

Crazy Horse Marathon in SD by David Holmen September 30, 2012

On September, 30, 2012, I ran the Run Crazy Horse Marathon, in Hill City, SD. This race is run mostly on the Mickelson Trail, which is the same trail used for the Lean Horse ultras. I missed Lean Horse this year because of schedule conflicts, so it was nice to have a chance to run the trail in a different race. It's a certified course, so it also gave me an opportunity to run a Boston qualifier in South Dakota.

The race starts at the visitor center for the Crazy Horse Monument. After three miles on roads going around the visitor center, we get onto the Mickelson Trail. The next 10 miles of the race are on a section of the trail that I've run before as part of the Lean Horse 100. I knew this section of the trail is a gentle downgrade all the way to Hill City. The half marathon finishes in Hill City, and the marathon route follows the Mickelson Trail for another 6 ½ miles before turning around and returning to Hill City. The out-and-back in the second half of the race is uphill going out and downhill coming back into town.

The host hotel for the race was the Lodge at Palmer Gulch. I opted to stay at the Best Western in Hill City, so I would be close to the pre-race and post-race activities. The race provided buses to the start from both Palmer Gulch and Hill City.

I flew into Rapid City and drove the rest of the way. The drive to Hill City is a little less than an hour. Because I arrived in the morning, I was able to eat lunch, pick up my race packet and check into my hotel all before noon. With the whole afternoon free, I decided to do several scenic drives.

I started by driving southbound on highway 87, a.k.a. the Needles Highway. The Needles are vertical outcroppings of granite that are typical of the rock formations found in the Black Hills. Along the way, I stopped at Sylvan Lake. Next, I drove the wildlife loop through Custer State Park, where I saw herds of bison and a few mule deer. Some drivers feed the mule deer, so if you stop along the road, they'll walk right up to your car. Finally, I drove northbound on highway 16A, a.k.a. Iron Mountain Road. This road has three tunnels that are each aligned so you can see Mount Rushmore through the tunnel. I didn't have enough time to stop at the Mount Rushmore visitor center, but I took a few pictures from scenic overlooks along the highway.

When I got back to Hill City, I joined fellow Marathon Maniac Joni Van Arsdale and a few of her friends for dinner at the Alpine Inn. There was also a pre-race pasta dinner at the Crazy Horse visitor center, but I didn't know if anyone I knew was going there.

Weather for the race was a bit warmer than normal. It was about 50 degrees at the start, and the forecast high was 79. I expected the temperature to reach the low 70s before I finished.

When we arrived at the Crazy Horse visitor center, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that they opened the building early just for the runners. We were able to come indoors, look around and use real bathrooms. 15 minutes before the start, I checked my gear bag and joined other Marathon Maniacs for a group photo with the Crazy Horse Monument in the background.

My goal for this race was to be under 3:30, so I need to average 8 minute miles. Although the first 2-3 miles are mostly uphill, we started with a short steep downhill, which caused me to start fast. I missed the first mile marker, so I didn't know how fast I was going, but I was getting short of breath. I attributed that to running uphill at 6000 feet elevation. As I approached the 2 mile mark, I wondered if I started fast enough to be under 16 minutes. I was a bit shocked to see my 2 mile split was 14:30. No wonder I was out of breath.

When we got to the Mickelson Trail, the gentle downgrade made it easy to run fast. My plan was to run a bit fast on the two long downhill stretches, so I could afford to go slow on the long uphill. I didn't want to wear myself out running uphill at this elevation. I wanted to run a 7:30 pace for the next 10 miles, but found myself running 7 minute miles. It felt fast, but it wasn't tiring.

When I reached Hill City and began the long out-and-back, I tried not to work too hard. I was already 10 minutes under my goal pace, so I could afford to give time back on the uphill. At first, I was running 8 minute miles, but by the time I reached the turnaround, I was slowing to almost 9 minutes per mile.

I paid close attention to the runners coming back. Most of them were on relay teams. I saw only two solo runners ahead of me. As I started my return trip, I knew I would be well under 3:30, but I wanted to hold on to third place.

Although the rest of the race was downhill, I wasn't able to run as fast as before. The fast miles on the earlier downhill took a toll on my legs, and they were getting stiff and sore. At first, I managed 8 minute miles. By the end, my pace was closer to 8:30. I never knew if the fourth place runner was close, so I never backed off in my effort.

I finished in 3:23:05, and I held onto third place. I stayed in the finish area for a while to greet the next several finishers, including the top two women. Finish line refreshments included chocolate milk, which is one of my favorite recovery foods.

My award for third place was a "horseshoe award" similar to the ones I've received at the Lean Horse ultras. This one was a little bit fancier, though.

I could have walked back to where my car was parked, but I opted to take the shuttle bus. That was a fortunate decision. A few minutes after I boarded the bus, it suddenly started raining. There was no rain in the forecast, and there weren't many clouds, so the rain was a big surprise. For runners still on the course, the rain probably felt good. Temperatures were now in the 70s, so I'm sure it helped cool them down.

The first half of this race gave me an opportunity to run a section of the Mickelson Trail that was familiar from the Lean Horse 100. The second half gave me a chance to run on a section of the trail I hadn't seen before. Someday I may have to run the Deadwood/Mickelson Trail Marathon, so I can run the northern section of the trail. I've now done five races on this trail, and I've loved them all.