

## ET Nevada by David Holmen August 2013

On August 18, 2013, I ran the Extra Terrestrial Full Moon Midnight Marathon in Rachel, NV. Rachel is a small town along Highway 375, officially known as the Extra Terrestrial Highway because of all the UFO sightings reported there. The highway runs near the eastern boundary of the mysterious "Area 51."

In addition to the marathon, there's also a 51K race and shorter races. Last year, I did the 51K race. I decided to return, but this year I did the marathon for variety. When I registered for the race, I was just planning to run for fun. Later, I discovered the marathon has a certified course, making it possible to qualify for Boston here. Nevada is one of four states where I have not yet qualified for Boston, so I had to give it a try.

Although qualifying for Boston was possible, it wasn't going to be easy. This race is difficult for several reasons:

1. Thin air. The average elevation is about 5000 feet.
2. Hills. Actually, there's only one hill, but it's an 1100 foot climb over the first 13 miles.
3. Lack of sleep. The race starts at midnight, Pacific Daylight Time. To me, that would feel more like 2 AM.
4. Heat. The forecast called for upper 70s at the start, cooling overnight to low 60s.
5. Excess weight. I would need to carry a water bottle. I'm used to doing that in ultras, but it slows me down.

Having run the 51K race in 2012, I knew exactly what to expect. I remember how I felt on the first 13 miles last year. To qualify for Boston, I needed a time of 3:30 or better. That's an average pace of eight minutes per mile. When I did the 51K, my average pace was 8:41. Of course that was a longer race, and I ran out of gas in the late miles. To convince myself that 3:30 was possible, I had to have a way of coping with each of the challenges listed above.

The elevation ranges from 4523 feet at the start to 5617 feet at Coyote Summit. The last several miles would be about 4900 feet. Below 5000 feet, I don't feel much effect, but above that, I tire faster, particularly going uphill. Accounting only for the elevation, I expected it to slow me down by a few minutes, but probably no more than five. Several of my recent races have been faster than 3:25, so I assumed I could beat 3:30 at 5000 feet.

The first 13 miles of the course are uphill, but it's a very gradual hill. It's most noticeable between 9 and 13 miles. I knew I couldn't maintain eight minute miles over this stretch, but I had to keep it close. Whatever time I lost in the first 13 miles, I would need to make up in the next 7, which would be downhill. To prepare for this, I did treadmill workouts where I ran on a gentle grade (1 to 3 percent) at 7.5 mph or faster for at least 10 miles. I did two of these workouts. I probably should have done more, but it's been such a nice summer for running outside that I hated to run on the treadmill. These workouts were difficult, but I was able to do them. My hope was that in the race I would only be 15-20 seconds per mile slower.

It's hard to predict how lack of sleep will affect you. Last year, I ran well in the 51K race despite getting no sleep. I knew there was a chance I'd feel sluggish, but I just had to hope for the best. It was at least plausible that lack of sleep wouldn't slow me down.

Temperatures in the upper 70s sounded bad, but I reminded myself that it would be dry. I've done races recently with temperatures in the 60s and high humidity. That probably feels the same. The

hardest part would be running uphill during the warmest temperatures, but I had faith that I can run well enough in warm temperatures to overcome this.

I was actually most concerned about carrying a water bottle. To minimize impact on the environment, this is a “cupless” race. According to the website, they would have a limited number of cups at the aid stations, but runners are encouraged to carry their own water. When I did the 51K race, I used a hand-held 20 oz. bottle and refilled it at each aid station. I'm a lightweight runner. Even a 20 oz. bottle is a difference that I notice. I'm used to carrying a bottle or two in ultramarathons, but I'm not trying to run as fast. I decided to deal with this by carrying a bottle, but leaving the cover off. At each aid station, I would use my water bottle like a mug, taking only what I could drink at the aid station, but not carrying any fluids with me. The aid stations are 3.5 miles apart, and it would be a warm arid race, so I need to drink as much as I could each time I stopped. I did several training runs carrying a full water bottle in the hopes that I would barely notice an empty one.

After reviewing all of these challenges and evaluating how my training runs felt, I decided that 3:30 was feasible, but I would really have to work for it.

One of the nice things about this race is that you don't have to arrive until late Saturday afternoon. The host hotel was the Hard Rock Hotel in Las Vegas. I got a room for one night. I didn't actually expect to sleep there, but it gave me a place to clean up and change clothes, and it also gave me a place to leave anything that I wasn't taking with me to the start.

My flight arrived at 4 PM. The hotel is close to the airport, so the cab ride is about 10 dollars. Packet pickup was from 4 to 8 PM in the Artist Hall. I got there when they started, so I would have time to have dinner with friends. We had several hours before the race, so I ate a normal dinner (i.e. pizza).

After changing into my running clothes and packing my gear bag, I went back to the Artist Hall for pre-race photos with other Marathon Maniacs. It's a fun race, and you see people in creative outfits. After pictures, we lined up outside to catch busses to the start. There was one bus reserved for Marathon Maniacs and Half Fanatics.

The busses leave Las Vegas at 8:30. It takes about two and a half hours to get to the start. This was my only chance to get a nap before the race, but I wasn't optimistic that I could fall asleep. When we left Las Vegas, I felt sleepy. When I tried to fall asleep, I just got more awake. After that, I decided to just stay alert. When we arrived in Rachel, I no longer felt sleepy. So far, so good.

During the bus ride, I drank a 10 oz. water bottle. I could have finished three of them. Surprisingly, I didn't see anyone else drinking. Two and a half hours is a long time to go without water in an arid climate. After a bathroom stop, my next order of business was having a drink before the start. I drank about 6 oz. of HEED. A few minutes before the start, I decided I should drink more to tide me over until the first aid station. I waited too long. The water tables at the start had already been disassembled.

The temperature at the start seemed reasonable, but my perception may have been a bit distorted, since it was over 100 degrees in Las Vegas earlier in the day. Besides, if you feel comfortable standing around in shorts, it's hot for running.

I lined up near the front, and started at a pace that had me slightly short of breath. I backed off a little bit, and other runners started to pass me. When we reached the first mile marker, my watch read 6:56. I knew darn well I wasn't running that fast. I chalked it up to the mile marker being misplaced. My recollection was that the first mile marker also seemed to come too early the previous year.

When I reached the second mile marker, my split was 16:42. That seemed more realistic. I reach three miles in 23:42, which would have been an average of 7:54 per mile. That seemed overly optimistic. I realized it would be a few more miles before I would be confident that I knew what pace I was running. I was hoping it wasn't much slower than 8:00, but I was afraid it might be closer to 8:30.

At 3 1/2 miles, I reached an aid station. I was surprised to see they were mostly using paper cups. I filled my bottle about halfway and walked while I drank it. 10 oz. was as much as I could stomach drinking at one time. It wasn't long before I felt thirsty again. Hydrating sufficiently without drinking between aid stations was going to be a challenge.

At the four mile mark, my time was 32:17. Since I spent about 30 seconds at the aid station, that would have suggested an average pace under eight minutes. I still didn't believe that. My split at the five mile marker was 40:49. That seemed more realistic. It was nice to think that I might be averaging 8:10 per mile. Unfortunately, the next few mile markers were a reality check. Each one suggested a pace closer to 8:30.

At the next aid station, I again drank as much as I could stomach, and I again started feeling thirsty within a mile. I was working hard to keep from slowing down, and I was feeling hot. I worried that my effort was wearing me out, but my goal was 3:30 or bust. If I averaged 8:30 per mile in the first half, I might be able to make it up on the downhill. Anything slower than that would mean a deficit of more than 6:30. That would be too much time to make up. The toughest miles were still ahead of me, and I had to limit the damage.

I don't remember my times for the next few miles, but I remember feeling uncomfortable after the aid station at 10 miles. I was wearing a reflective vest, but it fit loosely. I was wearing my SpiBelt higher than usual, so it would hold the vest in place. I was drinking so much that having a belt pressing against my stomach was threatening to make me nauseous. I moved my belt back down to my waist. It was annoying to have to keep adjust my vest, but overall it was more comfortable.

Miles 12 and 13 were noticeably steeper than the others. I remember slowing to 9:30 in 2012. This year was worse. Mile 12 took 10 minutes and mile 13 took 11 minutes. By now, I knew I had lost far more time than I could possibly make up in the second half. Instead of trying to break 3:30, my new goal was to keep my time respectable. I still thought I could run a time in the 3:30s, but soon I would realize that I was kidding myself.

I crested Coyote Summit and reached the 13 mile mark in 1:56. I knew I couldn't make up 12 minutes, but as I started running downhill, I tried to pick up my pace. At this point, I was too lazy to read my watch precisely. Because I had to shine my headlamp on my watch to read it, I just looked for the hours and minutes and ignored the seconds. Rounding to the nearest minute, my first mile of the downhill was eight minutes, but the next one was nine minutes. Even going downhill, I couldn't run eight minute miles. I would run nine minute miles all the way to Rachel. I still felt hot. In fact, I was so hot that I could feel sweat rolling off my arm. I was running through the desert at 5000 feet. To actually feel sweaty was disturbing.

During this section of the course I was passing lots of runners who were doing the half marathon. They would finish in Rachel, while runners doing the marathon or 51K would do an out-and-back before finishing. When I passed the 20 mile mark, I left the half marathon runners behind. The remaining 6.2 miles would be somewhat lonely.

Because the first half of the course is much tougher than the second half, I assumed I would run negative splits. By 20 miles, I realized that just to run even splits, I would need to continue running nine minute miles. After seven downhills miles, it wouldn't be easy to maintain the same pace on

level ground. I was also getting increasingly fatigued. On the positive side, the temperature had cooled down enough to be comfortable, and I was no longer feeling dehydrated. I think I started the race dehydrated and it took me 20 miles of forcing fluids before I caught up.

From 20 to the turnaround, I saw a few of the faster runners coming back, but nobody passed me. That surprised me. Several runners passed me in the first half, but I don't remember anyone passing me from 13 to 23, even though I was slowing down. I was still running 10 minute miles, but coming back into town I couldn't sustain it. After two straight 10 minute miles, I knew I was going to finish with positive splits. By this time, I just wanted to finish under four hours. Actually, I had one other goal. As tough as this race was, I still thought I had a reasonable chance of winning my age group.

Returning to Rachel, I saw lots of runners still heading to the turnaround. Some were friends and others were strangers, but in the dark, I couldn't recognize anybody. I tried to give a few encouraging words to everyone I saw. I had been working hard to keep from getting passed, but inevitably a few runners passed me in the last mile. Each time, I joked, "no fair passing me unless you're not in my age group." Two were women and the third was a guy who was clearly much younger than me, so I didn't have to try to compete with them.

I crossed the line in 3:56:26. The finisher medal is shaped like the head of a space alien. It's green and glows in the dark. After having a few glasses of HEED, I located my gear bag. I couldn't wait to take off my head lamp. It started getting uncomfortable about an hour into the race.

The race finishes at a diner called Little A'Le'Inn, and each runner got a free breakfast. I decided to eat breakfast before checking to see if I won an award. In 2012, the awards were large and fragile, so if I won something, I didn't want to have to worry about it breaking while I ate. While I was inside, I saw the winners posing with their awards. This year's awards were made from translucent green stones.

After breakfast, I finally checked my result and discovered I won my age group. That made me feel better about my race. I was disappointed with my time, not just because I missed my goal by over 26 minutes but because my slow pace on the downhill was clear evidence that I wore myself out in the first half.

Other runners were already waiting in line for the next bus back to Las Vegas, so after a quick bathroom stop, I joined them. I wish I could have waited to see all my friends finish, but most of them would still be on the course for hours, and I had to begin the long bus ride so I could check out of my room and get to the airport.

It was a long ride back to Las Vegas. As we left Rachel, I saw runners still on the course. They were still heading toward town from the south, so I knew they still had a long out-and-back ahead of them. Most of them were probably there to have fun and were going at a pace that was within their individual comfort zones. I had pushed for a time goal that proved to be unrealistic, so I set myself up for an uncomfortable second half. That can take some of the fun out of a race. I was sleepy, but never quite fell asleep. Once the sun came up, I knew I'd stay awake for the rest of the day.

It took a while because I was tired and sore, but I eventually got cleaned up and left for the airport. I got there early enough to spend some time in the new Centurion Lounge. I recently received an offer to visit the lounge for free. Although I had breakfast at Little A'Le'Inn, that was at 4 AM, and I was already starving again. When I got to the lounge, they were still serving their breakfast buffet. By the time I left to board my flight, they were serving lunch. When I'm feeling run down from lack of sleep, a good meal (or two) always helps.

Later in the day, I saw full results online. I was far happier with my result when I realized I had placed 12th overall. The average time was about 5:30. This was a tough race. I made it tougher by starting the race dehydrated and trying to run too fast.