

The North Face Endurance Challenge 50 Mile Run at Bear Mountain State Park – April 12, 2008

The Bear Mountain race was new to The North Face Endurance Challenge series this year. On their website, they ranked it four stars (out of a total of five stars) for elevation change and scenery and five stars for technical terrain and overall difficulty. In my opinion, they lied. The overall difficulty was probably an eight, and this was only compounded even more by the torrential rain and unrealistic time cutoffs they implemented. It is the only running event I ever competed in in which my arms were sore the next day - from climbing!

The start was pretty mellow and did nothing to indicate the craziness that would follow. It consisted of the RD yelling 1 minute to start, 30 seconds to start, 10 seconds to start, and then the whistle, followed by lots of cheering – mostly from the runners themselves. Trail races really aren't known for their fans and at 5 AM, the fan base is even smaller.

As we made our way through the parking lot and through a few short tunnels, I was talking to my friends and other runners about nothing in particular. Personally, I was getting a little warm and cursed myself for ultimately deciding to wear a mid-weight jacket with a hood. The start was in the mid 40's, it was foggy and there was a threat of rain. It seemed like the right choice of clothing when I left my car. Now, not even a mile into the race and I'm starting to get warm and all I'm thinking about was that it was a waste to take it and I'll have to carry it all day. Well, about 25 minutes into the race a nasty thunderstorm hit, filled with thunder, lightning and awful rain. I then complemented myself on the smart choice of outerwear and enjoyed the comments of others about how lucky I was to have a hood.

With the rain, any thought of speed or even running went away. It was basically slow going, with a single line of runners moving up the trail. I was doing my best to see in the dark. I was following the beam of my headlamp and focusing on the runner's feet ahead of me to guide my path and help avoid the muddy, shoe-sucking sections. I was also excited on my choice of trail shoes: a pair of Salomon XA Comp Gore-tex. So, here I was running through the rain and traversing the mud with dry feet and body; what could go wrong?

We then came to what North Face described in the race materials as an "aggressive climb up the Yellow Trail". No, no, no, they lied again....we found ourselves scaling what seemed to me to be a rock faced wall. I guess the designers of this trail never heard of switchbacks! The line of runners was backed-up waiting for others to make the wet and dangerous climb. I was literally looking for spots to place my feet and hands, hoping not to slip and fall. We finally reached the first aid station at mile 5.3, well behind schedule given the hard cut-off they scheduled for a future point on the course.

The trek from the first aid station to the next aid station was also difficult. The rain had stopped and it was light out so visibility was good, but the rocky trails and steep climbs made most of the sections un-runable. According to the description, "runners will need to use caution as the last part of the descent of the Timp Trail is a rock staircase (extreme caution if it is wet). How true. But their definition of a staircase was different than mine. The "staircase" was nothing more than huge 10-15 foot boulders placed in such a way by the big-bang event so as to create a downhill. I actually fell on this section more times than I've fallen on a trail in the last year. I kept joking that I was going to write a letter to Solomon and advise them that their so-called contragrip sole doesn't grip very well at all, especially not wet rock.

I finally made it down this section bruised but undaunted. The next section of trail was essentially a mine field of rocks. It was about a quarter mile long and completely filled with rocks and boulders. I tend to like sections like this and was bounding nicely along until I hit the deck. Apparently, I stepped

on a fallen branch that was hidden by leaves and managed to trip myself. I fell into a roll and thought I did a good job of protecting myself. I cleaned myself off, got up and started running again. A few minutes later, I felt a sort of wetness on my arm. Yep, I cut my elbow. The cut was no more than an eighth of an inch long but it just would not stop bleeding and would become the focal point of attention for me and everyone that passed.

I traversed the next 4 miles with my arm bleeding and my trying to figure out how to stop it. Everyone I passed commented on the blood, but no one had a band-aid. Ultimately, a bunch of dry leaves and my nice light green windbreaker did the trick, though I looked like I went to war. I had blood stains running the length of my forearm, my shorts, leg and on parts of the jacket. On the positive side, the final 3/4 of a mile leading to the next aid station was on the shoulder of the Palisades Parkway, and I managed to catch up to Tony who had pushed ahead after I fell.

After grabbing some food, refilling my bottles and washing off my arm at the Aid Station, Tony and I took off on the next section. This 5.2 mile leg to the first "hard" cutoff consisted of several difficult climbs. Tony and I left the aid station together and I led him up the first series of hills. Unfortunately, the elbow cut had started to bleed again. With more leaves and a lot of pressure, I managed to make it stop. However, not wanting to slow Tony down, I signaled him to go ahead.

For the next hour or so, I went through a sort of hell in that I was focusing on my bleeding elbow, I had an allergic skin reaction to the bug repellent I applied a few minutes earlier and I got a little dehydrated. The dehydration was due to my not drinking anything for close to two hours. The race was serving Accelerade, which I normally can tolerate, but they mixed it so strongly at the last station that I couldn't drink any without gagging. All of this was compounded by the fact that the sun had come out in full force and I was at the top of the mountain without tree cover. I knew that the 4 hour cut-off for the next aid station had passed and so I simply made the best of the last few miles. As I came down the hill into the 15.7 mile aid station, the aid station manager said, "I'm sorry sir but you missed the cut-off by two minutes. I cannot allow you to go on. I'm sorry." To which I replied, I thought I missed the cut-off by about 40 minutes!

Apparently, they extended the cut-off by 40 minutes but I wasn't aware of this. As I sat in the aid station, I learned that not many people knew about the time extension either and that, ultimately, close to 50% of the starters had either missed the cut or dropped out prior.

I was told that they had a bus to drive you back to the start. So, while I waited, I asked the medic to clean out and bandage my cut and then I sat around for 20 minutes waiting for enough people to fill the bus. While talking to one of the volunteers, I learned that I could continue on the 50k course if I wanted, though I would have to surrender my number and chip and run unofficially. I thought about it and decided "why not" as I was already committed to a long day of running in the woods. I tried to convince some of the other "drop outs" to run with me but couldn't convince anyone, so off I went.

I'm so glad I decided to do this. The next 16 miles were filled with beautiful terrain and lots of water crossings, of which I managed to fall into a few. Note to self: never wear gore-tex shoes when the chance of water getting into the shoes exists because it doesn't get out. I had to stop several times to drain the shoes.

I met up with several runners and ran with them for however long our pace stayed the same. I had a conversation, albeit brief, with the eventual winner of the 50 miler and I ran up one of the tougher hills with a top runner from the Patagonia-Montrail team (when we reached the top, he kept going and I stopped to admire the scenery, drink some water, and catch my breath).

I came across the finish line in 8 hours and 15 minutes to lots of cheers and confusion. "Where's your number? "Where's your Champion Chip?" "What's your name?" Pretty much the same questions I received at every aid station since becoming an unofficial runner. My time would have put me in approximately 35th place in the 50k event. Officially, I am listed as a starter of the 50 miler and one of 67 who didn't finish; only 19 runners would finish the 50 miler. In the days following the event, there was lots of complaining on running forums about the event: the time cuts, communication, trail markers, etc. For me, it didn't really matter as it turned out to be a great day of running, walking and climbing in the woods.

Here are some photos from friends that show some of the highlights of the day.



This is me and Wayne just before the start.



The rain just started & everyone is now walking slowly, trying to avoid the deep mud.



This is the first two miles of the course, taken during the half marathon event several hours after the 50 mile start. By this time, the rain had stopped and the trail was drier. Funny, it doesn't look this steep in the dark.



One of the easier downhill...



And one of the easier uphill...



One of the many water crossings. This one was about 10 feet wide.



This is my friend Tony. We are approximately 10 miles into the race. I was just ahead of him as we passed the photographer. Check out the runner behind him in blue - it's a long way down. It's a great photo that pretty much summed up the course - uphill all the way.



This is me coming into the 26 mile aid station as an "unofficial" runner. This is one of two points on the course where you are not in the woods. Here, we are running alongside the highway. I was feeling good, enjoying my music and the trails.