

## Tahoe Triple 9-11 by D.Holmen

On September 23-25, 2011, I ran three marathons in three days that are collectively known as the Tahoe Triple. This is something I've wanted to do for the last five years, but this is the first year that I could fit it into my schedule. Although I had run three marathons in three days before, this was much more challenging, because all three races are hilly, and the elevation ranges from 6200 to 7000 feet.

The oldest of the three marathons is the Lake Tahoe Marathon, which starts at Tahoe City and finishes in South Lake Tahoe. This race has all of the amenities found at most major marathons. The other two marathons are no-frills races with minimal support. (Traffic is only blocked off in a few places, the only aid provided is water, and the aid stations are about five miles apart, so each runner needs to carry a bottle.) These two races were added in 2001. Each race runs around a different section of the lake, giving you the opportunity to run all the way around Lake Tahoe in three days. At the time, it was probably the only place where you could run three marathons on three consecutive days.

Over the years, the organizers have added several other running events, a two mile swim in Lake Tahoe, a 72 mile bike race around the lake, and a speed golf tournament. There are also various dinners, a sunset cruise, spectator busses and other family-oriented events, transforming what was once a single race into a weeklong extravaganza.

The host hotel for all of these events was the Horizon Resort and Casino in Stateline, NV. As the name suggests, Stateline is right on the Nevada state line. If you walk two blocks to the southwest, you're in California. Although it would have been convenient to stay at the Horizon, I was worried that the casino would be smoky, so I stayed two blocks away at the Embassy Suites in South Lake Tahoe, CA. In retrospect, staying at the Horizon probably would have been fine. I was there once or twice a day, and I only smelled smoke once.

To get to South Lake Tahoe, I flew to Reno, rented a car, and drove the rest of the way. Because I had to make connections, it took all day. Packet pickup for the triple was on Thursday, so I arrived on Wednesday. That gave me plenty of time on Thursday to drive all the way around Lake Tahoe. This gave me a good opportunity to see the whole area and take pictures at various viewpoints around the lake. It also gave me a preview of all three marathon courses.

The first race was the Emerald Bay Marathon. This race was Friday morning. It started at Inspiration Point, next to Emerald Bay, and finished at the junction of US highway 50 and state highway 28, near Spooner Lake. From driving it, I knew the first few miles would be steep downhill, the middle miles would be relatively flat and the late miles would be mostly uphill. The last three miles are one continuous hill bringing us up to about 7000 feet elevation. (The low point on the course was about 6200 feet.)

There were busses to take us from the Horizon to the starting area, but we were on our own to get back to our hotels after the race. The expectation is that each runner will have a support crew. In practice, many runners go without a crew and catch rides from other runners who have crews.

I was recovering from a pulled hamstring in my left leg. I had recovered sufficiently to be able to run one marathon, but I didn't know how my leg would hold up over three days of running. I was especially concerned about the downhills.

I was expecting the temperature to be in the low 40s at the start and warm into the 60s by the time I finished. Ordinarily I would wear shorts in these temperatures, but I chose to wear tights instead. I figured the tights would keep my hamstring from tightening up in the chilly morning air. I knew I would get hot in the late miles, but I was willing to endure being overdressed, if it reduced my risk of further injury. I got more than I bargained for. It was about 10 degrees warmer than I expected.

I tried not to run too fast on the steep downhill miles, but I assumed I was running 8 minute miles or faster. It was a long time before we saw the 5 mile sign. By my watch, it took about 48 minutes, which didn't seem possible on a mostly downhill section of the course. It turned out that several of us had taken a wrong turn and ran almost a mile extra before getting back on the right course. I wouldn't mind if it was my own mistake, but we were directed to go the wrong way by someone who appeared to be a race volunteer. I was hoping to finish each race in less than four hours, and this meant I would have to work harder to do it.

My leg felt much better on flats and uphills than it did on the downhills. As we started the long climb from South Lake Tahoe to Spooner Lake, my biggest concern was overheating. It was 70 degrees and sunny, and I was overdressed. Fortunately, I was doing a good job of staying hydrated, and I was taking electrolyte capsules.

In past years, highway 50 was completely open to traffic. It's a busy highway with a speed limit of 50 mph, so you had to be very careful going around the sharp turns, in case a driver didn't see you coming. This year, they blocked off one lane with cones for the last six miles. Even before we got to that section, the Nevada state patrol had several cars stationed at strategic locations, and they shielded us from the traffic on some of the sharp bends. I was very impressed with the support they provided to keep us safe.

As I reach the last aid station, a volunteer told me there was just one little hill left. I knew she was telling the truth that there was only one hill. I also knew it wasn't "little." It was a brutal three mile climb. To keep from overheating, I had to take walking breaks. Whenever I started walking, I counted my strides. I wouldn't let myself take more than 60 strides of walking. Then I had to run for 240 strides before I would allow myself another walking break. This kept me from overheating too badly, but it also kept me on a pace to break four hours. I finished in 3:56:31. I was very happy with that time after the wrong turn earlier, but I had to work pretty hard for it. I didn't keep any gas in the tank for the next two races.

Before I even reached the finish line, Michael Miller spotted me and offered me a ride back into town. I met Michael at packet pickup, so he knew I didn't have a ride. We were running together in the middle miles, but he eventually pulled away and finished several minutes ahead of me.

I spent the afternoon refueling, loosening up in the whirlpool, stretching and massaging. I decided to go back to the Horizon for dinner because they had a buffet that included several pasta dishes, and it seemed like a great pre-race dinner. I expected to see other runners who were staying there. Instead, I had dinner with a couple who were also staying at Embassy Suites.

As we finished eating, I recognized Dick Beardsley and went over to say hello. He remembered me from the Napa Valley Marathon, and when I mentioned my concern about my left hamstring (which now felt worse), he suggested wrapping it with an Ace bandage. That made good sense to me, so I drove to CVS and bought a 4 inch wide self-adhesive wrap.

The race on Saturday was the Cal-Neva Marathon. This race started where we left off the day before and finished in Tahoe City. On paper, this was the easiest race of the three. The first 11 miles were mostly downhill, and the remaining miles were flat or rolling, with only one tough uphill. Of course, I wasn't exactly feeling fresh. I was the most sore I had ever been on the second day of a double, much less a triple. I once again wore tights, but I also wore the compression wrap on my left thigh. It was just snug enough to provide support, and without feeling too tight. As with the first race, this was a no frills race. We once again had to be concerned about staying out of the way of traffic, but I saw several Nevada highway patrols making sure the drivers weren't speeding.

Had I been healthier (and less sore) I would have tried to break 3:30 in this race. When I found myself just managing to run 8 minute miles on the downhills, I knew 3:30 was out of the question. Breaking four hours seemed like a more reasonable goal.

The wrap worked wonders for my left leg, but 11 miles of downhill eventually took a heavy toll on my right leg. At about 12 miles, I pulled my right hamstring. I had to slow down considerably, and I was very uncomfortable. My halfway split was 1:58, and the second half was going to be much slower, so I knew I wouldn't even be close to breaking four hours. I never considered stopping, but I did occur to me that I might have to start walking if it got any worse. I did the math and realized that if I couldn't keep running, it could easily take me six hours to finish.

The other runners I saw along the way helped keep my spirits up. At 15 miles, I caught up to Tony "Endorphin Dude" Nguyen, who took the early start that morning. Tony is always optimistic and his beaming smile was uplifting. After that, I got to run with Jon "Coconutboy" Mahoney for about two miles. I couldn't keep up with him, but I drew inspiration from him. As the miles passed, I was continuing to slow down, but I was pretty sure I could run it. I took a few short walking breaks on "Dollar" hill but resumed a slow run from there to the finish. I finished in 4:25:21. It was only the second time I average more than 10 minutes per mile in a marathon, but I considered it a victory under the circumstances.

It took a while to find a ride home, but it gave me time to rehydrate and eat a few snacks. I eventually got a ride with five other runners whose company I thoroughly enjoyed. I hope I see them all at other races. It's amazing the camaraderie that develops between total strangers in a shared experience like this one.

Getting ready to race again on Sunday was a challenge. I knew that to have any hope of running, I would need to wrap both legs. I also knew I needed to do something to reduce the inflammation in my hamstrings and my quads. For the first time in my life, I was desperate enough to be willing to take an ice bath. After washing up and changing clothes, I headed out to CVS to buy another compression wrap and 40 pounds of ice.

My plan was to alternate between ice and heat, using the bathtub in my room for the ice bath and then go downstairs to the hot tub to warm up.

For the ice bath, I filled the tub about seven inches deep with cold water. Then I dumped in the ice. I knew the only way to get into the tub was to sit down as quickly as possible and get the shock over with quickly. I sat in the tub with my legs completely submerged for about 12 minutes. I think you're supposed to stay in the ice bath for 15 minutes, but my hands were turning white, and I was worried about getting to hypothermic to be able to get out of the tub and walk downstairs to the hot tub.

When I got out of the tub, my legs felt like rubber. I managed to walk to the hot tub, where I soaked for five minutes while hand massaging my quads and hamstrings. When I got out of the hot tub, I dried off and worked on my legs with the massage stick.

By the time I got back to my room, I was already starting to feel chilly. Nevertheless, I plunged into the ice bath again. Within a minute, I was shivering, but I stayed in the tub for 10 minutes. Again, my legs felt like rubber, but I made my way back to the hot tub. This time, I stayed in the hot tub for about 10 minutes before getting out massage with the stick.

After each cold/hot cycle, my legs felt better. It seemed to be alleviating some of the soreness. I went to bed optimistic. Unfortunately, when I got up, I felt just as stiff and sore as I had been before the ice baths. I'm sure it helped, but it wasn't the miracle cure I needed.

It was now the morning of the Lake Tahoe Marathon – the crown jewel of the weekend. As much as I wanted to conquer the hills and enjoy the views, it was hard to imagine running 26.2 miles. There was no doubt in my mind I was going to do it, but I didn't know how. Unlike the first two races, this one had a 7:30 time limit. If I could run – even slowly – I'd be OK. If I had to walk the whole way, I was in trouble. At 20 minutes per mile, it would take almost 9 hours to finish the race, and I didn't think I could walk any faster than that.

I wrapped both legs fairly tight. As I walked over to the Horizon to catch the bus, I tried to run a little as a test. No way. It wasn't happening. I quickly realized the wraps were too tight.

While I was waiting for the bus, I took off the wraps, and slow redid them. I was careful not to get them too tight, but I still needed them to be somewhat tight. To protect my right hamstring, I needed partially immobilize it. Unfortunately, this also restricted the movement of my quads. To ensure I wouldn't favor either leg, I made both legs equally snug. When I was done, I tried another short test run in the hallway. It wasn't real comfortable but I was able to run.

The Lake Tahoe Marathon starts in Tahoe City and finishes at Pope Beach in South Lake Tahoe. It's the most scenic of the three races. It's also a very challenging course. I was looking forward to having frequent aid stations, so I wouldn't have to carry a bottle. I was also looking forward to having the left side of the road blocked off to traffic.

Since I was wearing shorts for this race, I waited as long as possible before taking off my warm-ups and delivering my drop bag to the truck. As I was dropping off my bag, all the runners doing the triple were being assembled for a group photo. I had to hurry to get over there in time. I ran part of the way and quickly discovered that it wasn't as easy as it seemed earlier in the hallway. It was possible to run, but I was going to have to work for it.

When the gun went off, I began running with a stiff shuffle. My stride was short, so I had to move my legs rapidly. For the first few miles, I averaged 10:15 per mile, but that pace wasn't sustainable. I soon found myself running about 11 minutes per mile.

The first 10 miles of the Lake Tahoe Marathon are along the lakefront, so they're fairly flat. That gave me time to get used to my new stride before we reached the hills. Over the next six miles of rolling hills, I maintained more or less the same pace.

The signature hill of this race begins at about 16 miles. There's a sign at the base that says "Hill from Hell – 6300." With each additional 100 feet of elevation, there was another sign. Although the hill was tiring, the signs helped break it up into manageable segments. Most people were walking some (or all) of the hill. I just kept motoring on with the same slow shuffle that I used on the flat and downhill miles. I only had one gear. The sign at 6500 feet said we were 100 feet from Purgatory. The sign at 6600 feet said Purgatory. Eventually we reached a sign that said we were 100 feet from Heaven. Finally, we reached the summit at 6800 feet and heard the sound of bagpipes.

After the "Hill from Hell," we reached the north edge of Emerald Bay and started a long steep downhill. I found it to be more uncomfortable than the uphill. As I shuffled down the hill, I slowly took in a panoramic view of Emerald Bay. It's a view you can't really capture in pictures. It's one of those views that you only get when you're running. After crossing a bridge, we still had to do one more climb to get up to Inspiration Point. It wasn't as long as the hill from hell, but it was steeper. Once again, I slowly motored up the hill while almost everyone around me was walking.

When I reached Inspiration Point, I began retracing the first six miles of the Emerald Bay Marathon. I knew at this point I would finish. I knew it would be uncomfortable, but I also knew I would break five hours. At the 20 mile mark, my average pace was just under 11 minutes per mile. By the time I finished, in 4:51:23, my average pace was over 11 minutes per mile. I was slower on the downhill part of the course than I was on the uphill section.

I can't remember when I was more proud to reach a finish line. I had to fight for this one. Actually, I had to fight for all three. In July, at the Firecracker Triple, I set more ambitious goals each day, and I kept exceeding them. At the Tahoe Triple, I lowered my expectations each day, but felt more satisfaction with simply finishing. The Cal-Neva and Lake Tahoe Marathons were my second and third slowest marathons to date, but I'm not disappointed with my effort.

Some runners return to do the triple year after year. At the end of the weekend, I met a few runners who did the Lake Tahoe Marathon this year, who are coming back next year to do the triple. I met a few who did the triple this year, who are coming back to do the super triple next year. (The super triple consists of two marathons plus a 72 mile ultramarathon that goes all the way around the lake.) I may be the exception. I'm tempted to come back to do just the Lake Tahoe Marathon. It was my favorite of the three courses, and I'd love to know how fast I could run it with fresh (and healthy) legs.