

Hot Springs SD by David Holmen August 2013

On August 24, 2013, I ran the Lean Horse 50 Mile in Hot Springs, SD. This was the fifth time I did one of the Lean Horse Ultras. If you include the Run Crazy Horse Marathon, it's the sixth consecutive year I've done a race on the Mickelson Trail. All of my other races this year have been marathons, so I wasn't really trained for 50 miles. I added this race to my schedule so I would have a Western States qualifier.

The last few years, I've flown to Rapid City and rented a car. This year the airfare was expensive, so I drove. It's a little over nine hours of driving each way. I could have driven that in one day, but packet pickup ends at 3:30 Friday afternoon, and I didn't want to get up at 4 AM two days in a row. Instead, I broke up the driving by leaving on Thursday and making an overnight stop in Mitchell, SD.

I've driven across South Dakota before, but I've never stopped in Mitchell. While I was there, I visited the Corn Palace. I was surprised by the number of food vendors. It was like a county fair. I resisted trying deep fried cookie dough on a stick, but a cookie dough sundae was too good to pass up.

Friday morning, I got on the road in time to arrive in Hot Springs in the early afternoon. I had plenty of time to pick up my race packet and get all my gear organized before going to the pre-race briefing at 4:00. After that, I stayed for the pre-race dinner at the Mueller Center.

This was my first ultramarathon in almost a year. Other than marathons, I didn't do any other long training runs. I was hoping that my marathon training plus experience would be good enough. I wasn't trying to compete, and I didn't have a specific time goal. My plan was just to start the race at a comfortable pace, do enough walking to keep from overheating, and see how it goes.

Before the race, a few runners who were doing this race for the first time asked me if I had any advice. I told everyone to make sure they have enough water for Argyle Road, since the aid stations are farther apart there. For people doing the 50 mile race, it's also the hottest part of the course.

In races that are longer than 50K, I've always been very disciplined about managing my pace with walking breaks. I think this is one of the reasons I've usually done well in ultras. For this race, I did something impulsive. At the start of the race, I decided to do a slow steady run instead. I wanted to get in my fast miles before it got too hot. I assumed I would then feel comfortable taking liberal walking breaks on the hills of Argyle Road.

It was about 70 degrees at the start. That was a little warmer than I expected, but comfortable compared to the temperatures I would face later in the race. I heard the forecast high was 97, and I expected to be finishing in mid-afternoon. I started at a pace that felt like it would be comfortable for the first half of the race. The first mile was downhill, but the next 20 miles would have an uphill trend.

After about 14 miles, I started running with another runner from Minnesota named Dean. Dean was also doing a slow steady run. This was Dean's first 50 mile race, but he had no trouble running at my pace.

My main strategy for coping with the heat was to put ice in my hat and let it melt on the top of my head. I planned to start with the Pringle aid station at 16 miles. When I got there, I was so preoccupied with filling my bottle and eating some solid food, that I forgot the ice. The next five miles had no shade, and I started to get hot. The aid station at the turnaround was self-service. I knew I could refill my bottle there, but I didn't think it would have ice, so I expected to be hot until we returned to Pringle. I got lucky. When we reached the turnaround, there was a cooler filled with ice. After

putting ice in my hat, I was more comfortable on the return to Pringle. After that, I always remembered the ice.

At Pringle, Dean stopped to use the bathroom, and I continued by myself. Since the next four miles were mostly downhill, I decided to continue without walking breaks until the Lime Kiln aid station (30 miles). As I left that aid station, I passed another runner to move into second place among the men. Although I was beginning an uphill stretch, I continued to run without walking breaks. My revised goal was to wait until Argyle Road before beginning to take walking breaks. Argyle Road is very hilly, and I've always needed to walk part of each hill.

For most of the race, I was carrying two bottles, but only filling one, so I wouldn't have to carry extra weight. The second bottle was for Argyle Road. I was supposed to fill both bottles at the Argyle Loop aid station, but I forgot. I started Argyle Road with just one water bottle.

As you start Argyle Road, you can see an imposing hill near the beginning. I've always needed to walk this hill. This year, I challenged myself to run it. I told myself if I could run the first hills, none of the others would be any worse. After reaching the top of the first hill without walking, my revised goal was to run all of Argyle Road without walking. If I could do that, and then run the relative easy miles going into Hot Springs, I would probably finish in less than eight hours. My course PR was 7:55.

On the Mickelson Trail, there are permanent mile markers. Although they're not in synch with race mileage, I used them as reminders to drink. In the past, I've also used them to remind me to take walking breaks. Argyle Road has no markers, so I switched to drinking every 10 minutes. That worked well, and I was pleasantly surprised to reach the Morph aid station without running out of water. That led me to make a fatal mistake. I didn't follow my own advice.

Despite having run Argyle Road several times, I was of the mistaken impression that the Morph aid station was about halfway between Argyle Loop and Cold Brook Campground. Since I was able to make it to Morph with only one bottle, I thought one bottle would also be enough to make it to the campground. I was wrong. I ran out of water about a mile before the turnoff.

Even before I ran out of water, I was slowing down. While I was still running the hills, I wasn't running very fast. I remember thinking that I was moving about as fast as a zombie. Then I noticed my arms. My sweat had mixed with my sunblock to form a paste. Throw in some dust from passing cars, and it looked like decomposing flesh. I looked and moved like a zombie.

When I got to the turnoff, the gate was closed. In past years, there was always an opening. I knew this was the correct place to turn, so seeing no alternative, I climbed over the gate. After that, suddenly, running was much more difficult. My legs felt like they were made of lead. At first, I forced myself to keep running. That didn't last long. I still had to run across a meadow for the better part of a mile to reach the aid station. That was too far. I started walking, hoping I would be able to start running again after the aid station. It occurred to me that I might need to walk the rest of the race.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I was beginning to suffer from heat stress. Walking the rest of the way to the aid station reduced my level of exertion, but it also lengthened how long I went without water, which didn't help.

When I got to the aid station, I immediately drank a cup of water from table. The volunteers filled my bottle and got ice for my hat. In the brief time I was standing there, I started to get light-headed. I held on to the table to keep my balance. I knew that coming to a complete stop after a long period of exertion could cause light-headedness, but I don't think I've experienced this before. As soon as I

was ready, I started walking again. The light-headedness quickly passed, but I wasn't going to try to run right away.

Leaving the campground there's a switchback up one last big hill. I wanted to get past this hill before trying to run. Going up the hill, I couldn't even walk very fast. It was more of a slow stagger, and I wasn't always moving in a straight line. About a mile after the aid station, there's a smaller hill. By the time I got there I was walking better, but I wasn't ready to try to run yet.

On that last small hill, Dean ran by me. He had paced himself more conservatively on Argyle Road, taking walking breaks on the hills. Now he looked strong. I told him he had second place. A few minutes later, another runner passed me. I told him he was in third place. Although I had dropped out of the top three, I knew I was still in line to win my age group.

With two miles to go, I got onto city streets. I know the last two miles of this course like the back of my hand. The closer I got to the finish, the faster I walked. I progressed from a stagger to a normal walk, and eventually, a power walk. With about a mile to go, I tried to run. I quickly discovered that I couldn't run any faster than I could power walk, but it took more energy and made me short of breath. I made peace with walking the rest of the way. I finished in 8:44:22 and held on to first place in my age group.

Immediately after finishing, I sat down. A minute later, I needed help getting up out of the chair. I went inside the Mueller Center, which was air conditioned. The volunteers offered to bring food and beverages, but I needed some time before I had the energy to eat or drink anything. After collapsing into a chair, I had to rest my head on the table for several minutes as I slowly caught my breath. When I could, I gradually rehydrated and ate some solid food.

As my sweat evaporated, it left the thickest coating of salt I've ever seen. I was also as sore as I've ever been after finishing a race. When I was strong enough to walk, I went back to the motel to shower. Then I took an ice bath, followed by a warm bath and some stretching. In time, I felt much better. Finally, I put compression wraps on both thighs to minimize inflammation in my quads and hamstrings. It worked. Later in the day I felt surprisingly normal.

I went back to the Mueller Center to visit with other 50 mile and 50K finishers for the rest of the day. In ultras, everyone has a story to tell. The next morning, I packed up the car, checked out of the motel, and went back to the Mueller Center to see some of the 100 mile finishers. I stayed there until the end of the race, watching the last several finishers come in. Most of the 50K and 50 mile finishers who won awards opted to receive them on Saturday, so they could begin traveling home. I waited until the award ceremony on Sunday. Besides seeing the winners, I like to see everyone get their 100 mile belt buckles. I didn't get on the road until about 1:00. I again broke up the drive by making an overnight stop in Mitchell.

Attempting to run without walking breaks was an experiment. I'm not sure how well it succeeded. On one hand, I've done the 50 mile race three times, and this was my slowest finish. On the other hand, it easily could have been my fastest time if I hadn't succumbed to heat stress. I'll never know if I could have run the whole way if I had taken enough water with me when I left the Morph aid station. It's encouraging to know that without training beyond the marathon distance I can run continuously for 45 miles, even with temperatures in the 90s.