

Wabash Trace, IA by David Holmen September 2013

On September 14, 2013, I ran the Wabash Trace Nature Trail Marathon in Shenandoah, IA. Until recently, I had never heard of this race. This was only its second year. I discovered it because I was searching the race calendar for a race this weekend that was within a day's drive of Minneapolis. The drive time to Shenandoah is about six hours.

The course is point-to-point, starting in Malvern and finishing in Shenandoah. Except for a few miles at the beginning and end, it's run on the Wabash Trace Nature Trail. This is a dirt trail that follows an old railroad line. It's a wide path with a smooth surface. There are some gentle grades, but no steep hills.

Pre-race and post-race activities were all in Shenandoah. The Shenandoah Inn & Suites had a special rate for the race, and it was only two blocks from all of the race activities, so that's where I stayed. Because I didn't want to be on the road for six hours after the race, I stayed two nights.

Google maps estimated the drive time at 5 hours, 39 minutes. Their estimates are usually pretty conservative for long drives, but I would need to make stops to buy gas and eat lunch. I was also aware of at least two construction zones. I was hoping to get to Shenandoah around 3:00, so I left at 9:00, expecting the drive to take six hours including the stops.

No sooner did I start driving than my "check tire pressure" light came on. It's normal for tire pressure to fluctuate with changes in temperature, and we were having our first cool weather after months of summer heat. I assumed that's all it was, but I didn't want to take any chances. The last time I saw this light was on a long drive to southern Wisconsin, and that turned out to be a slow leak.

There's a gas station with free air near our house, so I stopped there to check the tires. Visually, they all looked OK. On closer inspection, one felt a little bit soft. I should have used a tire gauge, but I just guessed how much air to add and started the car. The "check tire pressure" indicator was still on. I knew from past experience that it doesn't reset immediately, so I started driving. When it still didn't go off, I found an exit with a gas station. This gas station didn't have an air hose, so I had to keep driving until I found one that did.

When I eventually stopped, I searched the glove compartment for my tire gauge and checked the pressure of all four tires. Three were OK. The one that looked low before was now overpressure. I should have used the gauge in the first place. After letting enough air out of the tire, I started the car again. At first, the light was still on. After I started driving, it went off. Problem solved, but I wasted a lot of time.

After I got back on the freeway, I noticed my passenger side mirror was folded in. I must have bumped it while I was checking all the tires. I needed to stop for gas sooner or later, so I decided to stop sooner. I filled the tank in Albert Lea and fixed the mirror while I was there. By the time I reached the Iowa border, it was already 11:00. I had expected to get there by 10:30.

Realizing I wouldn't be able to get to Des Moines by lunch time, I made a quick lunch stop in Clear Lake. I-35 doesn't go through many other cities. The rest of the drive was long, but uneventful. My only other stop was at a rest area along I-80. I got to Shenandoah around 3:30. That still left me some time to wander the downtown area a bit. I quickly discovered two things about Shenandoah. They value art, and they value history. I also discovered that Shenandoah is where the Everly Brothers grew up. Their childhood home has been restored and relocated to the downtown area. It's two blocks from Shenandoah Inn.

I usually bypass pasta dinners in favor of going to a restaurant with friends. Since it's a small town race, and I didn't know anyone else who was doing this race, I made an exception. Packet pickup and dinner were both at the Shenandoah Chamber Office, which was a block from the hotel. At the pasta dinner, I met a runner from Texas who's also a 50 states finisher and a Marathon Maniac.

Heat had been a factor in my previous four races. Happily, the weather cooled off significantly in the days leading up to this race. The overnight low was 48. When I checked the hourly forecast, it looked like it would be about 50 for the start of the race and low 60s by the time I finished.

The race started at 7:00, but I had to take a bus from the finish in Shenandoah to the start in Malvern. The bus left at 5:30, so I set my alarm for 4:15 to make sure I would have plenty of time to get ready. The hotel had a continental breakfast. The morning of the race, they had it set up at 4:30. I went to breakfast at 5:00. I didn't eat much, just a slice of cinnamon bread and some hot cocoa. While I was there, I met one other runner. I also met the race director. I was surprised I didn't see more runners. I saw several runners checking in the day before. It's possible most of them were doing the half marathon. The half marathon didn't start until 8:00, so their bus didn't leave until 6:45.

The marathon start was at a school. While I was talking to the race director at breakfast, I learned that the school building would be open. That meant I wouldn't need my warm-up clothes to keep warm after the bus dropped us off, because I could wait inside. Just before we got there, I took everything I needed out of my gear bag, took off my warm-ups, and put them in the bag. As soon as we got off the bus, I dropped my bag into one of the gear check boxes. That way, I was able to go inside right away and get in line for the bathroom. I anticipated that the bathrooms in the school wouldn't have many stalls and everyone would need to use them.

Because the race was small, I was able to wait until five minutes before the start to go outside. Even then, no one seemed to be lining up. A few of us moved to the start line, and then others followed. No one wanted to line up at the front. I lined up about 10 feet from the line, and there were only about five runners in front of me. During final instructions, I found out that only solo runners needed to cross the starting line. Many of the other runners were on relay teams. The leadoff runners for the relay teams lined up in the parking lot right next to the starting line, but didn't cross the chip mat.

When the gun went off, I started at a quick pace. Since the relay runners started to the side, I could see which of the runners ahead of me were on relay teams. Only about four or five of the runners ahead of me were doing solo marathons. I realized I was probably starting faster than I intended, but I still stayed close to the runners ahead of me.

The first mile was on the streets of Malvern. When I reached the first mile marker, I was astonished to see I had run that mile in 6:50. It's been a long time since I ran at that pace, even for a short distance. It felt brisk, but it didn't feel that much faster than other races where I went out at 7:30. Evidently, cooler temperatures made the faster pace feel easier. My second mile was almost as fast, at 6:54. After that I settled down, and my next few miles were in the 7:30s.

About halfway through the second mile, we got onto the trail. It was a good level surface for running, and we were surrounded by trees. The branches formed a canopy, so the trail was completely shaded. I felt like I was running through a dense forest. Eventually we reached a small clearing, and I saw that we were actually running between two bands of trees. Beyond the trees, it was farmland as far as the eye could see. The line of trees on either side of us was just thick enough that most of the time you couldn't see through them. It gave us the illusion that we were running through a forest, when we were actually running across farms.

Each mile was marked with a sign that also had a piece of trivia. Most of them were about the local history, such as the year that Shenandoah was founded. When I reached the four mile sign, I realized I had run the previous mile in 7:36. To finish under 3:20, I would need to average 7:37, so I tried not to slow down any more. The next mile was slightly uphill, so maintaining my pace took some effort. I passed one of the runners who had been running just ahead of me.

Because the trail used to be a railroad line, there aren't any steep grades. Trains were originally designed to be able to climb a three percent grade, but nothing steeper. It wasn't unusual, however, to be going slightly uphill for a mile or more. Each time it felt like I was going uphill, I reminded myself that I would be rewarded later with a downhill. I knew the whole course had a net elevation drop, although it wasn't very much.

Near the halfway point, I passed another runner. I didn't know what place I was in, but there couldn't be more than a few runners ahead of me. From my 13 mile time, I estimated that I ran the first half in about 1:37:45. That put me on pace to run the whole thing in just over 3:15. I didn't expect to have any more miles as fast as the first two, so I expected I would need to work just to beat 3:20. If I could beat 3:20, it would help build my confidence for the Jackson Hole Marathon. My goal for that race is to beat 3:30, but I expect to be about 10 minutes slower there because of the higher elevation.

The half marathon started in Imogene. I assume that course also started on city streets before merging onto the trail. Shortly after the 15 mile sign for the marathon, I saw the 2 mile sign for the half marathon. It wouldn't be too much longer before I caught up to the back of the half marathon field. After I passed a few of them, one commented that I was in third place. I didn't know for sure if she was correct. It's possible one of the other runners who passed her was on a relay team. Since I didn't know when the half marathon started, it also seemed plausible that the lead runner could have gone by before the two races merged together. I decided to assume she was right, and I was in third place. That gave me a strong motivation to keep running strong in the second half.

After a few more miles, I had difficulty maintaining my pace. Some of my miles crept close to eight minutes. I also had some faster miles, which presumably were downhill, but overall, I seemed to be slowing down. I had one particularly tough mile that took 8:07. As the trail leveled out again, I tried to pick up my pace. I passed the 21 mile mark and saw that if I ran eight minute miles for the rest of the race, I would miss my goal of 3:20. I needed to gain 30 more seconds.

About that time I was passed by a runner who was going so fast he made me look like I was standing still. We were just getting to an aid station and I asked one of the volunteers if he was a relay runner. To my relief, he was. I didn't have to compete with him. As he was pulling farther ahead, I tried to stay close to him for as long as I could, as a way of picking up my pace. Eventually, I still lost sight of him, but I think it helped.

With about four miles to go, I reached a bridge. There were several other small bridges, but this was a larger bridge over a wide river. After I crossed the bridge, the trail surface changed from dirt to asphalt. I'm primarily a road runner. I don't usually mind running on pavement, but I missed running on dirt. Later, I reached a clearing and suddenly noticed a head wind. I was fighting to pick up the pace, and the wind was tiring. It made me wonder if it was windy earlier, but I didn't notice because we were sheltered by the trees.

In the distance I could see a water tower, and I recognized it as the same one I saw as I was driving into Shenandoah the previous afternoon. As I neared the end of the clearing, I saw a "Welcome to Shenandoah" sign next to the trail. As I entered town, I had no sense of direction. I should have known I was entering the town from the north, but somehow it seemed like I was coming from the

west. The rest of the race was on city streets. There were a few quick turns, so I had no idea where I was or which direction I was going. I only knew how far it was.

When I passed the 24 mile mark, I saw that I had gained more than enough time to beat 3:20. I had at least a minute to spare. By now, I was passing lots of runners who were doing the half marathon. There was a volunteer on a bike who seemed to be leading a small pack of runners. As I passed them, he stayed with me. He was a race volunteer who was very helpful.

Anyone who runs marathons has encountered spectators who try to encourage them by saying, "It's all downhill from here." While they have good intentions, that's only helpful if it's true. Usually there's at least one more hill. Often there are still several. As I started a somewhat daunting hill, the guy on the bike said, "This is the last hill of any substance." He seemed to know what he was talking about. As I progressed up the hill, he said, "You're about 125 yards from the top." He went on to tell me that after this hill, there would be one other smaller hill, but it was mostly downhill to the finish. I worked hard on the hill. He told me the summit was at the next light. As I crested the hill, I started racing downhill. There were actually two small rises, but I had enough momentum to run hard the rest of the way. I passed several runners. I assumed they were all doing the half marathon. I didn't realize it at the time, but one of them was doing the marathon.

I don't always bother to check my watch at the 26 mile mark, but this time I did. I wanted to know if I ran the last mile under eight minutes. Even though it was mostly downhill, I was stunned to realize I ran it under seven minutes. I made the last turn and saw the finish line. As I raced to the line, I heard them announce my name and home town. They also announced that I was doing the full marathon. I didn't realize it, but they hadn't seen a marathon finisher in a long time.

I crossed the line in 3:16:50. For all my worries about slowing down in the second half, I was only one minute slower than I was in the first half. After I received my finisher medal, I looked back. I saw a runner coming in who had a green bib, like mine. That meant he was also doing the full marathon. He was one of the runners I passed in the last mile. After he finished, I shook his hand and congratulated him. I didn't know it yet, but this was his first marathon.

The finish area was next to a restaurant called The Depot. The building used to be the town's railroad depot. There are still railroad tracks running by one side of the building. I don't know how much they're still used, but I'm sure they're only used for freight. It's fitting, however, that a race that was run on a former railroad line should finish at a railroad depot.

When enough results were posted, I discovered I had finished second overall. The winner finished more than 30 minutes ahead of me. My margin over the third place runner was only 29 seconds.

After getting post-race food (which included chocolate milk), I retrieved my gear bag. I had enough time before the award ceremony to go back to my room. It was only as I walked back to the hotel that I realized I had run right past it at the end of the race. I didn't have time to shower, but I had enough time to change into dry shoes and socks before returning for the award ceremony.

At the award ceremony, I saw several runners I met before the race. Several of them also won awards. They started with door prizes and then did the half marathon awards. The announcer was a local radio personality. He was entertaining and had a good sense of humor. As each winner came up to the stage to receive their award, he asked them where they were from and what they liked most about the race. He also encouraged them to say a little about themselves. When they were done with half marathon awards, they moved on to the marathon. They gave out the awards for the overall male and female winners and then moved to relay teams. There were a few categories of teams, so there were several team awards. Each member of the winning teams got an opportunity to introduce

themselves. I recognized the relay runner who passed me with about five miles to go. He was on a team called "Four Jerks and a Squirt." His team took second place among all-male teams. After his team left the stage, I went over and told him how strong he looked when he passed me.

After the relay awards, they returned to individual awards. When it was my turn on stage, I mentioned that I'm working on running 52 marathons this year. I had mentioned that goal to a few of my friends, but it was the first time I mentioned it publicly. After I got my award, the announcer referred me to a colleague who works for a local station. He wanted to interview me.

My award was a certificate suitable for framing and four \$25 gift certificates from the Shenandoah Chamber of Commerce. They were redeemable at local businesses that are members of the chamber of commerce. One of them was Shenandoah Inn & Suites. Because I was staying two nights, my bill was more than \$100, so I was able to use all of the gift certificates at once.

I think everyone I met who was at the award ceremony won something. Those who didn't place overall or in their age group won door prizes.

After the award ceremony, I went back to the hotel to get cleaned up and stretch. It was a long time before I was ready to go out again, and I was getting hungry. After a quick stop to tour the Everly Brothers' childhood home, I went to The Depot for dinner.

The next morning, as I was starting to drive home, I crossed a river. Wondering if this was the river I crossed near the end of the race, I looked to my right. I recognized the bridge I ran over. From the bridge, I could see a narrow band of trees cutting diagonally across the landscape. That was the Wabash Trace. It was hard to believe how narrow it looked from the road. When I was on the trail, I couldn't even see through the trees, but from the outside, you can't tell even tell there's a trail there.

I don't usually mention T shirts in my race reports, but the shirt had an interesting design. It was a green shirt with writing in a lighter shade of green. It included a design in the shape of a footprint, which consisted of dozens of leaves of different shapes. Together, the design and the colors give a definite impression that this is a nature race. The finisher medal was in the shape of a shamrock and included the same "leaf footprint."

If any of my friends asks me which marathon they should run in Iowa, I'm going to recommend this one. I loved everything about it, including the volunteers and all the people I met in town. It's still a small race, but it's growing fast. To keep the trail from getting crowded, they're going to have to start limiting the size. I predict that before long, this is a race that will fill early.