

Ice Age Trail 50K by David Holmen May 2012

On May 12, 2012, I ran the Ice Age Trail 50K race in Kettle Moraine state forest in southern Wisconsin. I used this race as a training run for the Western States 100. It was my first ultramarathon of 2012. It was also my first trail race of 2012. Both were long overdue.

This race was a six hour drive from home. A few days before the race, I saw that Delta had a bargain airfare to Chicago. I decided to drive anyway, so I wouldn't have to pack light. I later regretted that decision.

After a few hours of driving, my car gave me a "check tire pressure" indicator. I was just pulling off the freeway for lunch, so I took a quick look at all the tires. I couldn't tell which tire was the problem, so I assumed one of the tires was slightly low and I could adjust the tire pressure the next time I was at a gas station.

I continued on my way, and checked into my room at the Hampton Inn in Elkhorn, which was about 12 miles from where the race starts. Then I went to packet pickup and the pre-race dinner. When I got back to the hotel, I stopped at a gas station across the street to check the pressure of each tire.

As soon as I got out of the car, I could see the rear driver side tire was low. I apparently had a slow leak. After considering all my options, I decided to put on the spare and wait until after the race to get the tire fixed. I later regretted that decision.

One of the lug nuts was so tight that I couldn't budge it. One of the hotel employees was on a break, and helped me change the tire. He was easily twice as strong as me, and he also had trouble getting that lug nut loose. I can't possibly say enough about how helpful all of Hampton Inn employees were. If I ever do this race again, I will definitely stay at Hampton Inn again.

The race started at the Nordic Trailhead near La Grange, WI. There was a 50 mile race, a 50K race and a half marathon that all used sections of the same trails. The 50 mile race started at 6:00. Although my race didn't start until 8:15, I got there around 6:15 to make sure I could find a parking spot.

The weather was nearly ideal. The temperature was in the upper 50s. There had been a chance of a nighttime thunderstorm, but it never developed. There were a few short periods of light rain before the race, but the trails were still in good condition.

The 50K race started with an out-and-back section on the Ice Age Trail. After returning to the starting area, we did two laps of one of the Nordic Trail loops. The out-and-back was about 13 miles. Each loop was about nine miles. All of the trails were well-marked with paint arrows. They used a different color for each race. In the few places where trail intersections were potentially confusing, there were volunteers to show us which way to turn. It would be difficult to make a wrong turn in this race.

The Ice Age Trail is mostly single-track trail. It's moderately hilly, and some of the hills had rocks, so I had to watch my footing. The Nordic Trail loop was wide and grassy. Although it had some tiring hills, it also had some long flat sections, and I rarely had to worry about my footing.

Since I was using this race as training for Western States, I always carried two bottles. The aid stations were frequent enough that I could have got by with a single bottle, but I wanted to get used to carrying the extra weight. I filled one bottle with HEED and the other with water. I mostly drank the HEED, but the water bottle came in handy later.

I took a gel packet and an S-Cap every hour. I also ate PB&Js at several aid stations. I didn't really need that much food for a 50K race, but I will at Western States, so I wanted to start getting used to it.

My intention was to run this race at a comfortable pace, rather than racing all out. In the early miles, my pace felt comfortable, but after reaching the turnaround (6.7 miles) in one hour, I realized my pace was a little fast. I was maintaining a slow, but steady run, while most people were walking the uphills. On the return trip, I started to feel fatigued.

As I approached a steep downhill with lots of rocks, I started scanning the ground to pick my footing. I overlooked a rock just before the hill and tripped. Early, I had caught my foot on rocks a few times, but was always able to keep my balance. This time, I immediately fell. I was lucky and skidded in some dirt without hitting any rocks. It's fortunate that I didn't try to avoid falling, because stumbling out of control on a rocky downhill could have led to a more dangerous crash.

I was slow to pick myself up, but I felt OK. I had minor scrapes on one arm and leg, but they didn't hurt. My hands were covered with dirt, so I used my previously unused water bottle to rinse them off before starting to run again. The fall took the wind out of my sails both physically and psychologically. After that, I slowed down, and I was somewhat tentative on the downhills. At the next aid station, I filled both of my bottles.

I was relieved to get onto the Nordic Trail loop where the footing was much easier. I ran at a somewhat easier pace, but I still ran most of the uphills. By the time I started my second loop, my quads were getting sore. I still ran most of the uphills, but the downhills were getting uncomfortable. Midway through the second loop, I realized I was on pace to average 10 minutes per mile for the race. I picked up my effort, but when I reached the last aid station, I could see that I had fallen off the pace. I ran the last mile and a half as fast as I could and finished in 5:10:57. I missing a 10:00 pace by less than a minute, but I was rewarded for my effort with 2nd place in my age group.

By the time I finished, the post-race barbeque lunch had started. They put on a pretty good spread. After eating, I watched others finish while I waited for the awards ceremony.

As I drove back to the hotel, I noticed that the "check tire pressure" indicator has been replaced by a "check TPMS" indicator. Apparently, the spare tire confused the tire pressure monitoring system. By the time I got back to the hotel and got cleaned up, it was late afternoon. One of the hotel employees made a few phone calls for me to find a tire shop that was open on the weekend. The only one she could find was a Wal-Mart supercenter in a nearby town. It took at least 20 minutes to drive there. I took back roads, because I didn't want to drive on the freeway with a spare. When I got there, I showed them where the tire was punctured and they assured me they could repair it. They had a Subway restaurant at the front of the store, so I ate dinner while I waited.

When I went back to see if the car was ready, I was told they found another defect in the tire and weren't comfortable repairing it. I was handed a list of compatible replacement tires that they could order, but they didn't have any of them in stock. The soonest they could get a new tire for me was Tuesday. Since I needed to drive home on Sunday, waiting until Tuesday wasn't an acceptable option.

It was now late enough that no other tire shops were open. I drove back to the hotel and called AAA. A very helpful agent worked with me to locate an auto shop that was open on Sundays. It took an hour, but he eventually found one about 40 miles away that was roughly on my way home. I didn't know if they would have a tire that was the right size for my car. I also didn't know if the punctured

tire was repairable. I didn't even know for sure if they would be open, since Sunday was Mother's Day. I went to bed not knowing if I would be able to drive home.

Because I spent so much time in a useless effort to get my tire fixed, I didn't do anything to help with post-race recovery. Ideally, I would have taken an ice bath, spent some time in the whirlpool and done lots of stretching and massaging. The race beat up my quads pretty badly.

Sunday morning, I ate breakfast and then called Sid's Tire, Muffler and Auto in Edgerton. I was relieved when Sid answered the phone. He asked me what size my tires were and told me he wouldn't be at the shop for two hours, but he had an employee there working on an engine.

I missed a turn and went 15 or 20 miles out of my way before arriving in Edgerton. By this time, I had put about 100 miles on my spare, which was making me nervous. Sid's employee asked me again what size tires I had. When Sid arrived, he told me that he didn't have that size in stock, and his usual tire sources were all closed on Sundays. He showed me a used tire that had the same rim size and was about 4 millimeters taller than my tires. He said he could mount that on the rim of my bad tire and I could safely drive home, but I would need to get a permanent replacement later.

I showed Sid the punctured tire and asked if it could be repaired. He said the puncture could easily be repaired and asked me what the other defect was. I told him the manager at Wal-Mart was pretty vague about it. After inspecting the tire, Sid said he could repair it. He suggested that Wal-Mart's unwillingness to repair it may have been a gimmick to get me to buy tires. Of course, it would have helped if they actually had some in stock.

In about 15 minutes, I was on my way home with a repaired tire. It felt good to be able to drive on the freeway again. It also felt good when the "check TPMS" indicator turned off. I was still at least four hours from home.

I've often remarked that traveling to a race is more difficult than the race itself. This time, getting home was the hardest part of the weekend.