

Wyoming Marathon by David Holmen May 2012

On May 27, 2012, I ran the Wyoming Marathon in the Laramie Mountains. I've run this race before, so I knew how difficult it is. The elevation ranges between 8000 and 8723 feet, and there are hills that are several miles long. I've wanted to do some long stretches of downhill running to train for the Western States 100. This race gave me opportunities to run downhill for up to six miles at a time. The uphill were also good training, since Western States begins with a 4½ mile climb that tops out at about 8750 feet.

The Laramie Mountains are between Laramie and Cheyenne. The start of the race is closer to Laramie, but packet pick-up and the pre-race dinner are at the Little America Hotel in Cheyenne, so I found it more convenient to stay there.

I was able to get a good airfare to Denver, so I flew into Denver and drove the rest of the way. The drive takes less than 2 hours.

When I ran this race in 2004, I finished in 4:05. At the time, I felt I had a very good race, and I couldn't imagine running much faster. Since I'm in better shape than I was in 2004, I thought I might be able to take a shot at four hours. Then I came down with a cold.

I started having symptoms on Monday, six days before the race. I went through the usual progression of symptoms, starting with a sore throat. By Wednesday, the sore throat and post-nasal drip were replaced with congestion and generally feeling wiped out. By Friday, I no longer felt wiped out, but I was still congested and had developed a cough.

I flew to Denver on Saturday. I took a daytime decongestant to help my ears adjust to the pressure changes. The decongestant did its job, but it also left me dehydrated. Since I was traveling to a higher elevation, I knew I would have to really work at staying hydrated. I drank as much as I could that day, but I still felt thirsty.

When I arrived at the Little America Hotel, they didn't have any rooms that matched my reservation, so they put me in a deluxe king room on the terrace level for no additional charge. The room was huge. It had a sitting area/office that was at least as large as the bed chamber. It also had a walk-out patio with a lawn and a view of pine trees. It's a shame I was traveling by myself and only staying two nights. I felt like I was letting the upgrade go to waste.

The convenience of staying at Little America is that after settling into my room, I was able to walk to packet pick-up, bring my things back to my room and be back for dinner a few minutes later. I also didn't have to drive anywhere after dinner, which made it easy to get organized and get to bed early.

The race started at 6 AM, but I had to drive about 35 miles to get there, so I set my alarm for 4:00. I actually woke up earlier and couldn't get back to sleep.

The race starts at the Lincoln Monument rest area along I-80. This rest area has a large bust of Abraham Lincoln. This section of I-80 co-exists with the old Route 30, which is also called the Lincoln Highway (because it goes through Springfield, IL). The monument is located where it is, because it's the highest point on the highway.

The Wyoming Marathon is a no-frills race. There are no awards, relatively few aid stations and no port-o-potties. Starting and finishing at the rest area gave us access to a large parking area and a

building with real bathrooms. Real bathrooms are a convenience at any race, but for a small race like this, they're a luxury.

The race has an out-and-back course on dirt roads through Medicine Bow National Forest. A portion of the course is on a service road alongside I-80. This section of I-80 often gets strong winds gusts and the service road is the part of the course that's the most exposed to the wind.

If you look at the elevation profile on the race website, it looks sort of like a sideways lightning bolt. There's a four mile downhill, a three mile uphill and then a six mile downhill. That's actually the profile for the first half, which descends over 700 feet. Then you turn around. The second half is mostly uphill. For heartier souls, there's also a double marathon that does the whole thing twice. (There are also shorter distances.)

You need to carry your own water bottle, but there are aid stations every four to five miles where you can refill your bottle with water or Gatorade. The aid stations also have a few snacks, such as potato chips. I considered carrying a fuel belt with two bottles, but opted instead to carry a single hand-held bottle. That seemed about right. I was able to stay hydrated, and I was usually emptying my bottle just as I was reaching an aid station.

When I woke up Sunday morning, it was 48 degrees in Cheyenne, but I knew it would be several degrees colder on the course, because of the difference in elevation. I also knew from past experience that it would be windy. When I did this race in 2004, the wind chill along the service road was so cold that my fingers wouldn't work. I had to press on without walking breaks or water stops until I reached an underpass. Mindful of that experience, I dressed plenty warm. As it turns out, it was 37 degrees at the start, and the wind was really whipping.

Although I still had my cold, I didn't take a decongestant the morning of the race, because I was worried it would dehydrate me. The air is very dry at 8000 feet. I didn't know how much my cold would slow me down. Although I was no longer feeling weak or tired, I knew I wasn't 100 percent. I also didn't know if I would have trouble breathing. The air is very thin at 8000 feet. The cold didn't make breathing any easier.

Although I knew the cold would affect my race, I didn't alter my pacing strategy. My plan was to do continuous running on the three long downhill sections, and mix running with walking breaks on the long uphill sections. The plan was one minute of walking for every two minutes of running.

When the race started, I ran surprisingly fast. We start with the steepest downhill of the race, so gravity was doing most of the work. Before we had run a mile, we reached a short uphill. I knew it was just a blip in the middle of a long downhill section, so I continued running. My breathing was labored, and my pace slowed, but I got through it. After that I had no trouble running the first four miles, although my pace moderated. Every 10 minutes, I drank four or five ounces.

When we hit the first long uphill stretch, I switched to my run 2, walk 1 plan. It took some discipline, but I was able to do it.

When we reached the service road, there was a strong cross wind. A couple times, it blew one of my legs sideways, causing me to kick myself. I was very cold on this stretch. It was a relief, when we reached the underpass, where we crossed under the freeway and returned to dirt roads.

On the last few miles before the turnaround, I started getting hot. The sun was getting higher in the sky and I assumed the temperature was climbing. I was worried that I was overdressed and would

keep getting hotter. It turns out that my worry was misplaced. It only felt hot because the wind was at our back on this section.

I reached the turnaround in 1:56. I knew the second half would be much slower, so at this point it was obvious that I wouldn't break four hours, and I was likely to be slower than the 4:05 I posted in 2004.

As I started the return trip, I battled the double whammy of running uphill into a strong wind. I upped the ante by modifying my pacing strategy to at least two minutes of running, followed by one minute of walking. This allowed me time for my walking breaks to coincide with the steepest sections. I didn't have to worry about getting hot anymore. I felt good about my modified pacing strategy, although there was one point where I broke down and took a walking break prematurely.

When I got back to the service road, I was relieved that I was no longer running right into the wind, but even the cross winds were tiring. It was difficult to run in a straight line. The wind was also cold. My hands were getting uncomfortable. As I reached the underpass that marked my return to dirt roads, my watch read three hours. That was somewhat disheartening, since I had not yet reached the half marathon turnaround point. I was less than $\frac{3}{4}$ done, but I had already run for three hours. Although I knew I wouldn't break four hours, it was discouraging to be off the pace already with another four-mile uphill stretch still ahead of me.

As I entered the last long downhill stretch, I initially enjoyed being able to do continuous running, even if it wasn't very fast. After a while, though, my legs got increasingly uncomfortable. I was actually looking forward to the end of the downhill, even though it meant starting a long uphill slog to the finish.

As I began the last four miles, the slope was more gradual than I remembered. At one point, I ran nine minutes before taking my walking break. As we got into the last mile, however, it was all I could do to run for two minutes at a time. For the second time in the race, I took a walking break prematurely.

By now, I had seen two double marathoners, already heading back out for their second circuit. All of the double marathoners impressed me. I couldn't imagine heading back out after finishing this hill.

After what turned out to be my final walking break of the race, I looked at the grade ahead of me and I couldn't imagine sticking to running for two whole minutes. Then I saw the race director's trailer at the top of the hill. I knew that was the finish line, so I gutted it out. My pace was agonizingly slow, but I ran to the finish.

I finished in 4:17:12. That's twelve minutes slower than my time from 2004, but it's still a respectable time for this course. Despite my cold, I averaged less than 10 minutes per mile. More importantly, I got in some good training for Western States.

After the race, I was wiped out. I felt tired for the rest of the trip. I spent the rest of the day eating and resting.

If you want an easy marathon, go somewhere else. If you want to be pampered with all the amenities of the big city races, go somewhere else. If you want to challenge yourself with a hilly course, high elevation and strong winds, this is your race. When you finish this race, you know you really earned it. If you're really brave, you can even do the double marathon.