

Race Report

2015 Pistol 100 Mile

1/3-1/4/2015

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Event Rating

A+

The overall impression of this race is that A LOT of pride and care is put in to it from the Race Director and the entire volunteer crew. I did not hear one complaint regarding the race. This is extraordinary given that there were 400 people participating. The course is a paved greenway (generally 8 feet wide) between Alcoa and Maryville in Tennessee. The course often runs next to a creek which makes it pretty. The course is relatively flat, with gently rolling hills. There certainly could be far worse venues for an urban ultra! This race shows the Alcoa and Maryville greenway trails in an extremely good light. The 100 mile race consists of 9 iterations of the 11+ mile course. The course had 3 Aid Stations. These were extremely well stocked and manned by VERY supportive volunteers. The timing was performed by Endurance Sports Management and went without a hitch (as far as I saw). The Alcoa middle school facilities were greatly appreciated and proved an awesome venue for a start and finish area. This race feels much more refined than one might expect from a third year event.

Awards and SWAG

As far as SWAG, the registration bag was nicely stocked with the normal supply of fliers, free samples, etc.... Also included were some new gloves and a very nice long sleeve technical shirt. 100 mile runners also receive a pair of Injinji Toe socks. Upon finishing the race, everyone receives a Pistol finisher's hat. Again, quite nice.

The 100 mile belt buckle is very cool (a pistol with spinning cylinder) complete with display stand. All finishers receive custom engraved plates (to be affixed to the display stand) to commemorate their accomplishment.

For winning the event, I received a nice prize package. This included:

1. A very nice first place plaque.
2. A free pair of Altra running shoes.
3. An Injinji sock prize package.
4. Free entry to the 2016 race.

As if all that was not enough; for setting a new course record, I will be receiving a custom engraved trophy mug.

Overall Highlight

The theme I saw time and time again during this weekend of racing was the “Power of the Pacer”. I observed several elite runners helping complete strangers finish their first 100K or 100 mile race. Sho (Gray) helped one man reach his first 100 mile finish and then helped a lady along the way to her first 100K finish. Kirby (Russell) ran the whole race (as a registered runner) with a young lady in her first hundo. It seems like Kirby’s recent race times have been consistently falling and certainly a PR was possible for him on this course...but he chose to instead focus not on his PR, but on someone else’s (very cool indeed). Ron (Moore) and Misty (Herron Wong) both volunteered multiple shifts for the race AND paced many laps for people who were strangers just minutes earlier. Leah (Jones) also threw down a lot of miles to keep Elite runner Kathy (Smith) company on her way to a solid second place female finish. Last, but not least, Stephanie (Johnson) gave pep-talks, advice and hard-earned race wisdom to help her runner push through adversity and sprint to the finish just ahead of the cut-off. Seeing all these folks suffering the miles and weather to help someone else reach a goal was quite inspiring.

My Race Performance

Personally, this year’s Pistol race was definitely my “A-race” for this winter. In 2014, I had performed miserably in this event. I started too fast, and faced stomach issues which resulted in me pulling out of the hundred mile race after racing just 100K. It was by far the worst I’d ever raced, so I knew I had to come back and do it “right”.

The highlight of 2014 had been seeing James Barnard destroy the course in 15 hours and forty-some minutes. He set the bar and made it look easy; showing the rest of us what is possible. This performance gave us a good feel for what a winning time in 2015 would need to be.

Seeing the entrants list for this race, it was clear that there were several runners who would be vying for the win.

This year, the 50K race started at 7:55 AM while the 100K and 100 mile racers started 5 minutes later. The staggered start was a nice change. The <potential> to get drug along with the pace set by the faster 50K runners was alleviated. Additionally, it was nice to say “Hi” to the more leisurely 50K runners as we caught up to them during the first few laps.

During the first 3 or 4 miles, I ran and chatted with James (Barnard). Knowing that it would be a long day, we fell in to a brisk yet non-strenuous pace as we discussed the mysteries of the universe...or at least those of running. After 4 miles we both zoned out and fell into our individual paces. I ended up running solo for the remainder of the race. A very nice consequence of a large field (400 runners amongst the various events) and out-and-back course (with lollipop loops at each end) was that there were constantly friendly faces passing in all directions. So, though running alone it never got lonely.

My first lap ended on a good pace and I was in second place. Another nice feature of an out-and-back course is that I could see where I was in relation to the competition (as long as they were not close enough to be on the lollipop at the end of each out-and-back with me). The gentleman in first place (from what I could tell based upon bib color) was setting a blistering pace. I had to resist the urge to try to match his pace. I figured that in all likely-hood he would bonk (I certainly would at his pace), and if he did not bonk he was clearly WAY out of my league and he'd sail to victory regardless of me adjusting my pace. However, I think the first 4 or 5 of us all saw the pace being set by the front-runner and started running a tad faster than we might have otherwise. Sub-consciously, it is hard to not get pulled along. This led to my second lap being much faster than I should have run. But, I felt fresh and strong so I rolled with it. The 3rd lap so a slight slowing to the pace but I was still probably 15 minutes faster than I should have been coming through 50K. I think I was still in 2nd or 3rd at this point.

Lap 4 was my mental low-point of the day. I saw the first place guy still laying down good miles (pulling ahead by 20+ minutes I'd estimate) and suddenly I was passed by 2 guys in quick succession. They blew by like gazelles which made me feel lead-heeled. All I could do was tell myself to keep moving and that this valley would pass. Part of me feared a return of the issues that derailed by 2014 race. I started to wonder if I'd even finish. I basically told myself to suck it up, or all my training was for naught. I might not get a podium but I sure as heck better finish. This helped. I got through lap 4 (44 miles) and rolled into lap 5 feeling a bit better.

I had regained a positive attitude and was moving pretty well. As the first place runner ran towards me on his return trip of the out-and-back, I noticed that he was definitely in a lot of pain. He had red-lined it and said he was dropping at the end of this lap. This gave me a bit of boost because it reinforced my earlier pacing decision. Soon I passed mile 50 (roughly ½ way through the lap) at around 7 hours 30 minutes. This was a mixed blessing. I realized we (the first 4 or 5 of us) were all on a suicide pace, but I felt energetic and not too tired; which gave me hope that I could continue for a strong finish. Again, I thought that I was probably out of the running for first or second place...but perhaps I could sneak into third place now.

I finished lap 5 and rolled straight to lap 6. I kept moving well but about 3 miles in to this lap I heard the voices in my head telling me that first and second place looked so fast when they passed me (20 miles earlier) that now they must be hours ahead. Wonder of wonders...not 60 seconds later I rounded a blind corner and saw second place a few hundred feet ahead. He was moving ok, but I was going much faster. As I passed him, I asked where first place was and he said just a few hundred yards ahead. Wowza! I suddenly had my mojo back. I caught up to first place in about a mile. I held back a tad to make sure I wasn't running on too much adrenaline and to also gauge how fresh first place looked. He was moving quite well, but I decided to see if a quick pass might deflate him a bit. As I passed him, we exchanged pleasantries then I pulled ahead. I checked my watch and I seem to recall it was right at mile 58.

Now I second guessed the wisdom of passing right away. The day was still young and there were a ton of miles remaining. I hoped I hadn't let the adrenaline of the moment push me to go too fast just to momentarily grab first place. I figured that there wasn't much I could change now, so I shouldn't worry

about it. If I had made a strategic error, then perhaps they'd catch me in a few miles (or in a few laps)...all I could do was hammer down and see what happens.

I finished lap 6 and couldn't tell where the next guys were behind me (due to the lollipops at the end of each out-and-back it is likely that you might not see someone 10 minutes behind you). I received word though that I was maybe 6 minutes ahead of second place.

Too close for my blood, so I set out with a bit more gusto for lap 7. The next 2 laps felt great. I locked in to a strong pace and flowed through the miles. At the end of lap 8, it started raining hard. It was not terribly cold out, but it felt chilly to be drenched that far into the day.

As I passed the starting line at the beginning of lap 9 it was pouring rain. I did some fuzzy math in my head and realized a course record might be in the cards if I kept moving. What's more, a time in the low 15 hour range was a definite possibility! I recalled how bad I felt around mile 35 and marveled at how much things can change during a hundred mile race. I quickly debated putting on more clothes before heading out for the last lap. I decided to just grab my light rain shell and hit it. I hoped that I would stay warm by running hard the last 11 miles.

Not grabbing more clothing was a mistake. Initially, the rain jacket helped and I moved along well. But, by the time I was half-way through the lap, I was starting to feel cold. I noticed that the cold was slowing my stride. A slower stride meant I got a bit colder. A vicious cycle was beginning. Regardless, I knew I just had to keep moving forward to get through the cold as soon as possible. My GPS watch battery died and I no longer knew where I was in relation to the course record.

As I ran, I noted that several large puddles were gathering. I ran through some that were 4 inches deep. Beneath several of the road overpasses (where the greenway runs underneath a bridge) I saw running water crossing the trail. This was 2 inches deep during my last lap. I heard that later in the night these same run-offs were hip deep in water at places!

I knew I was moving slowly enough that it was going to be tight to achieve a course record. By the time I passed the starting gate to head out for the final 1.8 mile lollipop, I saw I still had a chance to get under the course record time. Honestly, I was just miserably cold and wanted to be done fast. Not to get any course record, or even podium finish...but just to get warm! I started to yearn for a nice hot shower more than anything else. My thoughts then turned to the truly tough runners who I knew would be running all night in these conditions. I hoped they were dressed more sensibly than I!

Regardless, I kept moving and soon was rounding my way back to the start/finish line. I crossed the line and was happy to see that I had taken a few minutes off the course record. Having seen James set it the previous year, I was extremely pleased to be anywhere close to his time...be it plus or minus.

My Nutrition Notes

For those that might be interested, I never really had any stomach issues all day. My fueling strategy actually started during my taper period three weeks out by reducing caffeine intake to one cup of coffee a day. I

then reduced my intake to zero caffeine the week before the race. I am a coffee fiend, so this is brutal. I get mild headaches for about 2 days or so. But I find it serves a few purposes:

1. It gets me in a Gladiator mindset. Sort of self-imposed test of how badly I want to have a good race. If I'm serious about running well, then a little caffeine headache is nothing.
2. When I want to give up during the race, I tell myself the 3 weeks of caffeine fasting would be for nothing.
3. I break the caffeine fast (with a Five hour energy drink) around mile 80 and it feels like I have jet fuel in my veins.
4. I think it helps avoid potential caffeine overload for the first 80 miles (which has some bad side effects like elevated heart rate and bad stomach).

For this race I bought my own supply of caffeine free gels and took one every 30 minutes with a healthy drink of water. This timing forced me to remember to drink water (which I was worried I might forget given the low heat during this race).

I also forced hydration by getting a cup of water or tailwind (alternating) at each aid station.

I took a ThermoTab (salt) and potassium pill two or three times during this race. In hot weather I usually do these once an hour.

I didn't have any solid food during the race. This was my plan as long as I kept to a sub 16 hour pace. Past 16 hours I was going to consider solid food if gels started sitting funny.

This was similar to my Georgia jewel strategy (though it was hotter at the jewel so I had much more water and salt). I also had more solid food early at the jewel. In retrospect, I couldn't find a distinct benefit from the solid food, so I dropped it from my Pistol plan. My stomach was fine at the jewel until hour 20 or 22. So, that gave me good faith that I was on a good path in my nutrition experiment for the Pistol.

My Foot Gear Notes

I never changed shoes or socks during this race. I wore Injinji toe socks with a second pair of "normal" socks over them. My shoes were Hoka One One Rapa Nui 2s. This particular pair is about a ½ size big on me (hence the second pair of socks). This foot strategy worked reasonably well and got me to the finish, though it looks like I'll sacrifice 3 toenails for the privilege.