

Lean Horse in SD by D. Holmen

August 2011

On August 27, 2011, I ran the Lean Horse Half Hundred in South Dakota. This is the fourth straight year I've done one of the Lean Horse Ultras. In 2008 and 2009, I did the 100 mile race. Last year, I did the 50 mile race to try something different. I did the 50 mile race again this year, so I could qualify for the Western States 100.

The Lean Horse Ultras are run on the Mickelson Trail in the Black Hills. The Mickelson Trail is a former railroad line that was converted to hiking/biking trails. The surface is crushed limestone, and it's a nice wide path. All three races (50K, 50 mile and 100 mile) start at the Minnekahta trailhead and finish in Hot Springs. To get to the finish in Hot Springs, you have to run about 11 miles on Argyle Road, and then five more miles on a mixture of prairie, dirt roads and city streets. In contrast to the gentle grades of the Mickelson Trail, Argyle Road is a roller coaster of hills. The races used to start and finish in Hot Springs. Since Argyle Road was the least enjoyable part of the course, Jerry Dunn changed the courses this year, so we only had to run Argyle Road once. I think this was a big improvement. It allowed us to do about 16 extra miles on the Mickelson Trail, while still having the convenience of finishing in Hot Springs.

The Black Hills have a number of attractions that make this a great destination race. Sightseeing options include Mount Rushmore, Custer State Park, Wind Cave, Jewel Cave, The Needles, Iron Mountain Road, Mammoth Site, and the Crazy Horse Monument. Farther north are former gold mining towns with a number of historic sites. Within Hot Springs, you can find good prices on jewelry at Larive's Black Hills Gold. You can also swim and enjoy water slides at Evans Plunge, a pool fed by the city's warm spring water.

Another thing I like about Lean Horse is the convenience of the Mueller Center. The Mueller Center is home to packet picket, the pre-race briefing, and the pre-race dinner. The finish line is in a parking lot behind the building, and as soon as you finish, you can walk indoors to air-conditioned comfort and enjoy a hot meal. There's a Best Western next door and a Budget Host across the street from the Best Western, so runners finishing in the middle of the night can be back in their rooms within minutes.

The expo is small compared to larger races. In fact, they have only one vendor, Wyvern Running. I'm always impressed, however, with the variety of gear available. They have nearly everything a trail runner needs, including many items that you wouldn't find at even the largest marathon expo. The products I saw this year included sport drinks, energy bars, gels, sport beans, electrolyte capsules, bottles, gel flasks, fuel belts, camelbaks, SpiBelts, Amphipods, running shorts, T-shirts, socks, gloves, inexpensive plain white Tyvek jackets, hats, visors, Bondi Bands, buffs, sunglasses, head lamps, flashlights, Body Glide, knee straps, arch supports, compression wraps, various blister repair products, and every imaginable size of The Stick. They even had duct tape!

Adding this race to my schedule was somewhat ambitious, because it was only a week after the Reykjavik Marathon, and it went all-out in that race. I figured it was OK if I wasn't fully recovered for this race, because my only goal was to finish without the 11 hour time limit for a Western States qualifier.

Four days before the race, I strained my lower back during a weight training workout. When I went running the next day, I found running to be painful, so I slowed down to a snail's pace and didn't run as far as I had planned. I took the next two days off, but it was painful just bending down to put on shoes. My entry fee and travel costs were non-refundable, so I decided to go to South Dakota and at least start the race. DNF is better than DNS. (I read that on a T-shirt recently.)

The day before the race, I finally noticed some improvement in my back. The morning of the race, I took some ibuprofen. I wanted to take it with food, so I got up a couple hours early to eat a light breakfast. I didn't think it would be wise to take any ibuprofen during the race, because the forecast high was 95 degrees, and I knew it would be difficult to stay hydrated.

We assembled at the Mueller Center, where we were supposed to catch busses to the start. The busses were late, so the runners with crew vehicles formed a caravan. As far as I know, everyone got to the start without any problems.

When the race started, I was relieved to discover that I was able to run without any back pain. Because I only had one training run during the week, my legs were still a little stiff from the Reykjavik Marathon. I didn't have much leg speed. My average pace in the early miles was between 9:00 and 9:30, even without taking walking breaks. Usually, I average that pace with a minute or two of walking each mile. I decided to run, albeit slowly, until we reached the turnaround. I reasoned that I should try to maintain a good pace early, since I would have to walk later, when it started getting hot.

As I approached the turnaround, I started seeing the lead runners coming back, led by John Maas. There were only five runners ahead of me, five men and one woman. Realizing I was in sixth place caused my competitiveness to kick in. I decided to continue running until I reached Argyle Road, knowing that the next several miles were slightly downhill.

At Pringle (26 miles), I started putting ice in my hat. I've found this to be a very effective way to cope with the heat. Somewhere between Pringle and the Lime Kiln aid station, I passed a runner to move into fifth place. I forgot to put ice in my hat at Lime Kiln. The next four miles were slightly uphill and parts were exposed to the sun, so I was a little worried about getting too hot on this stretch.

When I got to the Argyle Loop aid station, I was so focused on remembering to get ice that I made a different mistake. I only filled one water bottle. Most of the aid stations are close enough together that I can get by with only one bottle, but I was carrying an extra bottle for Argyle Road. It's six miles from the Argyle Loop aid station to the Morph aid station, so one bottle isn't enough. Fortunately I realized my mistake quickly. I was able to ration my water to avoid running out and going two or three miles with no water at all.

There's a long hill near the beginning of Argyle Road. I was planning to begin walking there, but I spotted a runner cresting the hill. He was only about half a mile ahead of me, so I decided to run nonstop on the first few hills, in hopes of catching him. It took about three miles, but I eventually passed him to move into fourth place overall. Since there were trophies for the first three men and women, and one of the runners ahead of me was the lead woman, I was now in line for a trophy.

From that point on, I took a walking break on each hill. Argyle Road doesn't have any shade, and the temperature was climbing into the 90s. I didn't want to risk overheating by continuing to push the pace.

When I got to the Morph aid station, I filled both of my water bottles. I knew it was another six miles to the last aid station. Having two bottles allowed me to drink twice as often as I did on the previous section. Toward the end of Argyle Road, there's a long downhill that goes on for about two miles. It helped me maintain a steady run, but it wasn't very comfortable. During this stretch I felt a little tightness in my left hamstring. It didn't seem too bad, but I ran somewhat more cautiously.

After leaving Argyle Road, I took a short bathroom stop. It felt good to finally relieve myself, but when I started running again my legs were stiff and my pace was sluggish. The last five miles were very

tiring. I usually enjoy running into Hot Springs, but this year, it seemed to take forever to cover the remaining distance.

When I reached the finish line, I got a pleasant surprise. I was handed the trophy for second place male. Without realizing it, I passed a runner who was resting at an aid station. I try to blow through aid stations as quickly as I can, so I don't always notice if there's someone there taking a break.

By the time I finished, it was already 98 degrees in Hot Springs. It later reached 100. I rested inside the Mueller Center and had a snack. The sloppy Joes were ready. After cooling down and refueling, I walked back to the hotel to clean up and change clothes. Later, I returned to the Mueller Center to hang out with other finishers.

After a while, Jerry asked if anyone would be willing to drive up to the Harbach Park aid station in Custer to pick up two runners who dropped. John Maas volunteered, but he needed to borrow a car. I had a car nearby, so John and I went together. It was nice to have an opportunity to help out. It was also a scenic drive. We saw a buffalo as we drove through Wind Cave National Park. As we approached Custer, we saw the first few 100 mile runners on their return trip.

When we got to Harbach Park, there was only one runner who still needed a ride, but we were asked if we could drive up to the turnaround in Hill City to pick up two more runners. Fortunately I knew where the Hill City trailhead was, even though the course didn't go that far north in the years that I did the 100. Once again, there was only one runner there who still needed a ride. The other had decided to continue.

The drive back made me nostalgic to do the 100 again. Since the trail is never very far from the highway, I got to see most of the 100 mile course. We saw several runners on their way back. We also saw three deer and the same buffalo we saw earlier.

After getting a good night's sleep, I returned to the Mueller Center again to hang out with other runners. Several of the 100 milers finished between 26 and 27 hours. As I continued watching, I saw some of the same runners that I saw at the Hill City trailhead the previous afternoon.

It was only after my flight home, that I realized I had pulled a muscle on Argyle Road. My hamstring was sufficiently sore to make me limp slowly through the airport. My next marathon is in three weeks. Hopefully I can recover by then.