

God's Country Marathon 2008

Andrew Paton

To all who cheered us, prayed for us and even those who sympathized with us,

Yesterday's (06 07 08) marathon was quite a test. It managed to live up to its rating as one of America's toughest in many ways. The God's Country Marathon starts in the scenic Pine Creek Valley, climbs up over the eastern continental divide at Denton Hill, and winds down into the Allegheny River Valley.

First the good news: Do you love beautiful scenery? You'll not be disappointed. How do you feel about home cooked meals? Ah, the pasta party was more like supper at grandma's house. Accommodation?- one of the best Bed & Breakfasts I've seen. They even invited us back after the race to take a nap or have a wash!

Perhaps you think friendly organizers and support staff make a difference to your race experience. Come meet folks who can't do enough for you. The small town hospitality of Galeton PA and Coudersport comes at you all the time. If I promised you a free buffet meal at a hotel after the race you'd think I'm kidding - Nope, not in Coudersport. A shower at the gym across the street from the finish? All part of the service - they even throw in a massage there if you wish it.

Do you like the marathons where they call out your name and announce where you're from as you approach the finish? This is the one for you. Things like water showers (5 of them) and crushed ice along the way were also a super touch. Since it's a town to town run they transport you by bus to the start. At the start there's free gel, band aids, Vaseline and other race aids.

The start itself is very informal. No starting line. No national anthem - and, surprizing for a race with this name - no starting prayer. Ah well I did enough of that of my own near the end. By time of the 8am commencement it was already hot. During breakfast we all laughed when the TV weather lady spoke of bad U.V. and high temps and suggested we all consider indoor activities that day.

It doesn't take much to get only 200 runners moving so we were off and running right on time. We toured Galeton and soon turned West on Rt 6. The uphill started immediately. I made best use of the bit of shade left as the sun marched higher. The plan was to run the first 12 mile long hill (no you did read that right) at 9 minutes a mile. That was "do-able" but as the temps rose through the 80s it became quite a challenge. I stayed right on target. Ah, that first hill was the easy one. Then came the sharp inclines that lasted until mile 18. As the sun beat down walking fast or running were about the same. By now it had been almost 3 shadeless hours of climbing. I poured water over myself at each table (every mile) and by the next table I was bone dry. The salt began to crust around my eyes. Then I'd wash it into my eyes and caused yet another problem! Near a road called "Struggle Lane," your sufferings come to an end and the hill lies battered and humiliated behind you - or at least that was how I chose to think about it. It felt like all the problems in the world were now over.

Eight miles of non stop decline until the finish. What a great way to end a race. You just have to "fly" now ... right? Somewhere down that long hill I became aware of the sunburn. My shoulders and the back of my arms were on fire. I guess all the hose showers had washed off the sun-block and now there was nothing for it but to get out of the sun as soon as possible. That took 4 hours 17 minutes. In the last few years the average finishing time has been about 4:17. I don't mind being called an average runner! My pace was around 9:50 per mile, but I had to work hard to win back the time lost crossing Denton Hill. Last year 5 guys my age did better times than I did. I'm keen to see the comparisons this year. As I neared the finish line I glanced at the town's cinema where the sign advertised the movie Iron Man. I felt a bit like that: bent out of shape, badly rusted and with a very metallic taste in my mouth. Why do we race? One of the reasons is like banging your head against the wall - it feels so good when its over! So.... "never again" well, not this year in Galeton.

Andrew J Paton
Pastor