

2012 Keys 100 UltraMarathon – Redemption Day

Very few things in life excite me or place me in a position of nervousness. A date with a beautiful woman, a visit with my family overseas and occasionally the ultramarathons. The nervousness comes from different reasons in each case. The 2012 Keys UltraMarathon was one event I looked forward to every day for one year. The reason was simple, in 2011 I DNF (did not finish) at the Keys 100, my only ultra DNF.

Failure is a powerful motivator and for someone like me, the worst thing that could happen. Injuries, accidents or even death are understandable and somehow justified. Failure is not! There are no excuses for failure. In hindsight, the failure in 2011 was an eye opening experience which led to a change in the way I trained, I approached races and saw myself as a man. Nevertheless, every night I fell asleep remembering the two major failures of my life. Life cannot change that, and with one of the failures there is no redemption, no second chance; the Keys 100 in 2012 offered a chance to redemption for the 2011 race.

The race seems simple on paper, one straight line from Key Largo to Key West, 100 miles long, no chance of getting lost, only one turn in Key West and enough aid stations to be comfortable without a crew. But what's on paper is not always what you get.

The Keys 100 is a very tough race, high humidity, high temperatures with sudden changes in degrees based on passing showers, moving clouds or a breeze. Typical sub-tropical climate, nevertheless for someone who never experienced it before, can be a trap. The views are phenomenal which could be a trap in itself, in the sense that mind focuses on the outside instead of paying attention to what happens inside. Many DNFs due to overheating, dehydration and the worst, blisters/foot problems. The asphalt heats up, the humidity is high, perspiration high, and the result is the perfect combination for "foot cooking." Without knowing, the skin around toe nails gets moist, light and then toenails just fall off. Blisters on top of blisters, on top of blisters is another common sight.

This year however, I experienced over 9 hours of storms out of the 22 hours of running. The rain kept the temperature down, the sun was on us only for a few hours instead of the full day. A blessing in disguise as other problems were created



Start of the race. Around 120 relay teams filled the parking lot. The energy was in the air; spent the morning drinking two Leffe beers and chatting with friends. It is a weird feeling when going to an ultramarathon of more or less 1000 participants, 150 individual 100 mile runners and personally knowing over 40 of them plus quite a few relay runners. It is hard to explain what happens before a race because each person deals with getting ready the last minute logistics, personal emotions, and at the same time encouraging everybody else while being nice and positive. Perhaps the phrase “blonde moment” is close to explaining the feeling. Mind races in a thousand directions, people left and right, conversations on top of conversations. Nevertheless, the start takes place and race mode takes over most runners.

Started the race fast, under the idea of getting as many miles as possible before it gets hot. The start was focused and after the first few steps I realized I could not talk to anybody else, I had to run for a while to calm down and feel the race. Did so for about 20 miles, fast pace, little conversation with runners I passed, trying to at least say hi and waive at support crews and people on the road.

Passing relay runners gave me power as I felt invincible..., well at least for the time being. I was close to the lead runners, Mike, Bruce, Brad however I knew my pace will slow down considerably and will be passed by other runners in a while.

The general atmosphere of the first 30 miles or so was phenomenal. Everybody was in good spirits, the pain was not there quite yet. Crew/support vehicles everywhere. Been offered so many things from different vehicles I felt embarrassed not to be able to return the favor.

I knew I was not going to fail again but after some earlier injuries I decided to run conservative. Goal for the day was 22-24 hours finish. For a while I played games in my mind with finish times and a few times wanted to change the plan and push it harder. Then slowly talked myself into finishing the race injury free, to allow training for my next race the UltraBalaton, a 131.7miles/212kilometers race 6 weeks away.

After running through some heavy rain, the weather cleared up for a bit. Some 100 miler runners started to pass me. Ran quite a few miles with great runners, exchanging stories, experiences, advice, and plans for the future.



Hit a few walls, the first one around mile 35. Took a while to get back to full energy and fluid running. The temperature started to rise as well and decided it is time to switch to preservation mode, basically take it slow, conserve energy and wait for the evening to push it again. The beers at the aid stations had their desired effect and each time I had one felt like new. The double cheeseburger I had the night before the race was doing a good job at keeping me strong. Started to eat PB&J sandwiches at the aid stations along with my beer. They provided each time enough energy for the following 20 miles.

Running the race I was able to remember the previous year emotions and feelings when passing landmarks. This year I was about 3 hours ahead last year's performance, much wiser and better trained. Nevertheless, it was still impressive to see and talk with ultrarunners doing their first 100mile race in the Keys. I figure, for the most part they have no idea what they got themselves into.

Running without a crew has its benefits. Less stops, nothing to look forward to, nobody to look up to for encouragement. It forces you to dig deep inside your mind and soul and discover who you are that day, why are you in the race, how you plan to remember yourself the following day. The aid stations and crew vehicles for other runners provided much more support than needed. While I do not like running per se, I was loving being in the race and knowing there have been challenges from the start which I overcame, there will be challenges ahead which I will overcome.

That is the point where I realized the beauty of having completed several 100 ultramarathons. An incredible feeling of power, a relaxed feeling of "I will make this happen, no matter what," no more worries, no more doubts. Ultramarathons provided the opportunity to learn about myself so much and know that without a plan, without fancy training or equipment, without miracle nutrition or hydration I can do this. There is nothing I need from outside world, EVERYTHING I EVER NEED TO SUCCEED IS INSIDE!

The camaraderie in these events is the perfect picture of friendship and healthy relationships, the energy is high, the atmosphere is positive and from all the pain, the most beautiful smiles surface. How can I live without these events? They are an UTOPIC world we are experiencing live, we share with others in a content silence because the majority of the world does not understand us.

A few years ago I would not have understood the need to run 100 miles, now it is so clear to me, it is scary. I am sure there will always be a few "rotten apples" but I am also sure they will wash away, the purity of the sport is so strong that no matter what, you either purify yourself or you move on.

Those were my thoughts in the second part of the race. The more time I spent talking and running with other runners the better I felt. While physically I was getting tired, the mind just climbed on a high of positivity. Passing runners who were running their first 100 miles was beautiful, I was so proud of them and their success, knowing this will be a memory they will cherish for a long time, but more than that, this will be the day their lives will be changed forever, they will join a very elite group of athletes who will have the power and ability to literally change the world in a positive way.

The last few miles were through a strong storm. The heavy rain was above ankle level and the water washed away any Vaseline left on my body. It started to get cold, body was freezing and started to bleed due to chafing. Running was the only option to stay warm, the only problem, it was "John Wayne" running style... ☺ Despite the cold rain, strong chafing and deep water, I was happy. Such a hard feeling to explain, beyond mile 90 in a race, at the time when body is exhausted and mother nature throws a storm on Key West. Nevertheless, it was genuine happiness!

Crossing the finish line was an official confirmation of the journey, 21:53:12. The next few hours were not too happy as I threw up for about 45 minutes, lost balance, went through high/cold moments. But even those feelings were nothing compared with witnessing other runners crossing the finish line. You feel blessed and in the presence of greatness. And the more time passes by, the better it gets. Seeing guys in their 80's pushing through and finishing is even more inspirational than the mind blowing performances of the winners. No way to describe the light in the eyes of someone who just completed their first 100miles ultramarathon, or to see someone who was taken to the ER, return on the course and finish the race. No excuses, only determination. Such beautiful people.

Those last finishers are a true representation of the ultrarunning spirit. For them there is no competition to the podium, they do not seek to beat someone else's time, they are there for themselves, seeking the inner light and infinite power of the human spirit.

Look forward to the next year's race and can only hope all who have witnessed this race as a support crew or volunteers, will join us in experiencing the purity of the run. Thank you to Bob for another great race, for playing such a huge part in promoting our elite sport. Thank you all the volunteers, job well done! Thank you to all who offered support and cheers. Too many names to mention on this RR.

So what did I learn from the 2012 Keys 100 UltraMarathon? I've learned that failure is too costly to accept in my life. I've learned that I do not need anything to complete an ultramarathon, except the inner drive to do it. I've learned that our sport is growing fast and the road races are ALIVE!

