I felt a huge relief when I finally saw the "boardwalk", a section of trail with lumber laid out over a marshy area, because this indicated I was almost at the aid station. As I left aid station 2, I steeled myself for the trudge across the Normac Trail. Just as I got onto the trail, I passed a runner who looked like he was having some trouble; I asked how he was doing, and he said he was ok, so I pressed on. I ran the downhill sections when I could, and fought for air on the unending series of steep uphill sections. I said a loud "yeah, Baby!" when I got to the last of the Red Trail and started onto the road. I was met at aid station 3 by Carter and by Joe, who had had a chance to get some sleep, and was feeling pretty rough. I grabbed a couple bottles of water, and jogged along the road, knowing that the rest of the run would be easy roads with only slightly sloped hills. I jogged the downhills, and walked the uphills, and went through aid station 2 without stopping, focused on the finish line.

At about 10:55 on Sunday morning, 28 hours and 55 minutes after starting the race, I ran across the finish line waving the Canadian flag.

Epilogue: It took days to get the last of the grime cleaned off of my feet, mostly because it was so painful to bend down that far to scrub them. 9 days after the run, I'm still a little sluggish on my morning runs, but hope to be back in working order for another race in mid October. 40 runners started the race, 23 finished, and I placed 20th, very happy to have finished at all.

Stats on my run: My heart rate monitor estimates that I burned about 24,000 calories. I took more than 200,000 steps, drank 12 litres of fluids, ate 24 gel shots, a cup of corn chowder, 2 chocolate cookies, a few potatoes, and drank 12 bottles of boost. I ran through 2 sunrises and one sunset, saw several bats, got about a dozen mosquito bites, went over on my right ankle twice (heard it crack both times), tripped and almost fell four times, stubbed the toes on my left foot three times, and went through my 100+ song play list almost two times. On 8 or 10 occasions, I had to stop at the top of a steep climb, bend over with my hands on my knees, and try to catch my breath.