

Paavo Nurmi in Hurley WI by David Holmen August 2013

On August 10, 2013, I ran the Paavo Nurmi Marathon in Hurley, WI. This area was settled by Finnish immigrants, so it's fitting that they named their marathon after the great Finnish Olympian. This was the first time I did this race. Hurley is a half-day's drive from where I live, so I didn't need to fly or rent a car.

I didn't have a race the previous weekend, so I was able to get back into a consistent training schedule for two weeks. I also had a chance to continue healing from some minor injuries. I wasn't too worried about being ready for this race, but I have tougher races coming up soon. It was important to go into this race healthy, because it was the first of 19 consecutive weekends with at least one race scheduled. I didn't have any new aches or pains, but my right hamstring, which has worried me for four weeks, still felt tight.

This race sometimes has hot weather, but this year the weather was almost perfect. The overnight low was 46. It was 50 degrees at the start, climbing to about 62 by the time I finished. My only worry was running a hilly course with a hamstring that wasn't 100 percent.

The course is point-to-point, starting in Upson and finishing in Hurley. The pre-race and post-race activities are all in Hurley, so it made sense to stay there. You can park at the finish and take a shuttle to the start. I stayed at the Days Inn. When I checked in, I was blown away by how helpful the receptionist was. She asked if I was doing the race, and then told me everything I needed to know. She even walked over to the back door to show me how to get to packet pickup from their parking lot. She also told me they would be starting breakfast at 4:30. With the race starting at 7:30, that was perfect.

When I got to packet pickup at the Hurley K-12 School, everyone there was helpful and friendly. This is a small race in a small town, and it definitely had a welcoming atmosphere. They had a pre-race pasta dinner for eight dollars. I usually skip dinners like this in favor of going to a local restaurant with friends, but I had a good feeling about this one.

When I read through the sheet of helpful things to know, I discovered that I didn't have to drive to the finish to catch a bus. They were also picking up runners at two local motels, and Days Inn was one of them.

Hurley is a long way from a major airport, so I didn't see many 50 Staters or Marathon Maniacs at the pre-race dinner. I did, however, see several runners from Minnesota. After eating, I stayed to talk to friends for about an hour. After dinner, I went back to the motel to use the whirlpool to loosen up my hamstring. I missed the evening festivities, which included a kids' run, a torch lighting ceremony and Finnish dancing.

I set my alarm for 5:00. I slept OK, but as usual I woke up several times. Each time I got back to sleep quickly. The last time I woke up, I saw it was 4:48, so I turned off the alarm and got up. After throwing on some clothes so I could go downstairs and have a light breakfast, I took a hot bath and stretched. My hamstring felt OK, so I gave myself the green light to run for time. The alternative would have been to run wearing a compression wrap. It would protect my hamstring, but it would also force me to go slow.

The bus picked us up at 6:15, and we got to the start in Upson at 6:45. There was one long line for four port-o-potties, but 45 minutes was enough time to get through the line. I dropped off my gear bag and headed for the starting line about 15 minutes before the start.

Everyone I met who was familiar with the course kept talking about how hilly it was. That made me nervous. In recent training runs I was holding back on hills for fear of aggravating my hamstring. Since I'm not very good at holding back in races, I had to be very careful on the hills.

The first few miles were mostly downhill, and I got off to a fast start. After about four miles, I started talking to a fellow Marathon Maniac named Fernando. We ran together for the rest of the race. In the middle miles, talking with Fernando helped me settle into a more sustainable pace. Later in the race, we kept each other from slowing down too much.

Midway through the race, we went through the small town of Gile. There was a large bell in the town square, and they rang it as each runner went by. Aside from a few small towns, most of the course was along wooded country roads.

In the late miles, it got sunny, and I felt a bit warm. We also started encountering some of the hills I had heard about. Although there are many hills, none of them is very steep, and the only long hills are early in the race. I think on a hotter day, they would have seemed much bigger. As it was, they probably wouldn't have concerned me if I wasn't worried about my hamstring.

By the time we reached the last hill, I had enough of a cushion that I knew I would be under 3:30. I finished in 3:28:58. No sooner did I cross the finish line than I was given a sealed plastic bag filled with ice. I was starting to get hot, so I put it under my hat. I can't remember another race where they give you ice at the finish line.

Finish line refreshments included mojakka, a Finnish stew, and some locally brewed beer. One of the guys serving the mojakka had a slogan. "If you finish, you're Finnish." Then I went to The Iron Nugget to get my finisher medal and shirt.

The one drawback of catching a bus to the start right at Days Inn was that I didn't have my car at the finish line. I had to walk back to the motel. Fortunately, it was only a mile, and it was a nice day.

Although my hamstring felt tight at times during the race, it never hurt, and it seemed OK on my walk back. I took no chances. My recovery regimen included a 20 minute ice bath, at least that much time in the whirlpool, stretching and massage. Then I wore a compression wrap for the rest of the afternoon. The only thing left to do was find a restaurant with pizza and beer. It turns out that The Iron Nugget has good pizza and beer in addition to Paavo Nurmi finisher medals and shirts.