

# Blood Rock Plus



By Brandon Kasteler

## THE BUILD UP

I never imagined I'd want to try back to back 100's until the opportunity presented itself. The whole world got turned upside down by the virus, including the races I was going to do, so I traded my planned race in for a couple local races that would cost less and be easier to manage. Pinhoti came and went and I forced myself to recover quickly. One week after Pinhoti I ran 13 road miles under 8 minute pace. It felt amazing. I felt bionic. A week later I ran 18 hard miles at an 8 ½ minute pace and felt fantastic-er.

I hadn't really intended to re-visit Blood Rock, but it's kind of like an old, familiar friend that you wouldn't mind visiting again. The course had changed since my last time doing it a couple years ago. Apparently 21,000 vertical feet wasn't enough for David so he doubled the back country trails (the steepest part of the course). Ugh. 26,000 vertical feet.

Mt. Everest, of course is only 3,029 feet more than that above sea level. Also consider, though, that most people who climb Everest start at a point on the mountain that already sits at about 9,350 feet above sea level. That means their total vertical gain is probably around 22,000 ft. Granted, it's that much farther above sea level, where the oxygen gets thinner and thinner and causes all kinds of complications, but still . . .

It's hard to believe anyone has created a course in Alabama with 26K of vert. It's weird that you could find that much elevation here. I compare it to some of the legendary 100's of the Wild West – and it stacks up. The Bear is about 22,000 vertical feet. The Wasatch is 24. Blood Rock is 26. Wow.

My ultra-brother, Todd, from Alaska, considers coming for the race, but in the end the Corona and other complications make it un-doable for him. By coincidence his good friend, Eric Johnson has signed up for the race. I met Eric when I attempted and failed the Bear. He, of course, conquered it like it was a tennis match.

I connect with Eric and we meet for dinner the night before the race. I pick his brain about doing the Alaska 350's and we look forward to what we came for: Blood Rock Plus.

## RACE DAY

The prediction of rain and cold temperatures consumed me all week. I was very nervous about the weather ruining my perfect day. Then I realized, *this is supposed to be hard*. It's going to be hard already. That's what we came for; a challenging difficult race. It's steep and rocky and long, and tries to bring you to your knees. So, what's the big deal if you add cold and rain? It's just adding to the theme. It's like adding alligators. At a certain point, nothing should be really shocking.

This thing starts at noon and it feels really strange.

I get there at 9 and hang out for three hours. I try to help set up a few things, but nobody really needs anything. I sit in the truck and smile and meditate. I start wondering what kinds of things I'll think about during this 100 miler. I wonder if I can program it a little bit, or at least guide my thoughts in a certain direction. It has to be organic, I know, but I'm thinking maybe I can give it a nudge.

I begin with a question: What does it take to make real progress in life? I'm always wondering how I can improve in my life. I want to be a better everything. Generally, my life is incredible, but how do I know what's possible if I don't stretch myself? I wonder how I can make *real* progress. How can I really get somewhere? How do I make significant, positive change? Like, for real. I get tired of feeling like everything is 2 steps forward, 3 steps back. Alright, that's enough musing. It's time to roll.

Eric shows up with not much time before the gun, and he's totally un-phased. Grace under pressure. I tell him I just met a guy who's 77 and he's doing the 25K tomorrow. Eric smiles and says, "I have a theory that the older we get to reap the rewards of everything we've done before that. You can cheat a little when you're young; you can get away with some things, or not see the benefits of some things. But, when you start getting up there it all starts catching up to you."

Wow, now I have two deep thoughts to get me started on my meditative journey.

David calls us in for last minute instructions. Don't get lost. Bridges are slippery. Got it.

We line up and David counts us down. I bust out with Joe Ritchie and we cruise up the road and off into the single track.

I love this part. Race day. Finally here, after all the anticipation. We're cruising along at 9ish-minute miles. Probably going too fast, but I want to try to run with him for a little bit.

We cruise through the campground, up and down some more roller coaster hills. We talk about other runners we've met today, race prep, pacing strategies, the course, etc. There's a lady hanging out just behind us. Logan, the cook, is ahead of us.

In what seems like 5 minutes we are at the first aid station.

## 3.6 MILES NORTH TRAILHEAD

It's a small tent with just the basics. I decide to dump out my Gatorade and replace it with tailwind. I catch back up to Joe and we do more roller coasters.

Gradually the trail starts to reveal itself as a climbing experience. We hit our first steep climb and we're forced into hike mode. We cruise over it and down the back side and then immediately hit another climb.

This is fun. I love the challenge of the climb. Love the way it forces you to dig in.

A few more little ups and downs and then we hit the real thing. All of that was just practice. This climb is the real deal. Steep and rocky and long. I like it.

We settle back into stiff hiking mode. We pass Logan as I order breakfast, then the lady passes us. Turns out she's doing the 50 mile and this is only her second trail race ever. Wow. Go girl.

We come up to the first ridge and I love it. It's chilly up here, but we've got the blood pumping so I'm plenty warm. We traverse the ridge for a while and then start dropping through the rocky terrain. Joe is flying and I'm having to push to hang on to him.

We drop down this long, long hill and then immediately start climbing again. Ok, maybe now *this* is the real deal. It's getting way more technical. Lots of rocks and steep double steps. We go up and up and up. Finally we get to the top and it's really rocky with an overlook. It's King's Chair. I love this one. There's not much view because it's still so foggy and misty, but it's still cool. You can feel the view even though you can't see it. It's not really raining, but there's so much moisture in the air it kind of is.

We traverse across the rocks and down another roller coaster of single track. The trail drops hard and Joe and I open up. He's going really fast and I'm barely hanging on. We bottom out and start to climb again and here comes that lady that's doing the 50. She passes me. Then I pass her. And so on.

It's another long, steep climb. Nothing to do but settle in. No overlook at the top and it drops down again. Now I'm alone in my own little zone and I don't mind a bit. The trail bottoms out and takes a hard right and suddenly there's a smooth, wide, flat trail.

*Ok, I think I'm done with a couple of things. I'm done saying this is going to be my last race. I will never be satisfied. I will never give up. I will always want to do more. When I am 77 I will want to run a 77-mile race. I run because I'm alive. It's been programmed into my cells. I am, therefore I run.*

*I'm also done pontificating over why I continue to do these races. It doesn't matter. It's complicated. I do it because I love it, because it's a challenge, and because you get to*

*live 1,000 highs and 1,000 lows in one incredible, compressed, extreme experience. It's a blast. I like to be outside. I enjoy it for some reason. Stop asking me why.*

This flat section is a welcome change, but my hands are getting cold. I need to add a pair of gloves at my next drop bag. I'm probably going too fast, but it's not like I'm sprinting. Each big climb keeps me in check. These climbs demand your respect.

*Out here it's not "time = money," it's more like, "elevation = time." You tend to underestimate how much longer everything takes when you're climbing.*

*I forgot how wonderful and challenging this course is. I love it. It's worth every penny.*

I top another ridge and start heading down again. I take advantage of the gravity and pick up the pace. Before long I catch a few glimpses of Joe again. Up, down, over.

I catch up to him for real this time and he's busting out his poles. "Good timing," he says. "Just in time for Barkley." Sweet. I take out my poles too and I see the ropes and the impossibly steep trail. I start fumbling my way up and I'm not sure the poles are helping. The rocks are so far apart it's hard to step up to the next one, and the poles have nothing to grab because it's mostly rocks, with a little bit of slippery mud.

*I think I just figured out the answer to the question I asked myself before this thing started. How do you make real progress? You keep stepping. You keep trying. You take a lot of steps and, eventually, if you have a good plan and you're going in the right direction, you end up somewhere significant.*

We climb forever and finally hit the top, then immediately drop down the other side. Another long down hill, and you'll never guess what happens next. That's right. Another long climb.

*These climbs are amazing. They force you to bring everything to the table. You really don't have a choice.*

This next climb is called "topless" because it seems to never reach the top. It goes and goes and climbs and climbs. I like it, but it's getting a little predictable. We drop down again, hit the bottom, and climb back up. I let Joe disappear into the distance and I settle into my own slower pace. The trail drops for another forever and then takes a hard right and suddenly we're at the Billy Goat's Gruff bridge. There's an aid station here, but it's just a table with 2 water jugs on it. No need for a stop.

The trail has widened into a sort of jeep road and it drops gradually as far as I can see. I take the opportunity to open up. I cross a creek, then another one, then another one. It keeps on dropping and soon I run out of flags. I stop and see flags going hard right onto some single track but there are no signs, and no flags rounding the turn. Not sure about this one. I look down the wide trail I'm on and can't see any flags. I wait for a minute to see if anyone else can come along and lend an opinion. Finally I decide it must be up into the single track. I take it and climb up another huge climb. I top out and drop down the

other side. Should be getting close now. Down another small drop and then up another one.

The guys that are ahead of me suddenly come flying past me. There are about 4 of them. Dang. They must be way ahead of me. Oh well. I top out and drop down the other side. Joe passes me, and he's flying, too. Good job, dude. Man, he's flying. I hope he can hang onto this pace. I drop another long drop and finally catch sight of the aid station I was just at 12 miles ago.

## 12.5 MILES NORTH TRAILHEAD

I take off my vest to re-arrange things. I get a ginger-ale, two ginger cookies, two fig Newtons, and a handful of M&M's. I take off my vest and set it down to reorganize. I take my phone out of the vest pocket and set it to the side while I get everything together. I pull out my thin windbreaker and put it on. I re-fill my Tailwind bottle and put my vest back together. I stick my phone in my shorts pocket just for a minute, because I know I'm going to record a little update in a minute.

I gather my gear back together and I'm off. I head up the hill, back the way I came, and I'm keenly aware that I'm about to repeat the last 9 miles in reverse. That means all those endless drops will now be endless climbs and the climbs will be drops, etc. Ok, bro. C'mon, let's do what you came here to do.

I start up the hill and check the time. I'm 2 hours and 24 minutes in. I can't tell if that's good or bad or indifferent. I guess it doesn't really matter. It's pretty obvious already that the elevation is going to call the shots around here.

The next two miles is nothing but "atta-boy"s. Good job. Good job, man. Keep it up. You too. Man, it's a lot of people. It's aggravating to have to move over for so many people on a tight, single-track trail. But, it's also motivating to cross paths with so many encouraging people. It's worth it. The encouragement energizes me and I fly up and down the 2 big hills and get to the road with the creek crossings.

I turn left and see Eric Johnson coming down the trail. "What do you think of the course?" I ask. "I love it! I love it!" Eric is waving his arms for emphasis. I love it, too. We are a unique breed.

He cuts right and I head up the dirt road. I reach for my phone just to check in and it's not in my vest. Uh-oh. I check everywhere else and it's nowhere to be found. Dang it. I must have put it in the wrong pocket when I left the aid station and forgot to transfer it to the vest. I turn around and yell to Eric. I catch up to him and ask him to look for my phone. At the same time, the 50-mile lady comes down the trail and tells me some guy picked it up and he's going to leave it at the North Trailhead. Phwew. I'm saved. And I'm an idiot.

I turn around and head back in the correct direction. I turn back up the road again and start heading up the long gradual climb. That same lady stays with me for a while and we exchange pleasantries. After a while she needs to slow down so I cruise on ahead. I cross over the creeks, pass the Billy Goat Bridge and head back up into the daunting single track.

Somehow it's the same mountains, just in reverse, but it feels like a lot more climbing. I climb the first two big ones and it takes a lot out of me. Dang. I've got to pace myself. We are still very early in this race. I'm trying to get my bearings, to remember which climb was which, but it's confusing in reverse. The climbs just keep climbing. I swear

there wasn't this much downhill on the way in. I'm having plenty of epiphanies, but I don't have a phone to record them on.

I know I've said it before, even just a month ago, but *elevation matters. Respect the beast.*

*Some of you who ran Blood Rock on the old course might be asking, "Now that they've changed the course and you go back through the back country twice, is it really that much different?"*

*Yes. Yes, it is.*

*Relax. It really doesn't help to think about how many miles I have left to go. All I really need to do is just make it to the next flag. And then the next. I can finish this race one flag at a time. "Think next action," as my son's soccer coach always says.*

*What a difference it makes, too, to have such a well-marked trail. It makes it even easier to implement my one flag at a time strategy. And, it takes the pressure off. It allows you to focus on pace and strategy instead of wondering if you're going the right direction.*

I get up to the next look-out and the fog is finally breaking and the sun is low in the sky. It's a beautiful scene, but I have no camera to capture it. Oh well, just me and nature. Serves me right. But, there's also something cool about not being able to take a picture. It's just me and this view right here, right now. Better soak it in.

I drop down the next mountain and the sun goes down for real. I break out the head lamp and start up what feels like the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> climb. It goes forever. I still love the trail, love the terrain, love the landscape, love being here. But, the elevation is killing me. I'm sucking wind and I'm probably only 18 miles in. This is crazy. I've never been this gassed during the first quarter of a 100 miler. This is not a good sign. The climb keeps going and I'm starting to wonder if I'm going to have the muster to make this whole thing happen. Are you kidding me? The hint of a DNF is entering my mind at mile 18? This is nuts!

I finally reach the top and I think this one is King's Chair. That's good.

I come down the next big drop and, speaking of dropping, the temperature is falling fast. I studied the forecast all week, but I was always looking up the Birmingham temperatures. Now I'm realizing that the temperature in downtown Birmingham and the temperature on top of a wind-swept ridge with a thick mist blowing in your face, are probably two completely different things. I'm going to have to add some layers when I get to the cabins.

I drop down what I think is the last climb and then start going up again. Gracious. This is going to be one of those sections that seems to never end. I make the long climb and come across another ridge and realize this one is actually King's Chair. Ok, now we must be mostly done.

Nope. After another long drop the trail somehow goes up again. I'm getting my rhythm back and my breathing is getting better, but man, this feels like I've already gone 40 miles!

*So, I've always known about the huge difference between road miles and trail miles. They are totally different animals. Road miles are smooth and fast and uninspiring. Trail miles are a lot slower, even with the same effort, a lot more sporadic, and way more inspiring. An 8-minute-mile pace on the road, for example, can take just about as much energy as a 9 or 10-minute pace on trails.*

*And now we have to add a third category: mountain miles. Mountain miles add an additional dimension. Up. Spend a little time running in the mountains and you start to realize that the effort of an 8-minute road pace might get you a 12 or 14-minute-mile pace in the mountains – if you're lucky.*

I finally come out of the steep downhill and hit the rolling hills by the little creek. I take the hard left and hit the smooth S-curves and I'm able to open up some. I pass some civilians and catch a glimpse of a road, then an aid station. Beautiful.

## **22.9 MILES NORTH TRAILHEAD**

“Do you need anything?” they ask. “A blue I-phone,” I respond. They have my phone and I am grateful. I complain a little about the magical extension of the mountains on the second pass through the line. I grab some grub and head off for the cabins.

This section is very runnable. I remember it from last time. It has a few climbs, but also some really cool sections with a thick, tight canopy of trees so you feel like you're going through a tunnel. The trail is covered with pine needles and there are essentially no rocks. It's a nice change from what we've just been through. I pick up the pace and start looking forward to hitting home base.

This is so weird. I'm grateful to be heading into mile 25. It's a good benchmark. But, my body and my brain feel like I'm coming up on mile 50. And, the weird start time adds to the allusion. It's just gotten dark. When you start at 7 am, like most 100's, then you might be coming into mile 50 around sunset. Right now I'm only at mile 25. But, I'm hungry, tired, and cold – and the sun when down a while ago. Feels like mile 50 to me.

## 25.7 MILES THE CABINS

I take a picture under the race clock to record the time. 5 hours, 14 minutes. Is that good? I don't know. I've forgotten all my time goals and benchmarks. I'm just happy to have that first big section in the rear view mirror.

*Wow, that was a quite a warm up. Smiley face emoji.*

I grab a quesadilla and some kind of homemade bread and try to eat them at the same time. I also add in some beef jerky, a shot of pickle juice, a Coke, and an Ibuprofen. Doesn't sound like the best pairing that's ever been invented. I stop at the truck and grab my green fleece jacket and my Carhart hat and my winter ski gloves. I put it all on and my body thanks me. Now I'm warm for the first time in the past 3 hours.

This was a good stop. I feel refreshed. And now break time's over. Let's go get the next 25.

I cruise through the easy, gradual hills, cross the creek and take the little roller coasters past the abandoned foundations and the falling down shack. I hit the little picnic area and then start gradually climbing again. The 50-mile lady catches up to me again (impressive), but I keep busting ahead and losing her.

*This is a full-body test. The muscles, the lungs, the heart - you can feel it making you stronger.*

The trail keeps climbing. And climbing. And climbing. I think I remember this hidden climb. I relax and bust out the poles to chew it up.

*How do you move a mountain? You keep stepping on it. Sounds like a cliché. But, it's true. If I keep stepping on this mountain enough times, with enough determination and direction, eventually the mountain will be behind me instead of in front of me. Not sure that's what Jesus meant about moving mountains, but hey, it's working.*

I hit the dirt road with the gate and it's fantastic to be here. I open up and cruise down the gradual downhill. It feels great to float for so long. I'm having great memories of the last time I ran this race. I remember how great it felt to glide down these long, flat downhills after knocking out so many long climbs.

*Slow down. Hmmm. Sage advice that I often give myself and almost never follow. I'm sure I'd have way more fun. I'm sure I'd feel a whole lot better. I'm sure I'd get to know more amazing people and spend more time with the peeps I already know. And yet, I cannot manage it. I like a strong stride. It feels natural. It makes me feel like I'm getting somewhere.*

The trail cuts left and does another round of roller coasters. I'm jamming out to my tunes. Loving the additions I've made to my playlist. A lot more Rush, a little more Interrupters, and some Bob Marley. Marley's been a great addition. And Spotify knows it. I've already heard "One Love" twice today, and I like it. Who would have thought reggae would be a good fit for ultra-running? But it works. It reminds you to chill out. "Let's get together and feel alright."

I hit the second flat road and it's another great chance to let go. It goes on forever, dropping slowly the entire time. It's magical. Finally the course cuts back to the right, back into the single track and we go straight into steep downhill mode. It's almost too rocky to run, but I'm trying anyway. This is the stretch where I raced Joe in the 18 mile race this summer. More great memories.

Several more dips and climbs and I start to see some lights.

## 32.8 MILES TERRACE DRIVE

I stop in to see what's cooking and the guy says he's got some vegetable soup. Sweet. Sounds delicious. I order a cup and take a big drink of it and it's cold. Hmmm. Nothing doesn't warm the soul like a cup of cold soup on a winter night. I choke some down anyway, because I feel like I need it, but it takes effort.

I jump back on the trail and hit all the flat switchbacks. The trail rises and then drops into the paved roads of the subdivision. The glimpses of all the city lights are pretty cool. There are Christmas lights all over the neighborhood. There's even a giant star all lit up at the top of the powerline hill. I like it.

*Hats off to David and Marye Joe. This course is amazing. How they could uncover this much elevation with all this technical in the middle of an urban sprawl like Birmingham – it's pretty dang impressive. Add to that a well-organized race and a well-marked course and there's a lot to appreciate with this race.*

*This is brutal punishment. I love it.*

*I feel so much better now than I did at mile 18. Shoot, maybe that was my bonk and I got it out of the way. Wouldn't that be amazing?*

I'm feeling great right now. Jamming out to my crazy playlist. It goes from James Taylor to Judas Priest and so much in between. I love it. Each new song makes me smile.

I start methodically chewing up the switchbacks and suddenly two headlamps are coming down to pass me. They are 50-milers. 100 yards later I see Joe coming down. That means he's at least 2 miles ahead of me. Awesome. I'm happy for him maintaining such a strong pace. I tell him he's killing it and ask him if he's past Mr. #1. No way, he responds. How did I not pass him yet? Oh, he's so far ahead of me I'm not even going to see him at this out and back section. Mercy, that means he's at least about 4 miles ahead of me. You go, bro.

I reach the top of the powerline and cut left onto the Peavine Road. I don't know what time it is. I don't know what my pace is. And I really don't care. I'm just happy to be moving in the right direction.

I follow the road for the long, gradual climb, hit a little trail, and boom, there's the pavilion I know and love.

## **38 MILES PEAVINE FALLS**

I go for a grilled cheese and a Coke and a Ginger Ale. All of it is delicious. I change headlamps to the lighter one and I'm good to go. I cruise back down the powerline trail. The city looks cool again, all lit up, especially with the Christmas lights mixed in. I pass a few people but not as many as it seems like there should be. Back into the neighborhood, back into the single track, cut right at the break-off point. Roller coasters. I love this part. Covered bridge. Road crossing. Ok, here comes the weird climb. I remember this is a long one. Be patient. It goes up and up and up.

Suddenly I see a light coming down the trail I'm going up, but this is not part of the out and back section. Something's not right. The light gets closer and . . . it's Eric! What the in the world?

"What's up? I think you're off course," I tell him.

"I don't know what's going on. This trail . . ."

I look up ahead and realize where he may have missed a turn. I talk him into following me and we get up to the long flat road. I look left and see the flags that point down toward Terrace Drive. I point ahead and tell him he must have missed that turn off the long road. We run together a little bit and I say, "How do you like the course?" He hesitates. He likes the elevation and the technicality, but he's not excited about all the zigs and zags. Funny that we ran into each other again. He heads toward the turn down, and I take my exit up and to the right.

Soon I'm crossing over a ridge and going in what must be the wrong direction. I come to a hard right turn in the trail, but there's a very clear sign pointing left, so I must be on course, but it just feels like we're headed away from the pavilion instead of toward it. This is definitely not the way it was last time I did this course.

The trail starts winding down like crazy and this can't be right. I'm still seeing flags, but I'm supposed to be going across the ridge to the Peavine aid station. I come to another split and a park sign says "Peavine parking lot" and points right. Once again the race sign points left. What in the world? How could I get off course right after I ran into Eric getting off course?

I pull out my map and there's not enough detail to be able to tell. I keep following the flags and before I know it I'm running into the waterfall. This has to be part of the next loop, but then the arrows would be facing the wrong way. The flags go left and up and over the rocks and cross the creek and cross it again and cross it again. Are you kidding me? It crosses back over and then shoots straight up a steep incline and at least this feels like we're headed toward the pavilion. The single track turns into the long, wide road and now I know we're getting close. I pop out into the parking lot and cruise into the aid station.

## 44.7 MILES PEAVINE FALLS

“Should I have gone past the waterfall just now if I was on my second loop?” I ask.

“Yeah, I think so,” comes the reply.

“This is way different than the old course, isn’t it?” They nod. I guess it is what it is. I eat a cup of Ramen noodles, another grilled cheese, a small bowl of oatmeal, a piece of pineapple and 2 Cokes. What a meal. Other runners are arriving and it’s cramping my style. I’m out of here. I thank the peoples and head out the back.

The trail starts dropping, but it’s not as steep as it was last time. There aren’t any ropes. I can see the lights from a neighborhood down at the bottom. I need to keep my stops to a minimum. Every time I stop it seems like the temperature drops by several degrees. Then, when I get moving again I’m just about right.

The trail drops and crosses the creek then meanders all over the valley. I look up and the moon is out and super bright. Fantastic. I love having the light of the moon as a little added bonus. It’s comforting. The trail starts to climb back up but it’s sweeping wide right and apparently missing the waterfall. I remember that I still have a few Mentos in my pocket and they sound good. I decide to wait until I’m sure that I’m back up on the ridge, heading back to the cabins. Then I can have one as a reward.

It climbs a while, then levels off just below the ridge. This feels right. I see all the lights way down and to the right. I can actually see lights off to the left, too. The trail is really rocky and it keeps jumping 10 to 20 feet to the right, then left, then right again. It’s playing with me. If this trail wasn’t as well marked as it is, there would be no hope of staying on it in the dark.

It drops and winds and twists and I look up and see the moon again. I love having him as my guide. I look down at all the lights and think about all the people binge watching their shows and eating their pizzas and falling asleep on the couch. My next 14 hours is going to be very different from theirs. I feel like I’m the lucky one.

I’ve been chugging the Tailwind. I’ve just about drained a bottle every 8 miles for the whole first half of the race. That’s good for me. I never really swore by it like other people, but maybe it’s because I was never drinking enough of it. Now that I’m draining it steadily I think it’s making a difference.

The night looks really cool up here on the ridge. I stop and take a picture of the moon beyond the trees.

There’s something great about having the moon around. It’s a cool frame of reference. It helps a little bit with light. It gives you company. Hey moon. What’s up?

The trail goes for three more forevers and finally starts to drop. It cuts left then crashes into a real single-track trail. It's the orange, or the white, or both. Whatever. Follow the flags. Seems like we should be heading down to the low parts where the cabins must be, but it just ain't happening. Finally I come across a park sign claiming that Maggie's Glen is only 1.3 miles. That's very close to the cabins. I pick up the pace, but the trail just keeps winding and going. I go for another what feels like 5 miles and finally cut left, then hit a new trail and cut right. Man, this leg feels more like 17 miles than 7.

Long, cold, and rocky. That's a pretty good summary of this whole section of the race.

Suddenly I'm on top of Maggie's Glen. This is it. I follow the signs hard left and I know we're really close. I catch a glimpse of the arch and it's a very welcome sight. They've got Christmas lights lining the approach like a runway. Awesome. I open up and sprint it in to the Cabins.

## 51.8 MILES THE CABINS

I cruise under the banner and check the race clock. 11:22:22. Ok, not bad considering all the elevation and rough terrain and freezing-ness. David is here and I let him know that he has changed the course just enough to confuse the heck out of me. I ask him to take a picture of me under the race clock. I want to document my split at the half, and maybe I can send the picture to my “fan club” to let them know how I’m doing.

David takes the picture and then hands me an award. I’m confused. He says I got third place. I tell him I still have 50 miles to go. He laughs. He thought since I had him take a picture of me under the clock that I must have been finishing the 50 and only 2 guys have come through so far for the 50. Hmm, so I’m in third position for the 50, but doing the 100. Perhaps I’m going too fast.

I drain a couple Cokes, and take a couple Ibuprofen. They offer quesadillas and so I take one and gnaw on it. I think about stopping at my drop bag in the truck, but why? What do I need? I’m already wearing the warmest stuff I’ve got and most of the time it feels just right. I’ve got all the food I need and my bottles are mostly filled. So, I keep moving. Rinse, lather, repeat.

Half way. A little over 50 miles. Now all I gotta do is do it again.

*This is a spanker. No one can accuse this guy of designing a soft race. This thing is hard core. All that climbing definitely has an effect – no matter what you do.*

I cruise up the road and into the trail and then through the campground. Suddenly all the flags are gone and I’m going by a dumpster and there is no trail. Are you kidding me? I run back the way I came onto the paved road of the campground and look for flags. After some searching I realize I should have taken a hard right at the road intersection. Gracious.

I cruise through the roller coasters and the shortest section of the course has once again disappeared quickly.

## 53.9 MILES NORTH TRAILHEAD

I top off my bottles and grab a few cookies. I exchange a few pleasantries with the crew and I'm off.

I think I've got a fairly good perspective for the next 18 miles. Take it slow. It will seem like forever. Embrace it. Take in one flag at a time.

I cover the winding, flat trail, the hard right, the long, slow climb to get deep into the back country, and now it's just one mountain at a time.

*It's cold. The trail is steep. The night is dark. It's time to meditate. I put the headphones back in and I'm in the zone.*

*It's getting tough. I'm getting really winded with every climb and my gut's not feeling so hot. Then again, everything is just about like what I expected. This all seems pretty normal and I feel like I'm just kind of executing the plan. One foot in front of the other. Run when the trail and gravity will allow it. Make it to the next flag.*

I get to the top of the first significant climb and my banjo version of "Thunderstruck" is building up to the crescendo. "You been . . ." I stop for the dramatic pause and hit those anxious drum beats in the air above my head. I point to the sky and, wait for it . . . "Thunderstruck!" I freak out and then go straight back into my blue grass / heavy metal / dance / run stride. I love performing for an audience of none in the middle of the woods in the middle of the night. It cracks me up.

I conquer King's Chair, then the next big one, then the next one.

*Man, it's hard enough to explain what it's like to run 100 miles. Now how am I going to adequately explain what's it's like to run 100 miles on a steep inclined plane with lots of rocks in the way and sometimes mud and wind and a little bit of rain thrown in? It's difficult to describe - and difficult to do.*

*I bet most people would have to dig pretty deep just to make it up one or two of these climbs. Now, here I am repeating all of them. Again.*

I'm wondering when I'll cross paths with the first place guy. This is a 9 mile out and back section, so I would think it would be impossible not to run into him. It seems like it should be anytime because he's so far ahead of me. I wonder if he's still sprinting like he's at a track meet.

Another drop. Another climb. Rinse, repeat.

*OK, ok, I give up. I admit, these are mountains. It has taken me over 20 years to get to this point. I'm always comparing the sharp, rolling elevations in the East to the towering, jagged peaks of the West. No doubt, the mountains out West are more domineering, more*

*impressive to look at, more rugged and snow-capped, etc. But, these little guys on the east side ain't no joke. Granted they are not as tall, but they can be steep and rocky and scrappy and kick your butt just as good as the rest of them.*

I hit Barkley's and I try using the ropes this time. It's a lot of work, but I soldier up to the top. I pause and pull out my phone to record my status. It's 1:19 am. I'm about 57 miles in. I start recording with the camera turned up at my face. I look pretty rough. It's Blair Witch Project footage. I'm breathing slowly and talking slowly.

*"This is hard," I say, "It's not easy. At least with this kind of elevation it's excusable to burn out. Those are some serious climbs. Stomach is getting crazy, but I'm still moving. I'm warm, though, that's good. This is a little rough. It's hard. I still like it, deep down."* At that last part I give a pitiful little half smile. I put the music back on and drop down the back side.

I climb up the next one and I finally see an oncoming light. It's the first place guy and he looks hammered. He's carefully negotiating the rocks as if he's sore. I ask him if he's going to knock out the course record and he says, "Not even close." Dang. Oh well. At least it's nice to know he might be human.

I knock out the last mountain and mercifully arrive at the dirt road, the bridge, the creek crossings. It's good to be this far.

I don't think people can really appreciate how much harder this is than a "regular" 100-mile race. This is my fifth one, and it's hard to even compare it to the others.

Stomach is not well. It's doing the standard shut down, protest mode. It's always the gut, man. Every stinking time. I'm trying not to let it drag me down, but now I can see we're headed into the usual downward spiral: sick stomach leads to less calories and water going in which leads to increased exhaustion which leads to slower and slower pace and sicker and sicker stomach. Man, how do other people beat this gut issue? It's really the missing piece for me.

I drop down all of the dirt road and hit the single track to the right toward the aid station. I keep looking for Joe. He should be crossing past me by now. He must have slowed down, because I know I haven't sped up. This section involves way more climbing than I remembered on the first leg and it seems like a completely different trail. I suffer through it with my gut getting progressively worse and eventually I see the lights down below. As I approach the aid station I'm sure of 2 things: my stomach is completely shot, and something has happened to Joe Ritchie.

## 64.3 MILES NORTH TRAILHEAD

I immediately ask about Joe and they tell me he came in feeling rough. They're pretty sure he's sitting in a car across the road. That's not good. I ask them if they have anything for stomach problems and all they have is ginger candy. I guess it's better than nothing. I eat the ginger and try to get some peace in my stomach. I really don't feel that bad besides my stomach. Always the gut, man. I hate that. I like everything else about everything out here. I like the pain and the cold and the elevation and the challenge and the people and the food and the night running and the mud and the rocks and the mountains. But, I could do without the stomach problems.

Plus, I've got almost 40 miles to go!

I warm my hands by their heater and it feels amazing. They pour me some soup and I put it to my lips but I just can't get any down. It won't go.

Suddenly a guy comes in across the road and it's Eric! What a coincidence. How do we keep running into each other? I love it. He's just come from the Cabins and is headed into the back country. I'm at the turn-around, half way through the back country, and here we are. We trade notes and I tell him my gut has got me by the throat. He asks me if I want to take something and I say, "anything." "I've got the good stuff," he replies.

He pulls out a little tin from nowhere and fishes out two funny looking pills. I start to ask what they are and then I realize I don't care. I grab the skinny one and pop it in my mouth. It goes to the back of my throat and I squeeze a squirt of water in to give it some help. I try to swallow and my body has other plans.

I turn around and kneel down by the heater and start puking my guts out. It's the violent, involuntary kind. My back keeps arching and my body keeps going into that motion of heaving all it's got onto the ground. I'm not freaking out. Just kind of observing. It's mostly liquid, which probably means I haven't been eating enough solids. My body tries to puke a few more times, with no success because there's nothing left.

Eric comes over and squats down next to me with the same kind of casual observation that I'm experiencing. He starts examining my puke pile like a scientist. Then he starts gently stirring it around. "If you didn't swallow that pill," Eric says, "we really should try to recover it." He fishes around for a minute and now I'm looking too.

This is so crazy. We're half way through a hundred-mile race, kneeling down in the cold, dark night, sorting through the recently-evacuated contents of my stomach, trying to find the pill I was trying to take to cure my stomach problems. And everything is just so matter-of-fact. If this, then this. It's such a hilarious scene.

We're both diligently studying the ground and I start thinking, *what are we going to do with the pill if we find it?* Will I try swallowing it again? Will he put it back in the secret tin and recycle it for another day?

Ok, now I feel better. Maybe that's what it was supposed to do? If so, that was a dang effective pill. This is interesting. I usually feel really pukey in the last quarter of the race but I rarely actually puke. Maybe this will be better. I take the other funny pill and it goes down without a fight. I chew the juice out of an orange slice and it doesn't make me gag, so I feel like we're getting somewhere.

I gear back up and run across the street to try to check on Joe. There are a few people staring warily at me in their cars and some people who are obviously trying to sleep. I can't tell if any of them are Joe's crew so I decide not to bother them. I'm bummed. I want to be able to talk to him and see if I can help or we can trudge on together. Then again, I'm pretty tapped myself. And I gotta get moving or I'm going to start getting cold.

I go back across the street and head back up the hill into the final section of back country. I'm prepared for the fact that this is going to feel like forever and it's going to try to whoop me. If it almost took me out at mile 18, it surely has the potential to bring me to my knees 50 miles later.

I start heading up the hill and immediately run into an oncoming runner, then another guy, then 2 more. What in the world? That means 4 people are right on my tail! How is that possible? Usually by this point things are so spread out that I hardly ever run across anybody. I'm trying not to care about position, but you just can't help but feel the pressure of four people breathing down your neck. Plus, come to think of it, I guess I'm probably in second place right now since Joe is still at the aid station. Weird. Probably won't last. Place means nothing, Brandon. Repeat after me.

I patiently take on the single track, then the dirt road with river crossings. I come across the guy who's doing his 760<sup>th</sup> ultra. He's going slow, but smiling. "This is number 770?" I ask. "760," he corrects me, "but, I gotta finish!" he says, with a big smile on his face. What a great sport.

I finish the dirt road and hit the Billy Goat bridge, and start into the mountain climbs. I pop in the headphones and Bob Marley comes on again. That's twice now in my random playlist. I like it. I think I need a little more Bob Marley in my life. *Let's get together and feel alright.*

*The night is pretty dang gorgeous. The moon is still really bright and there's just that stillness that we so rarely get in our busy lives. Solitude is pretty amazing. It feels like the whole rest of the world is asleep.*

My head lamp powers down and I just leave it on low for a while. I guess I should start to worry, but I feel like I've got bigger fish to fry. I'm taking these hills one step at a time, fully expecting them to go on forever. Actually I think I'm doing better mentally with this round of back-tracked back country because I prepared myself for the worst. This actually feels do-able.

I finally force myself to switch batteries in my headlamp and it's not good news. One of my rechargeable batteries is fried – not just out of charge, but like out of commission. I switch to my other headlamp and it's on power-down, barely-light mode.

This is bad. I check my watch and it's 5 am. That means I've got maybe an hour and a half before sunrise and my headlamp situation has entered critical phase. Oh well. I'll just use dull mode while it lasts and see what happens. If both of them die I could just take a break and chill beside the trail until the sun comes up.

Wow. I've never looked forward to a sunrise like this before. Usually I'm trying to finish a 100 before the sun comes up, so I'm mad every time when I don't make it. This time I've still got a long way to go and it's been a long, dark, cold night. I could use the boost.

I cruise along, up and down, around, on and on. I pass Eric and tell him my stomach is ok. I pass a couple more dudes, including Michael Scott, who's done all those 200's. He gives me a cheer and that's cool. I come across two guys and one says, "ok, what mile are you on?"

"I don't know," I respond, "67ish?" They shake their heads because they're probably 8 miles behind that.

I keep on cruising with my pitifully dim headlamp. I keep looking to the horizon but no sign of an imminent sunrise. Finally I get a slight glow off to the right. I keep pressing forward and watch as it slowly brightens. Pretty soon there's a red glow at the horizon and I feel giddy with excitement, like waiting for your favorite band to come on stage. I take a few pictures because I can't stand it.

The trees are still pitch dark silhouettes in the foreground and the sky is a rainbow of colors in the background; red at the horizon then pink then violet as you go up.

I switch to video and record my drunk-sounding assessment.

"That's a pretty fantastic sunrise we've earned. It's a good thing, cause my headlamps are pooping out. My stomach sucks pretty bad, but I'm just trying to ignore it. These are some big climbs, but hey, one step at a time, brother. I think Joe dropped, so that's bad. This is tough. I don't like being nauseous. Would I pay somebody to drive me around and make me carsick? No. No I would not. I like the rest of it, though. I think my muscles have actually been the least sore of any other hundred I've done. That's pretty amazing. I'm fighting a little fatigue, but it's mostly the stomach. The sun's going to help a lot! Gonna give me a little light, a little warmth, a little comfort."

I keep climbing while I'm watching the show on the horizon. It's so amazing. With every step the sky is getting a little lighter, changing colors almost imperceptibly. What a show. I keep climbing and climbing. The sun is cheering me on. He's taking his own patient steps toward full blown sunrise. I love it.

I get to the top of this hill and the rocks are familiar. I'm already at King's Chair, and what timing! I was so bummed I missed being able to take pictures of the sunset when I

came through here last night because I had dropped my phone. Now I've got my phone and I couldn't have planned the amazing timing. The sun has just popped up above the horizon. It's a bright red ball. The whole world is instantly lit up with that golden glow. I stop at King's Chair and I'm flooded with emotion.



I can't even express to myself how grateful I am to have the sun coming up – and in such a glorious display! Suddenly everything is going to work out. This view, this experience, this moment is worth all the rest of it -- the cold, the exhaustion, the puke – all of it. Suddenly I feel about 10 degrees warmer. I can see everything in every direction. My headlamp issues are inconsequential now. The rest of this race will be bathed in sunshine. How glorious.

*I keep scanning this beautiful scene and I am filled with one single, powerful thought: **Appreciation**. That's what this is all about. That's why I do this. I sign up to suffer – but only because it makes me grateful. Denying yourself of blessings makes you value them so much more. Right now I'm flooded with appreciation. For my legs, my stomach, heat, sleep, nature, this race, the people, my family, food, water, a house to live in, air to breathe and the lungs to do it with.*

*I could have watched a movie last night and woke up late and cleaned the garage today and look what I would have missed.*

*I have never been so grateful for a sunrise.*

*Can you believe I've been doing this for 12 years now and I just now figured out the real, true, underlying reason why I do it? It's **gratitude**. Doing this makes me grateful. It keeps me from taking my blessings for granted. It keeps me from being complacent, entitled, stagnant, spoiled.*

*It's like all my other little epiphanies in all my other races have led to me to this one, culminating conclusion. This is all about gratitude. It's gratitude lessons.*

*It's like going to a third-world country for a month, only this is cheaper. This is the smartest, cheapest, quickest way for me to experience this "deprivation-induced appreciation training."*

*That's what this is. Holy Crap. No wonder I love it so much. It's not so much that I love the suffering – I love the effect of the suffering. I do love the race and the nature and the challenge, but I also love coming out on the other side, alive, and seeing my family and taking a shower and getting my stomach back. And then, for at least one beautiful week I am completely overwhelmed with gratitude.*

*This is not just a sport. It's a culture, a lifestyle, a way of thinking. I can do hard things and it makes me happy to be alive. No wonder it has taken over my life. This is not a hobby. This isn't golf or ping-pong or old cars or woodworking – it's a magnification of life. It's appreciation therapy.*

*This is about sucking the marrow out of life, like Thoreau talked about. It's Carpe Diem in a syringe. You can't get this artificially. You can't watch it in a video. There's only one way to get to this kind of gratitude. You gotta walk the walk. You gotta do the miles. You have to make it to a rock like this after doing all that all through the night just in time to see a sunrise like this.*

I cruise down the other side and up the next big one and down again. The hills keep coming but I have outsmarted them. I'm planning for them to last forever so I will be pleasantly surprised when they exhaust their supply.

My plan works perfectly and soon my downhill are getting less steep. I take the hard left and run the sidewinders and I'm back at the trailhead. Hallelujah. What a stretch. That last 12 miles contained half a life's worth of ups and downs and I wouldn't trade it for the world.

## **74.7 MILES NORTH TRAILHEAD**

I tell the peoples I'm good and cruise right through the aid station. I love this part. And it's daylight. And it's getting warmer.

I peel off my hat and the cool wind feels good. There's a little more climbing here than I remember, but no big deal. I chew it up and get into the little canopy section. It's egging me on now, because I know I'm getting close to home base again. I hit Maggie's Glen and pick up the pace because I know the Cabins are within reach. Hallelujah. This is a great reward for making it through the night and making it through the back country.

## 77.5 MILES CABINS

I make the last turn and see that beautiful arch.

Boom. 75 miles +. I love it.

I come in through the banner and there's a huge crowd. I joke that I'm glad to see so many of my fans. They are actually lining up to start the 25K and 50K and whatever else they're running today.

Bobby is here and I'm so glad to see him. "I busted it to make it by 8 am just to meet you," I tell him. It's 5 minutes to 8 and I had told him that I was hoping to come through sometime between 6 and 8 am.

I get to the truck and change to lighter gear now that it's getting warmer. I order hot chocolate and eggs from Bobby and I sit down and close my eyes for a minute. I don't sleep, or even dream, but it feels good to go into a figurative fetal position for a minute.

Bobby comes back with the hot chocolate and he's got nothing to mix it with. I hand him a string cheese out of my lunch box and he stirs it up. He hands it to me and surprisingly it's not very well mixed. I take a sip and it's one step below warm. Dang. I just can't get a break with the liquids around here.

I take out some grapes from my lunch box and put one in my mouth. I bite into it and squeeze the juice out and it's delicious. Who could have guessed grapes would be the one thing my stomach would allow? Oh well. I'm glad to have guessed it. I squeeze the juice out of 2 more and Bobby comes back with 2 fried eggs. They sound good in theory. I take a bite and it just sits there in my throat like a dirt clod. I chew it up into smaller pieces and now it feels like lots of little dirt clods. There's no way I can swallow this. I spit it out and tell Bobby I'm ready for the last 25 miles.

We hit the single track and I give him all my updates. He says I'm looking pretty good, all things considered, and I'm grateful to hear some positive feedback. It's so great to have a pacer.

We're in to full-blown daylight now and it feels great. Sometimes the sun feels annoying after you've been running all night, but right now it feels fantastic. Come to think of it, I haven't really noticed any significant sleep fatigue. I'm exhausted, but I'm not drooping or feeling like I need to sleep at all. Amazing.

We cruise along and I get quiet again. I chew another grape. I can't swallow the "pulp". I just squeeze out the juice, let it trickle down my throat, then I chew on the solid part until it turns to mush and then I spit it out. I'm making progress, but still can't handle "solids" apparently.

After a long stretch of silence I say to Bobby, “I guess you’re going to get a treat almost no one ever gets to experience: Brandon being quiet!” He laughs. I get quiet again.

We run a lot of the roller coasters and then start up the sneaky big hill. I’ve got good momentum, but it’s a monster of a hill – not steep, just long. I see a rock that will make a perfect seat and I plop down on it to take a break. I apologize to Bobby. I lay back and sit lifeless for just a few minutes. It feels so good to stop moving for a second. Bobby takes a picture and it makes me look very dead.

I collect myself and stand up to trudge on and suddenly we see a guy gaining on us. What in the world? How could anybody else have made it through what I just went through and at almost the same pace? I don’t get it.

“He can have it,” I announce to Bobby. I mean it. Position means nothing to me now. I’m going to finish this thing and it doesn’t make one bit of difference who’s in front of me or behind. He catches up to us just as we reach the top of the hill and turn right onto the dirt road.

Oh. That’s right. I forgot about this one. I love this stretch. I start talking to the other dude for a minute, and then I just feel too good. I open up and start sprinting down the road.

*Now we’re talking. This is the kind of stuff I live for. Sprinting at 78 miles! I love it. There’s something unbelievable about feeling good after so much struggle.*

I start losing the other guy and I just keep feeling better. I run faster and faster and it actually feels better on my muscles than hobbling. I’m sprinting now. Feels like 6 ½ minute miles. It’s probably more like 9:45’s, but it feels like I’m going all out.

“I guess you didn’t mean it when you said he can have it,” Bobby quips. Touché. I’m a sucker for a challenge.

The trail cuts right and it’s the steep downhill section. I really open up and I think I’m even losing Bobby in a few places. Oh well. He’ll catch up. I’m sure I’ll crash again somewhere up here. Then again, I’m kind of feeling like a million bucks. My stomach actually feels ok, for the first time in a very long time. This has never happened before. I got my stomach back! Oh man. Maybe this will last through to the end. Maybe I’ll keep running strong for the last 20 miles and have one of my best finishes ever!

We wind through the final roller coasters and I’m feeling so on top. We catch a glimpse of the aid station and Bobby runs ahead to get my drop bag ready. I tell him I just need 2 things: Ben Gay and Pedialite.

## 84.7 MILES TERRACE DRIVE

The aid station dudes offer me lots of things but I'm sure my stomach won't allow any of it. I check my water bottles and they're still relatively full. That's never good. I'm going to have to keep leaning on my grapes, I guess. My stomach really has started feeling better, but it's like my esophagus has taken over as the first line of defense. I try to drink or eat and it just kind of closes the gate.

I know I need the energy. I open up my bottle of Pedialite and force down two big swallows. I try to eat an orange slice, but that ain't happening. I bite the orange slice anyway and suck the juice out and that works, so I do it with 2 more orange slices.

My muscles are just barely starting to notice me, so I decide to do some preventative maintenance. Apparently all I had in this bag was the Icy Hot, so I slather it all over my thighs and calves. I shed the winter hat and my green fleece jacket and the ski gloves – all of the winter gear that got me through the night – and I feel a lot lighter and warmer.

I cruise along the flat, winding trail, and Bobby catches back up to me. This section is really easy, but my running legs are quickly stiffening and I'm having trouble getting into a rhythm. I keep running in little spurts then hiking again with the poles. I'm disappointed. I thought that last long haul of good-paced running was a sign of how this whole last leg was going to go. Now it feels like it was foolish to go faster than I should have and now I'm paying the price. Dang, this is such a roller coaster ride. Don't sweat it, bro. One flag at a time. Do what you can do. At this point you know you're going to finish the race. Time doesn't matter. Position doesn't matter. You've got a pacer and some sunshine and the trail that's left is a lot more merciful than the back country you have already put to bed.

We hit the neighborhood road and hobble down to the base of the powerline. I'm down to a long sleeve shirt and even that's getting warm. I pause for a picture at the base of the hill and some guy comes flying past me like he just started the 50.

What in the world? This is not the same guy that caught us a little while ago. I haven't seen this guy the whole race. How is that possible? I should have been seeing him at the out-and-backs if he was right behind me, right? I don't get it. And how do some people do this? They sit back in slow cruise control and then power up in the last 20 miles. It doesn't matter. I don't have the juice to fight with him for second place. I'm tapped. I'm just trying to finish with my dignity. But, this guy is hauling. And smiling! Amazing.

I peel the long sleeve shirt and ironically I'm wearing my White River 50 shirt. It's the exact same thing I was wearing when I finished this race 3 years ago.

We start trudging up the powerline trail and two big dogs start to hang out with us. They're both wearing bandanas around their necks and they won't take a hint.

The trail goes up and up and I just keep putting it away. We reach the top of the power line and Bobby gets some pictures of the view. We hit the road and try to run it, but I can only do it in spurts. The dogs won't stop following us and every car that goes by gives us a dirty look like, *why can't we keep our dogs out of the road.*

We hit the little stretch of single track and we're home free.

## **89.8 MILES PEAVINE FALLS**

I'm hoping my wife and Everett have made it by now. They almost never make it to my races anymore and I'm so excited to see them. At the same time, I'm pretty spent, and I don't want to hang around at the aid station any longer than I have to.

They're not here, so I look through my drop bag to see what I have. Nothing seems to interest me so I drop it and start heading out. There's a porta-john here, so I decide to take advantage of it. I try to go to the bathroom just because I feel like I should, but ultimately there's so little of anything in my system that there's nothing to expel. Oh well, I tried.

I grab my gear and we start to head out when I see Mr. Orange shirt again. Man, what's his deal? He just keeps catching me. I wish he would suck me under or hang back or something. How do we keep bumping into each other? Is he going steady and I'm just hot and cold, or is it the other way around? I don't know. He's getting checked on by his crew so I'm going to try to get a head start.

We cruise back down the power line. At the bottom of the hill there are some neighbors cheering us on. They ask if we've seen 2 dogs and I confirm that they went all the way to the top. Sorry. I've got bigger fish to fry.

Through the paved road, up into the easy single track, onto the split. I ask Bobby to turn on some music or tell me a story or something just to distract my brain. He turns on "This American Life." Aww, my pacer knows me. I love the show, but it's hard to hear and I don't have a lot of capacity to concentrate right now. Oh well, it's something.

Man, it's weird that these two guys have caught me in the last 10ish miles and yet I'm not running into anybody else behind me on this out and back section. I don't get it.

We hit the section where I doubled back in a panic when I was doing this race a couple years ago. That was a traumatic experience, but I still love this section of trail. It's so runnable. I open up and give it all I have. We're cruising along and here comes that guy again. Gracious. He catches us right at the covered bridge. We cross the road and start heading up the last endless climb of the race. We offer to let him pass and he politely declines, saying he doesn't feel like running right now. *Really? 'Cause you sure have felt like running for the past 8 miles while you've been chasing me!*

We climb together while the podcast blares in between us. This guy is probably wondering what's up with the podcast. I finally work up the energy for some conversation and find out this guy is from the Midwest and this is his first 100-miler. OMG. Crazy. He did his first 100K a while back and took 1<sup>st</sup> place. I ask him what his big secret is and he says, "food." His wife is his crew and she force feeds him at each aid station exactly the number of calories he needs. Hmm. Sure beats my nutrition plan. It's a plan I like to call, *Suck the juice out of a grape every 20 minutes and spit out the pulp.* We reach the top and leap frog a couple more times. We start going back down the other side toward the waterfall, and at least I don't feel lost this time. My legs are getting stiff, though, and I'm having a hard time running. I'm trying, but it's not very successful. I suddenly catch a little root and fall flat on my face. Bobby helps me up and I feel like a 90-year-old man who just lost his balance. I collect myself and keep prodding forward.

Bobby's running ahead of me now, trying to urge me forward. It's the right strategy, but I'm having trouble taking the bait. Suddenly orange shirt hits his stride and he just runs out of site. Bye. There goes third place, I think. Doesn't matter.

We hop down all the rocks and take a picture at the waterfall.

We cross the river and back again and start the climb back up to the pavilion. I'm going slow, but making steady progress. One flag at a time, brother. I'm cruising up the big climb thinking how manageable this section seemed last night, but this time the hill keeps expanding up ahead of me. It climbs and climbs and climbs. There's no way this was like this on the previous lap. This is ridiculous.

*David, don't you realize that you're killing us?*

*How can you take pleasure in our misery? How do you make these climbs expand over time?*

*How have the people ahead of me apparently zoomed through this no problem and now they must be happily jogging their way into the finish? How are there not carcasses of other runners strewn about this trail?*

Ok, I'm getting frustrated. How is it possible to get this much vertical out of this tiny little mountain? It just keeps going. I start complaining to Bobby and he's just absorbing it, knowing that I need to whine for a minute. It keeps climbing and stubbornly I keep managing to take the next step.

I reach the point where I've got to catch my breath or I'm not going to make it. I plop down on a rock and give my body a much needed motion vacation. Bobby wants to take a picture and I give him the death stare. I don't look so hot. I really don't feel as bad as I look, but I'm also in no position to put on a happy face for the camera.

Finally we hit the wide trail and see civilians. We're almost there. Last aid station. Let's do this.

## **96.5 MILES PEAVINE FALLS**

I check in but I don't need anything. I can't consume anything anyway. I'm on a strict grape juice diet. We head out and cruise back down into the valley. We make all the twists and turns and start heading back up to the ridge. We reach the top and it's a good sign. This race is almost over, but I can't think that way. I remember how long and rocky this section was last night. I can't think about it. I need a distraction. I can't just lunge for the finish line. I know how these last few miles can be so grueling mentally. Each mile can feel like 20. And it just keeps getting worse, the closer you get. At least, that's the way it works for me.

I'm not going to play that game. I'm going to play a different one. I've been going flag to flag through this whole race and it's been a very helpful strategy. At this point I'm going to take it to the next level. I'm going to count the flags. From right here at the beginning of the straight shot across the ridge all the way to the finish I'm going to count every stinking flag.

I start by guessing how many it will take to get to the finish. 47. I start with number one and I can see number two in the distance. This is going to be fun.

I'm expecting it to be horrendously rocky, but it's not as bad in the daylight. The trail keeps meandering left and right, taking me away from my destination, but oh well. I'm just counting flags. 13, 14, ok, now where's 15? C'mon 15, show yourself. I get up to 35 and it's obvious that my original guess is way too low. I hit 50, 51, 52.

My body is in cruise control. The quads hurt, I've got zero energy, and my stomach is in knots. All I can do is chew another grape and count another flag.

I've been wide awake for 35 hours. I've been plodding forward in this race for about 26 hours. I guess I've covered all 26,000 of the vertical feet, because the rest of this is downhill. All the rocks. All the cold. What an amazing feat.

Bam. There I go again. Another awkward face plant. This time my left elbow smacks a rock and I'm reminded that I'm still healing from my little Pinhoti mishap.

I get to flag 100 and I tell Bobby about the significant milestone. I keep counting and make it to 150 and then I start losing track. I don't have the mental bandwidth anymore.

I start to get a little chill and I look at the sun. It's not very high in the sky. Oh my gosh. If I don't hustle I could be running out of daylight. Again. Uh-uh. Not on my watch. I am not going to get stuck out here and be forced to finish this thing in the darkness. I've got to surge now and finish in the warmth and daylight.

Mercifully we hit the white / orange trail and take the hard right. This is a good sign, but don't count your chickens.

We're off the ridge now, back into the woods and I look up and see something weird. Up to the left there is a car. I'm wary, because it seems very suspicious to see a car out here in the woods when I've been up all night. I don't trust myself. I'm not going to say anything to Bobby until I get a closer look. Sure enough, it's a green hatchback, with the hatchback open and there's a sign next to it. I'm still questioning it, but there it is, plain as day.

I'm just getting ready to reveal this amazing discovery to Bobby and it's suddenly a pair of trees instead of a vehicle. Man, that cracks me up. It seemed so real, and I knew it couldn't be, but my brain kept telling me it was legit. As I get closer I see how there's a branch on the tree that comes out at a weird angle and that was definitely the shape of the opened hatchback sticking up.

This makes me form a new theory on hallucinations. You know how you see something in the road in the distance and it's dark and you're not sure what it is and then your brain says maybe it's a dead dog and then you start to see a dead dog and then you get closer and it's actually a tire? Maybe that's what hallucinating is but your brain is getting closer and closer to being in a state of dreaming, so your brain's hypotheses are just getting more and more creative.

When you've had some sleep in the past 35 hours your brain thinks that unidentified object up ahead might be a stick or a rock or even a raccoon. But when you've been awake for a day and a half your brain starts guessing things like treasure chest and flock of penguins and circus tent. Or green hatchback.

Ya gotta love at least one good hallucination in a race like this. Come to think of it, this is almost exactly the same spot where I hallucinated in this race a couple years ago – and that was a car in a parking lot. Weird.

Alright. Time to finish this thing.

We come to the sign that says Maggie's Glen 1.3. This is good, but I remember this felt like 5 miles last night. I tell Bobby to check his watch to confirm how wrong this sign is.

We go down, left, up, right. Are you kidding me? There's no sign of anything remotely close to a valley or a creek or anything but trees and trails and sky. It goes and goes and goes. At least I knew it was going to be like this.

We finally start to drop for real and come to the hard right turn. I take 10 more steps and there, in all its glory, is Maggie's Glen. "We're saved!" I tell Bobby. "We're going to make it!" I'm so excited I lunge forward and catch a toe and fall flat on my face. I feel like such an idiot. "Didn't I do the exact same thing at the finish of that solo 50K I did a few months ago?" Bobby nods his head in agreement.

I pick up the pieces and run up to Maggie's Glen and take the hard left. Gradually I keep picking up the pace. I can hear the noise now. I can see the last stretch of this thing. I open up and sprint as hard as I can. I can't believe my family is here. It's rare for me to have my crew at the finish line. Makes me wanna cry.

Everett comes running up to me 10 feet before the arch. He's trying to give me something, but I grab his hand and run through the finish with him.

Hallelujah. It is finished. What a race.

I have no words.

## **103.6 MILES FINISH**

I hug my wife and pose for pictures and thank Bobby for his tremendous pacing. I collect my buckle award and sit on a bucket. My head is spinning. My body is relieved to be at the end. I want to eat, but that's going to take a while.

What an amazing race. It whooped me, but it was so different from my other 100's. I had some weird bonks in weird places. I had that supreme sunrise epiphany at King's Chair. It whooped me like no other race, but it was kind of a slow burn.

Overall my mental state stayed fairly upbeat. I never got real loopy or confused or mad. I got tired and exhausted and somewhat irritated at times, but I never lost it.

I never had a psychological breakdown, never wished I hadn't signed up. Never curled into a ball and wished for death. That's progress.

I hang out with the fam for a bit and say farewell to Bobby, and then to my wife and son.

I sit in my truck and peel off my gear and fall asleep.

A couple hours later I wake up and look around for Eric. We hang out for a little bit and talk about the race. He, of course, kept a steady pace through the whole dang thing and doesn't look the least bit worn out. He loved the course and that makes me happy. He gives me some medical advice on the gut issues and we say goodbye.

I collect my drop bags and drive home.

## EPILOGUE

The next day I can walk and I start to get a little bit of appetite back. I take several soaking baths to sooth the legs and it helps a lot. On Tuesday I run a strong 4 miles at 8 minute pace, and it feels pretty dang good.

By Wednesday I feel completely healed, but my stomach is still a little funny. Swallowing is still difficult and it's been four days since the race. Should I worry about that?

By Friday I feel fantastic, including my stomach. I go out to my lake with a friend and we sprint around it in 1 hour, 32 minutes – less than 2 minutes behind my all-time PR.

I feel like I'm in the best shape of my life. I think the back-to-back 100's experiment was a big success. I'm glad it worked out the way it did.

I look back and think, for several reasons, that this race was special. The weird start time, the challenging terrain, the elevation, having Eric come to town for the race, bonking at mile 18 – so many things made this race unlike any other.

But, mostly what I keep thinking about is that incredible sunrise up at King's Chair, and the revelation that came with it. These are tough and crazy times I'm stepping back into, with the continuing effects of a worsening pandemic, and all the political discord you can eat – not to mention all the normal challenges of life. This whole year has felt a little like an endurance race. Hopefully, in the midst of all this enduring, we can still manage to catch a few sunrise moments. Maybe, with a little concentrated effort, we can pause and appreciate what we're missing, and then we can appreciate it even more when we get it back.

My life is not immune to this roller coaster ride. So far I've managed to steer clear of this virus, but somehow it has still turned my life upside down. Plus, I've got all the regular pressures of life to get back into; messes to clean up and jobs to finish and money to earn and people that need stuff. But, I also have all the joys a person could ever ask for.

I think about this amazing race, and what it feels like to have endured. I think about all the things I've endured this year and throughout my life. I think about all the insurmountable joys that I've been lucky enough to experience, the many "King's Chair sunrise" moments I have been blessed with. I think about how lucky I am – to be alive, to love my family, to know the people I've known, and to have the experiences I've had -- and I am once again overwhelmed with *gratitude*.

What a race. What a life. What an epiphany.

I've got to make sure this one sticks.