

HURL Elkhorn 50K...Life is Good

Bill Wood, 50K Finisher

As the week progressed the forecast continued to climb and by the morning of the Elkhorn Endurance Race it had settled at a blistering 97 degrees. Usually at 6:30 I'm toeing the starting line wearing a long sleeve t-shirt but Saturday morning found us waiting in close to 70 degree balminess. At 7 am Steve, the RD, gave us a Ready-Set-GO. And so it began - right away I latched on to the shirt-tails of Rich, as he is a local 100 miler legend, and in my age class. Rich has been extensively training with a heart monitor and has dialed in a pace that sustains him for a couple of days and a night, a most promising prospect for my mere 50k survival (or more accurately 52k ugh).

The Forest Service had closed the usual Crystal Creek start/finish, for rehabilitation, so the race moved to the Willard Creek Trailhead, a few miles south. This prompted a course change, whereby, adding a steep climb, up Jackson Creek, from mile 2 to mile 6, where it joined the previous course trail, thus adding another 500 feet of elevation to the already almost 8000 feet. By mile 3 I noticed my sunglasses were gone from their tucked in spot on my fuel belt. With the expectation of bright sun, without respite, my contacts were going to melt to my eyeballs. Rich said "good start for the day - always expect something to go wrong". Rich is always the glass-is-half-full kind of guy. Later I learned they had been found - only to be lost again. A short story.

We made good time running, and marching, up the Jackson Creek climb. Rich was keeping his heart rate under 140 and above 120. A pace I seemed comfortable with at least this early in the race. I had resolved to stay hydrated and continued to drink from my two 20 ounces bottles, as needed. By the time mile 9 arrived both Rich and I were filling from the creek in Casey Meadows. The next climb was up out of Casey Meadows to the rocky pinnacle below Casey Peak, then a welcomed downhill run of 3 miles into the Teepee Creek aid station. On this second climb I had an early "bonk" but a cliff bar snapped me out of it. I thought this is way too early for problems.

I refilled bottles at Teepee Creek and rushed out behind Rich to head up the next climb. It starts with a slow uphill slog for a couple miles then turns into a steep rocky set of switchbacks for the next 2, before topping out at the Elk Park aid station. I stayed with Rich until mile 13 where he left me sitting in the creek pouring cold water over my head. So hot – just so hot !! On the switchbacks I came across a pony-tailed runner sitting on a log staring at the dirt. I stopped and asked if he was alright to which he replied he was dizzy, had plenty of water and gels, and was from Florida. He stood up and almost fell down while announcing he was fine. I would later run a short piece with Seth from Florida down through Elk Parks and Wilson Creek. Seth is a chemistry professor at the University of Central Florida. He is also in my age class and would finish an hour behind me. At least I wasn't going to be dead last in my age group -- go Florida!

Finally I finished the least desirable of climbs and stumbled into the Elk Park aid station. Did I mention it was hot. Not just sorta warm - it was cooking hot - like cook an egg on a flat rock, HOT!!! The awesome volunteers refilled my bottles and got me whatever my heart desired except for the air conditioner and recliner I requested. My hands were swollen to the point I couldn't close them and much to my consternation the M & M's kept rolling off my palms and falling to the ground. A good application of the 5 second rule and I had yummy dirty MM's, and a couple of pretzels.

Elk Park aid is the high point at 8,000 feet and the point of no return. If you are going to DNF here's your chance because if you continue to go on you drop into a whole new drainage and the only way back out is to climb back up to here. I had met two other runners on the climb to Elk Park aid that were going the wrong way. They said they were toast – too hot – time to walk out. As I continued I wondered to myself – are they smarter than me? Do they know something I don't?

As I walked away from the aid station on the ridgeline my legs had seemingly forgotten how to run so I leisurely strolled along stopping now and then to pick up an M & M. Finally, I was running through the Elk Parks plunging a good mile down to Wilson Creek and the only road, if you could call it that, on the entire course. I spied Pat, a journalist with the University of Fairbanks Alaska, standing in a pool in the creek, happily rinsing his shirt and splashing about. He waved and smiled. Pat would finish over an hour behind me but by now the day had evolved from a race to a quest for survival and time was quickly losing any importance. I jogged along the jeep track for a couple miles then headed up the cruel and inhumane out and back section which leaves the road and switchbacks up to the Tizer Meadows aid station on a very narrow trail.

At Tizer Meadows I chatted with a volunteer, Kelli, my facebook friend. The fig newtons were tasty and I discovered I was able to grasp them in my hand, so grabbing a couple off I went. I trotted down the Tizer Meadow out & back and made the turn up Moose Creek. Now for the last of the big ass climbs back up to the Elk Park aid station where I had been 12 miles before. Suddenly a discovery - Oh No...I had only filled one of my two water bottles at Tizer. I am so stupid !! I had got caught up in yakking and forgotten what I was trying to do – survive !!! There was absolutely no physical way to make the Moose Creek climb with only one water bottle so as I crossed Moose Creek I waded into the middle and dunked my bottles. This creek isn't one of our time tested clean sanitary water sources and is a large creek, but it was either fill up or die. There was literally no way I could make the 3 mile climb in this heat, besides giardia has a 2 week ingestion period, so its die now or die later. I chose the later.

I humped my way up Moose Creek (which really isn't following a creek and should be re-named Moose Mountain). Oh man, I was suffering, head spinning, and starting to take breaks. As I was resting my chin on a chest high deadfall a 50 miler blonde came by at a steady hiking pace. She stopped and asked if I was all right. I must have looked bad. I smiled and said, as upbeat as I could to this chipper chick, that I was fine – just resting my chin. After a high-five off up the trail and out of sight she went. Had she really just been there? Was I starting to hallucinate? Am I delirious or is that big black rock a moose, or a bear? "Shoosh" I yell but it doesn't move - obviously its sleeping. I continue to trudge.

Moose Creek (mountain) climbs and climbs and climbs and neverendly climbs. Then suddenly I am back to Elk Park aid station staring at unfamiliar smiling faces. Did I take a wrong turn? Nope shift change and new people. I re-fill – both bottles this time – pop a Nunn tablet in one of them for more electrolytes, a couple more M&M's on the ground, and I am finally on the best part of the course. A 6 mile, primarily downhill, section to the start/finish. This is where I had dreamed of being. Now I can take revenge on the grueling rocky climb by going DOWN DOWN all the way to Teepee Creek aid and then only two plus miles from there to the finish.

I roll out of Elk Park aid with a big grin and a bounce to my step (definitely delirious) down through the switchbacks and the rocks and the dirt I go. Down down down...splashing across the creek I had been sitting in hours before. Now feeling life seeping back into my legs and the smell of the barn in my nose. I have been out here so long the hottest part of the day is behind me. Into Teepee Creek aid I bounce. Do I want some Mountain Dew – sure why not!! I'm going home and I feel it creeping

closer. On I run – now I have the running toots from the carbonation – I laugh out loud - two miles to go – now one mile to go. OH NO my sight is growing dim and things are starting to look hazy – I might not make it ! Ah, it's all okay as I realize it's just the sun getting ready to go down. It has been a long day. The longest hardest run of my life but I turn the corner and there looms the FINISH LINE BANNER and people clapping and cheering. I sprint to the finish feeling great and awesome and alive. 11 hours and 14 minutes from when I started this ordeal. But I did not DNF and I did not die. Someday I will not be able to do these things ----THIS is not that day ! LIFE IS GOOD ☺