

Fenton MO by David Holmen September 2013

On September 1, 2013, I returned to Fenton, MO to run the Flatlanders 6 Hour race for the second time. I usually do well in fixed time races. When I did this race in 2012, I was hoping to win my age group, but ended up placing first overall. This year, I went back with hopes of repeating. For the second straight year, I was able to get a cheap airfare to St. Louis.

Early in the week, when I first starting looking at the weather forecast, I saw an overnight low of 73 and a high of 97 with sunny skies. My first impression was that those temperatures would be similar to my last race, but I could stop after six hours. (The Lean Horse 50 took me 8:44.) My training runs during the week reminded me that 90s with humidity would feel much worse than the dry heat I encountered in the Black Hills. I scaled back my expectations for distance. I knew I wouldn't run as far as I did in 2012, but hopefully I could survive the heat and keep moving. Later in the week, the forecast didn't look quite as imposing, but it was still going to be hot and humid.

If this were a large marathon in St. Louis itself, it would probably get cancelled. Fortunately, it was a small race in a suburban park, sponsored by an ultrarunning group. Races like this are seldom cancelled. Ultrarunners expect adversity and come prepared for it. My plan for coping with the heat included bringing a large insulated bag that I could fill with ice. I planned to keep filling my hat with ice and let the ice cubes melt on top of my head. It's not very comfortable, but it's effective. I also went out during the late morning or afternoon three days in a row to run for two hours in the heat and humidity. I didn't have time to adapt to the heat, but I wanted to get a good idea what it would feel like, so I could pace myself appropriately. On two of these runs, I did continuous running at a slow place. On the third, I alternated running with short walking breaks. I was wiped out after the first two runs. After the third one, I felt OK. My total mileage for those three runs was 36.05 miles. It didn't seem likely that I would run any farther than that running for six hours straight.

Immediately after my last training run, my tentative plan was to take walking breaks from the beginning of the race, initially setting a goal pace of 10 minute miles. Early in the race it would feel easy. Later in the race, it might be unsustainable. Then I reminded myself that I didn't use any ice on my training runs. With that in mind, I considered starting the race with a slow continuous run and switching to run/walk only as it got hot. By the end of the week, the forecast looked better. The high temperature had been revised down to 94. I knew from past experience that I probably wouldn't make a final decision about pacing until I started running. I've been getting more and more impulsive.

Two friends, Carl and Chad, were also doing the race. Carl also did the race in 2012. For Chad, it would be his first time running a marathon or farther. By chance, Carl and I were staying at the same hotel, and Carl offered to pick me up at the airport, saving me the cost of renting a car. After checking into our rooms, we met Chad at Fenton City Park to pick up our race packets. It was 100 degrees. I knew it wouldn't be quite as hot on Sunday, but it was still somewhat sobering to feel the late afternoon heat.

The race is run on a 1.4 mile paved loop around the perimeter of the park. Just past the start/finish area, there's room to store your gear. Some runners set up small camp sites. Although we didn't have a tent or canopy, Chad brought a few folding chairs, and we each had a cooler with ice.

When I woke up Sunday morning, it was 75 degrees. According to the latest forecast, it would climb to 91 by the time the race finished. I started the race with a slow continuous run and expected to switch to run/walk after an hour or two. I planned to start putting ice in my hat as soon as I started to feel hot. It didn't take long.

My first lap took about 13 minutes. A few minutes into my second lap, I realized I would need ice after that lap. In fact, I regretted that I didn't start after the first lap. For the rest of the race I never went more than two laps without putting a cup or two of ice in my hat (usually two). Sometimes I filled my hat on consecutive laps.

I couldn't believe how hot and sweaty I felt in the first hour of the race. Although the temperature was in the 70s, the humidity was sky high. I didn't know it until after the race, but the heat index was in the 90s from the very beginning. The ice made a big difference, but I had so much water melting and running down my back and legs that my shoes were soaked. This caused problems with my insoles.

Because I wear orthotics, I always replace the original insoles with Spenco insoles cut to the same shape. If too much moisture gets between the insole and the orthotic, the insole can slide forward. I could tell after a few laps that this was happening in one of my shoes. The insole was slipping forward and bunching up under my toes. Before long, I had to stop and take the shoe off to fix it. This quickly became a chronic problem in both shoes. Throughout the race, I must have stopped about eight times to fix at least one of my shoes. To save time, I usually combined these stops with stopping to put ice in my hat.

I only ran a few laps before a faster runner lapped me. He was really moving. I could see from the color of his race bib that he was also doing the six hour race, so I lowered my expectations from "possibly win the race" to "probably win my age group." He would pass me four more times by the halfway mark.

Although the conditions at the start felt much tougher than I expected, it never got much worse. The temperature climbed to a high of 90, but the humidity decreased. It usually took about a lap and a half for my ice to completely melt. In the last four or five minutes of each lap, it felt like I was in an oven, but then I would get a fresh supply of ice, and then I would feel OK again.

My pace never really slowed. I opted not to take walking breaks, because walking made my insoles slip almost immediately. On laps where I didn't need to stop, I continued to take about 13 minutes. Other laps were a minute or two slower, depending on whether I just needed ice or stopped to fix a shoe.

Late in the race, I expected the conditions to get tougher, but they actually improved. It started to get cloudy, and we got a nice breeze. With an hour to go, I realized I could finish 26 laps before starting the "short course." That meant I would run at least 36.4 miles. The "short course" is a quarter mile and-and-back course that we can start running in the last 20 minutes of the race. I finished my 26th lap with a little less than eight minutes to go. That gave me time for three short laps.

I've done many fixed time ultras. In some, only full laps count. Others also use a shorter course at the end of the race. One thing that sets this race apart is that they measure every runner's exact distance down to the nearest foot. As you begin the "short course," you're handed a flag on a wire with your bib number. You keep it in your right hand, and when the air horn blows, signaling the end of the race, you stop and jab the wire into the ground to the right of where you stopped. The race director then measures the distance to each flag.

I exceeded my expectations for the conditions, running over 37 miles. Chad's goal was to run 30 miles, which is an ambitious goal for someone who's never completed a marathon before. At one point during the race, he wasn't optimistic that he would make it. Carl's number one priority was to keep from overheating. He promised his friends and family that he would run conservatively. He used a heart rate monitor and took walking breaks if his heart rate started climbing too high. He knew

that most likely would mean running something short of a marathon, even though he exceeded the marathon distance the first time he did this race.

While the race director and volunteers were tabulating everyone's totals, a barbeque lunch was served under the park pavilion. When everyone's mileage was totaled, the race director announced that the award ceremony was about to begin.

This race has three types of finisher medal. Anyone who completes at least 50 kilometers gets a gold medal. Runners completing at least a marathon, but less than 50K get a silver medal. Those running any distance shorter than a marathon receive a bronze medal. I assumed the Carl, Chad and I would each be getting a different medal, making for a nice group photo.

Results are announced in order of ascending mileage. As they announced each runner's name and distance, the runners came up to receive their medals. In a few cases, there were runners separated by as little as a hundredth of a mile. The overall winners and the winners of each 10-year age group also received plaques. Carl ran over 24 miles and received a bronze medal. As they got into the silver medals, I started listening for Chad's name. They got above 29 miles and then 30 miles, and they were still calling out other names. Eventually, Chad received his silver medal with a total of 30.55 miles. That's an impressive result for someone who's never run a marathon, but he was already thinking about how close he was to 50K. I placed third overall with 37.21 miles. Along with a gold medal, I received a plaque for winning the Seniors (over 50) division. The overall winner got well into the upper 40s, setting a new course record for men over 40.

For several weeks, I've been worried about my right hamstring. Going into this race, it felt OK, but I noticed it during the race. It never bothered me while running, but I felt it tighten up a little each time I stopped for ice. After the race, I took an ice bath, did extra stretching and wore a compression wrap. That helped. The next morning, it felt fine. I didn't have any new aches or pains. I didn't feel at all like I ran a race, much less 37 miles.