

## **Fort Clinch 100mi – Lucky 7<sup>th</sup> \* medical/physiologic lessons learned at an old military fort.**

Fort Clinch 100mi/160km was my 7<sup>th</sup> ultramarathon of over 100mi for this year, and the 18<sup>th</sup> race of 100(+)-mi or 24hrs in the last 16 months. So was Fort Clinch my lucky 7<sup>th</sup>? I guess it all depends on how you look at the experience.

From a performance perspective, it was the most pathetic one. From a learning experience it was the one I've learned from the most. Great knowledge comes from pain, and this race was filled with pain and knowledge.

Signed up for the race as soon as Caleb Wilson (the Race Director) emailed me. I had no idea what I was signing up for, however the time frame of March 30<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> looked great on my calendar to push one more ultra on top of the previous 6 I already signed up for. Have heard people complaining on line and live about pavement, the road, the fishing pier, etc. I falsely believed it was a race on paved roads, beach and a bit of trails on the Amelia Island. This seems to be a recurring problem with me and I really need to learn to research the races before signing up for them.

Drove to Amelia Island on Friday to make the package pick up, then went to the host hotel to check in. After checking in, had dinner with Claire Dorotik and later, Claire Johnson joined us for a few minutes.

On Saturday morning arrived at the starting line only to learn the start was pushed back 30 minutes. I liked the idea as I did not care about running in the dark for too long. Before the race, learned from Eric Friedman that the course was about 85% trails with roots and trees... I do not really like running trails, it is beyond me why anyone would like running 20 hours looking at nothing but trees..., but then again, I grew up in a place where my ancestors built paved roads over 5000 years ago :-)

Had 2 glasses of red wine chatting with other athletes at the starting line watching the fire pit. The race started promptly at 06:30 from the parking lot and following the main access road. I liked it, beautiful, solid, clean surface... Soon it was all over, the course turned on a single track trail which took us up and down over various small hills. Likely the tallest one was 15feet/5meters, however they were steep and coming one after another, turning to the left, right, circling around. The roots were not too bad, however you had to pick up your feet or you would trip. Seen several athletes taking some nice tumbles down the hills, rolling a few times before stopping. Was not looking forward to a fall.

After about 5 miles of trails, finally the FUR AS (Florida UltraRunners Aid Station) was manned or womanned by faces I recognized, all dressed in purple unicorn shirts. Just the idea of seeing someone wearing them makes me smile, seeing them live was fun. At that aid station I had a drop bag and decided to give up on my carry-on bottle as I have the tendency at times to over hydrate. The race was on a 10miles loop with 4 aid stations, so plenty of hydration.

After leaving the FUR AS, the course slowly took us on the beach around the old military fort and then on the pier. To me that was the only portion of the race worth doing as the views were breathtaking, open water on one side, the old military fort on the other while running on hard packed sand. The pier is just a beautiful concrete surface, flat and long taking you over the water, feeling the breeze and smell of the ocean. I wished the entire race was on the pier.



Went to the race broken from my previous 6 ultras and have experienced injuries, frustration, anxiety and mild depression. Let me explain. When you race so much there is no time for training as after each race you need a short recovery period. If you get injured, that period increases and in my case racing injured lead after the 3<sup>rd</sup> ultra to basically barely walk before starting the next one. The exhaustion sets in, especially from travel and lack of recovery which leads to frustration. Why? Well, for once you cannot train, you cannot get back to your routine (most of us have compulsive personalities), you cannot get stuff done, you fall behind with errands. On top of that, the races made me a much stronger ultrarunner mentally, especially learning how much I was able to push myself. The problem is that physical I was getting weaker and that creates an imbalance between the mental image of where I should be and the physical reality. That leads to even more frustration which coupled with exhaustion leads to mild depression.

So how it manifests? No interest in running, no interest in traveling, no interest in racing. Started to feel the “weight of the world on my shoulders” and just did not want to do it. Why did I do it? Well, it was part of the

training schedule and it was on the list :-)) I do not like to back down from the promises I made. To find out where my limits are, I have to really push them.

Ran the first loop well with Steve Schwab and decided at that point to keep a fast pace for the first 50 miles (with the Spartathlon cut off time in mind as the course was challenging). At the end of the first loop had some bacon freshly cooked by Caleb's mother Chaundra, at the main aid station. Things were looking good, but I wondered how long will it be before my lack of recovery will show its face.

By mile 30 I started to have problems, my stomach would not take any food. Was not sure why as I trained to run and eat basically cardboard if required. We all have favorite foods but I always considered a sign of weakness to depend on a special diet or nutrition. Soon, I started to realize what was happening. Running up and down the hills was forcing my heart to increase its pace very sudden (going up the hill in a few seconds) then relax when going downhill. Repeat that, time after time and I was having major problems... Generally have trained to run with a high heart rate, part of my tire dragging over the Key Biscayne bridge, but there, the HR stays constant high without fluctuations. Some short interval training would have been extremely useful, as well as very short uphill speed exercises. Have not done either and was paying the price.

The beauty of doing many bad ultras is that you know you can get the job done. Any job, period! You might not know how to do it, but there is a comforting confidence of "I've got this" which helps push away the negative. It is by far the most important feeling/attitude to have in a race!!!

Reached 50 miles in just a bit over 09:30 which was my goal, but then I slowly collapsed. The extreme exhaustion I had before the race suddenly took over me. If during the entire race almost everyone else was complaining about the heat, my body was cold. I was not sweating much and my hands were cold the entire time, not cold enough for gloves, but uncomfortable cold. Once my pace slowed down I had to start piling up warmer shirts and jackets. By mile 65 I was wearing 2 jackets and freezing. Just not enough energy to keep warm and run at the same time. I guess I was not doing either, as I was cold and started walking.

Before mile 70 I started to have very serious problems with my heart rate which was getting higher and higher with less and less running. I was hungry but could not think of food, I was tired but afraid to drink coffee or energy drinks because of the HR... I started to fall asleep and literally walk into trees... Not a pleasant feeling.

Carey Clarkson who volunteered to do just about anything at the race also had a sleeping mat. When I reached 70 miles I was broken, could not walk straight and decided to lay down. Very soon realized that laying down on my stomach would decrease the HR much faster than laying on my back. Not sure why, but followed what my body told me and took a few minutes nap. Got up feeling much better and the stomach problems cleared so I was able to eat some soup and pizza brought by Chris' mother. Claire Johnson, who was the race MD on site was near by, briefly took my pulse and said something to the extent "it is a little bit high." At that point I knew I was OK as my resting HR is usually higher than that of most endurance athletes.

Got back on the course and did 5 more miles before I reached the FUR aid station. I was still exhausted but better from a heart rate perspective. Craig Lozowick who came to Amelia Island to volunteer at the race offered to run with me the next lap. I informed him I have no running left just some very slow walking. He joined me and for a while felt good to mix short running sections with walking sections. Craig was not pushy, but was persistent to run as much as possible. The next 5 miles went OK under the circumstances, mainly because of the beach, road and pier sections. The following 5 miles were not that good anymore. My HR started to increase again and basically I had to stop at every park bench we encountered to regain control over my body. Closing on the 85 miles mark things went bad again and several times I just went down (controlled) but I reached moments where I was not able to stand and knew if I push it a few more steps I will pass out. Once I reached the 85 miles mark, back at the FUR AS I had some soup and decided to take a 25 minutes nap. Fell asleep as soon as I got into Craig's tent. Next thing I know Elizabeth Stupi was shaking my leg to get moving.

Felt better and knew I had quite a bit of time to finish the race so I was not worried about that. By the time I reached 90 miles I was a few minutes under 25 hours. Cut off was 30 hours and I had 5 hours to do the last 10 miles. Even in the worst circumstances I was still doing in average of 2 miles/hour so I decided to go for a very light last loop, 4 hours or so. As soon as I returned to the trail Chris Twiggs was running looking for me and offered to pace me (Chris was my first mentor when I started ultrarunning and came by to check on me and bring me a bottle of wine for Easter). He was dressed in just shorts and a t-shirt and felt bad for him as I was dressed well. Decided to try to run with him and when I cannot run anymore let him go ahead. The last thing I wanted was to worry about him getting sick, being cold.

We started chatting about future plans, training, ultras in general, we caught up with our personal lives and very soon I realized I was doing much, much better. Around that time it was full light again (Easter Sunday morning). Made it to the FUR AS running and there Susan Anger who was very worried over night for my well being had some solid food for me. Eggs, potatoes and avocados. Not sure who made them, but they were delicious and the eggs and avocados had protein. I could feel my body regenerating. It is a funny feeling, almost similar with the one I get when I drink wine. You just feel energy getting delivered to all your body parts fast. Having had stomach problems I skipped drinking wine and that only contributed to my weakened state.

Chris paced me to the finish line and the last 5 miles were fast, finishing the last loop in about 2:30 much faster than anticipated. That feeling of “coming back to life” is what I love about the ultras. It is pure magic, nothing rational can make you believe it can happen, but it does and your brain is mesmerized.

While I had a terrible race, several athletes had great performances. George Barthelmes was running his first 100mi race. He did excellent. Claire Dorotik was running as expected, extremely well. The two of them had the best races. Claire’s split times are so constant, it looked as if she ran it like a machine. That is the mark of a true champion. George’s were almost as good as Claire’s. George ended up taking 2<sup>nd</sup> overall, Claire took 1<sup>st</sup> female. Two other young ladies ran their first 100mi races, Taryn Giumento and Krystle Martinez. They are both fast runners especially for 100km distance and based on their performances at Fort Clinch I know they will both be super strong at 100mi as well, in just a short time. Jeffrey Kasal and Tim Puetz ran very well too. Jeffrey ended up taking 3<sup>rd</sup> overall after seeing him strong the entire night. Tim was at his first 100mi and had the pleasure of running with him for about 5 miles. He was strong and after a few minutes I knew he might have some problems but he will finish strong as he has the character and attitude required to succeed in an ultra: determination, humility and will to accept pain. Lana Kovarik had a good race with a strong finish even if she always complains about the heat. Great Job, Lana.

Steve Schwab finished strong in a very calm manner. He showed a huge improvement from the last race we did together a few months back. Sung Ho Choi decided to just run the race slow in order to focus on his next ultra, a week later and during the race at some point, he became the pacer for Krystle. They both finished at the same time.

Tammie Wunning, a former Florida ultrarunner who moved to Maryland was back for some Florida racing. She had a tough race, but she finished strong in the spirit of ultra athletes. She definitely learned to always push forward and overcome any obstacles.

The last two athletes to cross the finish line were two of my favorites, Jodi Weiss and Wayne Wright. They ended up running together almost the entire race. Finishing with a DFL (dead f\*\*\*ing last) is one of the most impressive things in an ultra. As an athlete you reach a point in the race where you do not believe it is still possible to make it before the cut-off, you are tired, broken down and you know you will not do well. You have every incentive to just quit, but you keep going nonetheless. “Elites” or talented runners quit a race as soon as things are not going well, and indicate they will not reach the podium. They are NOT ultrarunners and no matter how much they try to justify or hide under the idea of “saving themselves for other times” they display mental

weakness, they disrespect the other athletes and ultimately show their true colors... The saddest part is they miss the opportunity to experience the magic of ultras because they get so caught up in finishing on top to impress their sponsors, cheerleaders, or the ignorant crowd who lacks the ability to understand what it takes to be an ultrarunner.

Jodi and Wayne and both amazing human beings, they are positive and they are strong. Jodi always finishes her races no matter what. Fort Clinch was just such an example. She came to the race sick, with fever. She got the job done. Having learned she and Wayne finished brought tears of joy to my eyes.

Fort Clinch is by far the toughest trail race in Florida. Caleb Wilson did a great job managing the event and I have only good things to say about him and his volunteers. Besides the ones mentioned already, I have to say thank you to Zsofia Inhauser, Bambi Pennycuff who worried for me and offered help every time I passed through their aid station, to Wendie and Jon Cooper part of the FUR AS, to Gene Meade who did a great job managing two unmanned aid stations, keeping an eye on the athletes and encouraging everybody to keep pushing forward. Susan Haag, Cheryl Wright, Cynthia, Mike Melton and Carl Weiss helped lifting my spirits every time I was passing by the main aid station.



Even if I had a very pathetic performance, finishing in 27:32:54, the experience and the lessons learned (especially the medical part of the problems encountered) transformed the negative into a positive. I can only say I am deeply honored to have shared this event with wonderful people and amazing athletes. One more step on the path to Spartathlon was completed and one cannot ask for more. Nevertheless there was more, much more at the race... At the moment will keep that part personal, however I have to admit that all aspects of life have continued to improve at an unexpected pace since I started ultrarunning and only continue to do so with every event. I am realizing I am just beginning to touch the true magic of this incredible sport and life style. Every obstacle encountered started to develop into a stepping stone for the next level in life, with the only condition required, to push forward by all means necessary, to keep moving forward. NO EXCUSES, NO DNFs!