

Last Saturday (11/18/06) I ran the JFK 50 Mile Ultra-marathon, which was held in Hagerstown, Maryland. It was the 44th running of this race, which started when President JFK challenged the military to run 50 miles in less than 14 hours, thereby making it the longest running ultramarathon in the US. It was the 6th consecutive time for me so there weren't any real surprises with what to expect, though some unexpected events occurred which presented their own challenges. But before I get into my race, let me provide some detail about the course.

The course starts off on a well paved road that travels 2.5 miles and climbs up 500 feet to meet the Appalachian Trail. The next 13 miles (except for two miles of paved road between 3.5 and 5.5 miles) follow this rolling and sometimes very rocky section of the famous North-South footpath. At approximately 14.5 miles the course goes down a series of steep switchbacks that then crosses under Rt. 340 and connects with the C&O Canal towpath. The Canal section is 26.3 miles of almost totally flat unpaved dirt surface that is free of all automotive traffic. The route leaves the C&O Canal towpath at Dam #4 and proceeds to follow gently rolling paved country roads the last 8.4 miles to the uphill finish – there really is no mercy.

To get to the starting line, you have to walk/run a ½ mile from the high school where the pre-race briefing takes place, but the really cool thing is that there is no assigned starting line location. So, my friend and I walked right to the front where I chatted with Ian Torrence, Eric Clifton, David Horton and Serge England-Arbona (all ultra running legends) before the gun went off. Once the gun sounded, the elite took off at sub 6-minute pace and the rest of us wished each other luck and made small talk as we ran and/or walked that first 2.5 miles at our own comfortable pace - no one was trampled, pushed or shoved. And, we were cheered on by (my own count of) approximately 30 locals, families and friends.

My goal for this race was to set a PR, which would mean better than 10:15. Ideally, I wanted to break 10 hours, but realistically my training has been limited to a few long runs with the club, running intervals on my treadmill and pushing my boys in their stroller several times a week for 4 miles along the Columbia Trail. Nonetheless, I was confident as I had actually accumulated more miles in my legs than previous years, albeit they were achieved differently (i.e., fewer long runs).

So, when the starting gun went off, so did I. For that first 2.5 miles, which is so steep and is probably the equivalent of running up Philhower Road in Califon, I ran where I could and power-walked the steepest sections so that I could get onto the trail section as quickly as possible. I am a strong trail runner and wanted to use the trail to gain as much time as possible. However, since it is fairly narrow in most sections thereby making passing difficult without someone moving off the path, I figured that the sooner I reached it the better off I would be. I got there in around 27 minutes. I was happy with this and actually entered the trail ahead of several more runners who stopped to change clothes, use Porto-Sans, etc.

Once I hit the trail, which starts off downhill, I started to fly. The people around me were running a good pace and I stayed with them, running an approximate 8:30-9:00 minute mile pace. At around mile 9 I turned my ankle. I stopped, walked on it a bit, tighten my shoelaces, and then started to run again, albeit a little gingerly. After about a mile, it felt fine so I started to pick up my pace again. I caught up to the group that I had been running with and started to cruise again. Unfortunately, I turned my ankle again. This time it was worse and I actually fell down. The other runners whom I was running with stopped and helped me up, offered assistance and basically ensured I was fine before continuing on their own again. I was surprised that I turned the ankle again because the trail wasn't terrible in this section but I wasn't in extreme pain so I continued. I always carry a few Advil with me and I planned to take one once I reached the next

aid station and could refill my water bottle. As there was approximately 2+ miles of trail remaining and the precarious switchback section was just ahead, I decided to (mostly) walk the remaining trail. I stepped aside for everyone who wanted to pass and accepted that I would lose time here but it was better than hurting my ankle again and risk not finishing. Once off the trail, I was relieved and ready to continue the run. The Advil kept the swelling in check and – thankfully - it never bothered me again (A post-race visit to the doctor revealed a grade 1 ankle sprain).

The next section: 26.3 miles along the C&O Canal. This is a very picturesque place with the Potomac River on the left, trees, rocks and the occasional National Landmark (like Harpers Ferry) on the right. The only thing that took away from the beauty of this section, which is the equivalent of running along the Columbia Trail, was the stiff headwind. I immediately thought to myself, “I hope we don’t have this wind for the full 26 miles.” I put my sunglasses on, as the wind was irritating, and just ran, and luckily, the wind died down after 7 miles or so.

My goal was to alternate a run/walk pattern of 8 minutes run and 2 minutes walk but after doing this a handful of times, I decided that my body wasn’t comfortable with this and switched to a ratio of 6 and 2. I held this pace for the entire canal. I didn’t encounter any problems during this section and basically enjoyed my run. I flipped-flopped pace with a few people and even caught up to a few that had passed me during that last section of the trail. I’m not really sure what pace I was running but it felt comfortable to me. The highlight was catching my friends, who had started 2 hours before me, at around mile 37 (note: the race has two starting times to accommodate slower runners). I didn’t expect to catch them so I was really excited when I saw them and started running a little faster. Mile 38 is always a highlight because the folks who maintain the Mile 38 Aid Station really go all out. They call themselves 38 Special and they have all sought of food available, including bagels, gummy bears, fruit, turkey sandwiches, potatoes and chicken noodle soup. I indulged in some soup, enjoying the saltiness of it.

When I reached the end of the Canal, I knew that I was really close to breaking 10 hours but the final 8+ miles were going to be tough. I continued to pass people and flipped-flopped pace with others who were in a similar run/walk pattern. I felt comfortable with no muscle soreness or other aches so I just continued to run my pace and pushed where I felt comfortable. With about a half mile left, you can see the finish line at the top of a hill and as I got closer, could hear all the people screaming – it’s really exciting and probably one of a handful of places on the course where people gather to cheer you on. I looked at the time-clock and realized that sub-10 was not to be, but I still set a PR by 11 minutes and beat last year’s time by 21 minutes. I smiled as I ran across the line in 10:04:25.

After chatting with some of the runners I finished with, I collected my clothing bag, had some food and then went back out to the finish line to cheer on my friends and the other finishers for the next two hours. There’s nothing more inspirational than watching a runner who’s been on the course for nearly 14 hours come across the line just before the cut-off.

All-in-all, I was very pleased with my race and I’m already thinking about next year. Click on the link below for photos of me on the course and crossing the finish line.

http://www.brightroom.com/view_user_event.asp?EVENTID=13800&PWD=&BIB=159

