Lake Wobegon by David Holmen
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On May 11, 2013, I ran the Lake Wobegon Trail Marathon in St. Joseph, MN. This was the first time I did this race. When I started running marathons, Twin Cities and Grandma's were the only marathons in Minnesota. Ten years later, there were three. Now there are about a dozen, but I've run less than half of them.

During the winter months, I have to travel across the country to run marathons. Sadly, in Minnesota, "winter months" include April. Now that winter is finally over, I can do some local marathons. This race gave me a chance to do a new race without having to travel very far.

The Lake Wobegon Trail Marathon has a point-to-point course that starts in Holdingford and finishes in St. Joseph. Except for portions of the first mile, the course consists of paved bike paths. St. Joseph is about six miles from St. Cloud, so I stayed in a hotel on the west side of St. Cloud.

I got to work early on Friday, so I wouldn't have to take any time off work. I left work early and drove straight to St. Cloud after work. There was construction on I94, and it was also the opening of fishing season, so I wanted to get ahead of the traffic. After checking into my hotel, I drove to St. Joseph to pick up my race packet. Some of my friends were doing this race, but I didn't see them until Saturday morning. Race morning packet pickup was available, and most people arrived late Friday or early Saturday.

The race started at 7:00, but I had to get up much earlier, so I could drive to St. Joseph in time to catch a bus to the start in Holdingford. I timed it well and got there just before the first bus left. The start was at Holdingford High School. The school building was open, so we could wait inside and use the bathrooms. While I was waiting, I saw several friends from Minnesota, as well as my friend Kino from New Jersey. Kino is a member of the 50sub4 running club and did this race to get a sub four hour marathon finish in Minnesota.

This was a small race, but it was well-organized and well-supported by the St. Cloud River Runners club. They provided many of the amenities usually found in larger races. They even had pace leaders. The course travels through five small towns in rural central Minnesota, and much of the course is between these towns, but there were volunteers to stop traffic every place where we crossed a road. There were about 15 aid stations, with about a dozen volunteers at each one. In all, there may have been as many volunteers as runners.

Unlike my last two races, which were both moderately hilly, this one was almost completely flat. As usual, weather was an important variable. It was 39 degrees at the start, with the temperature forecast to reach about 45 by the time I finished. More importantly, it was windy. The wind was about 12 mph at the start, but was forecast to be about 25 mph for much of the race.

The course is roughly L-shaped. For the first 11 miles, we ran mostly southwest from Holdingford to Albany. For the last 15 miles, we ran east from Albany to St. Joseph. The forecast called for winds out of the northwest. In theory, that meant we would have a crosswind in the first 11 miles and a tailwind in the last 15. In practice, the wind direction kept shifting. Most of the time we had crosswinds, but we did enjoy tailwinds at times.

I ran the first mile with the 3:15 pace group. We started a little easy. My first mile was a 7:41, which would turn out to be my slowest mile of the race. To run 3:15, I needed to average about 7:27 per mile. In the second mile, I started running a little bit ahead of the pace group. I noticed Kino was too.

The first 11 miles were a bit tiring. I could feel the wind. Although it was a cross-wind, it still had a noticeable effect. My effort felt unsustainable. I was counting on the last 15 miles being easier. In Albany, we made the first of two sharp turns, and suddenly the wind was right at my back. I surged to a faster pace. After the second turn, the wind was at an angle. It was mostly blowing across our path, but it was also partially at our backs.

Kino also surged to a faster pace. First he caught up to me. Then he went right by. I didn't want to lift my effort to stay with him until I saw how fast we were going. When I reached the 12 mile sign, I saw I had run that mile in 7:03. That was my fastest mile of the race. I eased up a little, but continued running mile times that were between 7:10 and 7:30. I was never very far behind Kino, but we were separating ourselves from the 3:15 group. Eventually, I caught up to Kino, and he asked me how far back the 3:15 group was. I told him I thought they were about a minute back. Kino told me he was going to set a PR. After that, I think he joined the 3:15 group.

I didn't know if I could sustain my pace to the finish. I was running at my limit. It helped that the course was flat, making it easier to stay in a consistent rhythm. With each mile, I continually asked myself what pace I would need over the remaining miles to beat 3:15 and what pace I would need to beat 3:20. If I could continue running 7:30s or faster, I could beat 3:13:50, which was my fastest time in the last year.

With six miles to go, the wind picked up, and it was briefly a headwind. That was almost my undoing. I fought through it, but that mile wasn't very fast. I worked hard to pick up my pace in the next mile. I saw that the trail was starting to bend to the right, and I realized that would put the wind at my back.

With about four miles to go, I could finally feel the wind pushing at my back. At that point, I needed it. I gave it everything I had, realizing I could break 3:13:50, but I was running out of gas. In the last mile, I saw a red arch in the distance and realized that must be the finish line. It took a long time to get there. I was frustrated that I couldn't pick up my pace, but at least I wasn't slowing down.

When I crossed the line, I tried to stop my watch, but I hit the wrong button, so it didn't stop. I didn't know my time yet, but I was pretty confident I beat 3:13:50. A short time later, I saw the 3:15 group finish. Kino was right behind them, finishing in 3:15:12. He set a new PR by about four minutes.

There was a building next to the finish line where volunteers were serving food. On the outer wall, I noticed they already had results posted through 3:11. I figured I wouldn't have to wait long to see my official time. After picking up my gear bag and finisher shirt, I went inside. They had a variety of food, but I just had pizza and chocolate milk. Mostly I enjoyed having shelter from the cold wind while I pulled on my warm-up clothes. Kino had to leave quickly to drive to Minneapolis to catch a flight. He had another marathon the next day.

When I was done eating, I went outside to check the results again. I finished in 3:13:19 and took second place in my age group. My award was a large ceramic mug with the Lake Wobegon Trail Marathon logo.

I've known about this race for a few years, but never fit it into my schedule before. It's a hidden gem. It combines small town charm with many of the features of larger races. I expect to be back.