

When things go wrong, push forward. The two worst (performance wise) ultramarathons so far. Georgia Jewel 100 and Hinson Lake 24

The week before the Georgia Jewel 100 miles work was crazy requiring 12-14 hours in the office each day (when you do not have a full time job/secure job you work when ever work is available). Nevertheless, I managed to train and felt stronger than ever. The last night of sleep was a Wednesday which ended at 02:30 am with my regular time to wake up and train. That time was not to train, but to pack for the race (having worked long hours the entire week I did not have the chance to pack). Made it to the office early, worked all day on Thursday and around 8 PM got on the road for Dalton. A trip which was supposed to take about 14 hours.

The plan was to arrive in Dalton, GA early, pass through Jacksonville and Atlanta off-rush hour times and take a nap before the mandatory race meeting, attend the meeting and then sleep the night (early start time for the race: 0400). Well it was not meant to be...

As I was driving North I had on my mind the amount of work left for the weekend at the office, the first negative thoughts: "perhaps it was not such a good idea to run this race." Then, just North of Valdosta, GA I reached a point where I started to slowly feel exhausted driving and being afraid I might fall asleep... Just about that time I passed through this area where all lanes except one were blocked due to an accident... Passing the accident site I could see the bodies on the road, covered with blankets and limbs coming from under them, blood all over... My heart raced to perhaps 180bpm thinking that could have been me... Once again, negative thoughts in my mind... I washed them off and made Atlanta before the morning rush hour. I was happy with myself and happy in just a short time I was to be in the hotel room sleeping... Then my car stopped... It happened under a bridge so I managed to pull over on a shoulder...

What to do? After an initial 30 seconds of panic, I realized I had towing coverage through my phone, VW offered some type of coverage, as well as my auto insurance. Called AT&T and asked them to send a tow truck... After about 1 hour the truck arrived and we started driving around trying to find an auto shop which would work on a VW GTI... On the 4th shop, the guys said yes. We unloaded the car..., it was already close to noon on Friday. The shop did not have weekend work schedule so I realized will have to rent a vehicle and have it for a while.

Made it to a rental place and got a vehicle determined to get to the race. By this time it was not a matter of bad luck or obstacles, it was a matter of "there will be nothing in this world which will stop me from racing..., I either die or this will happen" attitude (it helps to be stubborn).

Got to the race briefing in time, purchased some beer and started drinking right away. I was already up for more than 36 hours... At the briefing I saw Liz Bauer, Scott Brockmeier, Farouk Elkassed, Daniel Lucas, Susan Donnelly, Clifton Goodgame, Brad Goodridge and talked to Karen Pearson (the Race Director)... I realized I have packed my drop bags wrong and with the wrong stuff. It did not really matter as I was determined to run no matter what.

Liz Bauer was starting her 26th ultramarathon of 100miles or more for this year. She was hurt, her ankle swollen and I knew I had no excuse to even feel bad for myself. After the briefing went to this Chinese place and had dinner... Perhaps not a good idea to eat sushi if it is warm... Did it anyway... Once I made it to the hotel room and wanted to set out my equipment for the morning I realized I needed to throw up... It lasted all night... Apparently food poisoning was next on my list of pre race challenges... On my way to the race I was dehydrated, having to stop the car every few minutes to throw up and realized had been up for 50 hours now. I smiled inside thinking of how stupid it is to do that on the way to run a tough 100 miles race...

By the time I made it to the starting line there were less than 2 minutes to spare... I was not even able to walk straight, but got signed in while Karen was getting ready to release us on the trails. Marie-Ange Smith was there

crewing and she told me she will be at the 25 miles aid station, asking me what I will need. I thought to myself “by then I will either be dead or feeling great”... Nevertheless, it was so nice to see her gorgeous smiling face and positive attitude.

Race started, I couldn't talk to any one as I felt like crap and did not want to negatively influence others. A little bit of asphalt and then the trail. It was supposed to be 10 miles of rocks, an area baptized “the rock garden”... It was not, the entire freaking course was rocks... Perhaps less than 5 miles of running surface on the entire 103.8 miles... Just rocks on top of rocks... For someone who loves trails this was the ideal race, for me, it was the start of a 30 hours nightmare...

Ankles started to roll every two minutes or so, after about 10 minutes I started to feel the pain on the bottom of my feet. Wore the INOV8 trail shoes with hard soles..., well the soles were not hard enough. While I was running I noticed some extremely “confused souls” who showed up with minimalist shoes... Their choice made me smile, the first smile in a long journey. NONE of them made it to the finish line. If you ever think it is “cool” to run barefoot or have minimalist shoes on, do NEVER attempt to do the Georgia Jewel 100 (apparently it is not as easy as Hardrock or Leadville). The only shoes fit for that race are the Hokas.

About 3-4 miles into the run my ankles were starting to send shocks through my entire body every time I rolled them or stepped on a sharp rock, and that happened almost every 30-40 seconds... Imagine having someone with a hammer hitting the bottom of your feet with the equivalent of your body weight for 30 hours... That was the race for me... After being passed by many runners in the first 10 miles, things improved a bit in the sense that I was able to sprint for short portions of time... Slowly by day break I started to catch some of the runners who passed me. I remembered the advice received from Susan Donnelly who won the previous year 1 female “I won because most runners started fast and did not make it”... It started to make sense... After about 17 miles or so, whatever bad food I had in me was burned and I started to feel better, to be able to drink water, take in electrolyte pills and even have PB&J sandwiches at the aid stations... After about 20 miles or so I started to run full sprint every chance I've got and walked very inclined up-hills and areas with lots of rocks. The strategy worked, and soon I started to pass more runners displaying signs of exhaustion only 5 hours into the race...

Soon I started to pass and be passed by a group of guys, John Gordon, Jonathan Faryadi and Andy Gordon. Two brothers and their close friend. We started chatting and ended up running with John Gordon for the next 40 miles or so. While some portions were so difficult that you could not talk, other portions permitted communication. They were crewed by their families, and I was adopted and received encouragements and help every time the trail intersected with a road.

Sometimes when you are in an ultra, things seem easier if you can share the misery with others. Unfortunately you have to be very careful of who you are spending time. Quitters are always looking for others to “group DNF” and you do not want to be around them. You want to be around guys and girls who will push through everything determined to finish. John, Jonathan, and Andy were this type of guys. While John used to make fun of his wife, Kimberly Gordon and his daughter Kayla Gordon every time we would see them, suggesting he might quit, I knew he was determined to push through.

After about 11 hours and 30 minutes we reached what is called the “power lines...,” a chain of hills so incline that several runners resorted to get in their knees and arms to climb them. And these hills are not short, you go up perhaps a half a mile, then you go down, then up again and you have the feeling you will never reach the end of them. Then, suddenly the half way point is there... What a perfect site. Made it sub 12:30 minutes. The leader and overall winner, Kathy Smith was only a few minutes ahead of us... I was thinking that perhaps there was a chance to finish in a good time, I could not have been more wrong...

At the aid station had some burgers, pizza and rested a bit. Got back on the trail meeting quite a few runners coming in. At the end of the race I realized that any one who did not make the half way point in 14 hours or so

did not finish (36 hours cut off time)... Saw Margaret Curcio, Susan Donnelly, Scott Brockmeier, Liz Bauer and Farouk Elkassed (they all finished, even if they had serious problems)... Quite a few others who never made it to the finish line.

The return half was brutal, as the amount of pain in the feet started to influence my ability to step and at times I could feel my body ready to get into shock due to pain. Then the temperature dropped and while feeling “decent overall” I realized I was moving slower and slower.

After one of the aid stations where I had some soup, talked to Clifton Goodgame who was in a great mood as he finished his race and was passed by Will Jorgensen, the pain reached a level where I could not talk and started to get dizzy... I knew I was not able to keep up with John, Jonathan and Andy who even if slow, they were moving at a decent pace... I slowly let them gain some distance to just be able to scream and cuss at will, also I do better alone when things get really, really bad. Then at one point I realized my head lamp was losing intensity..., but it was happening fast, too fast..., so I knew something was happening and it was bad. I was going blind and decided to get to the ground to prevent a fall on the rocks. As soon as I got down in my knees, I passed out. Woke up probably a few minutes later with some nice brown spiders crawling on my face... Checked my head light and it was good, I could see again. Decided to rest for a few more minutes... As I was resting, Margaret and her pacer passed by, she had serious problems herself but she was pushing forward. They asked me if I was OK and told them “yes, I will get up in a minute.”

Got up and made it to the last aid station. I was still dizzy and weak. Had some food and one of the volunteers got me a blanket. Went to the ground and took a 15 minutes nap, got up and started to move out as it was breaking day light. It was the rock garden again... It took forever to get through it, made it to the road and then to the finish line... 30hours, 16minutes, 16seconds for 103.8miles/166kilometers – the longest time for that distance for me.

I felt bad as Karen asked me what I taught about the race..., my response: “I hated every second of it.” The truth is I do not like trails, I hate them now even more, but the race is great in the sense it pushes you to the limits, it messes your body bad, it forces you to figure out who you are “a quitter or a winner?” and for that I highly recommend it. Out of the 45 athletes who started the race, 19 finished, quite a few ended up in the ICU with broken limbs and serious dehydration and the rest decided to stop at some point during the nightmare.

If any one considers doing the race next year, two tips: train hard and wear HOKAs! Thank you to Brad and Susan for the phenomenal advice they gave before the race. HUGE congratulations to Liz Bauer who finished and become the **WORLD RECORD HOLDER** for the most 100miles+/160kilometers+ races in 1 year. It was her 26th race for 2012...

At the finish line I realized, had been up for 80hours, had food poisoning, ran 100miles and had to get back to Miami to be in the office Monday morning. So what better thing to do then get on the road... Drove a few miles and was losing control so I pulled over to sleep. I could not sleep and got back on the road..., about 30 minutes later saw a sign for Dalton... what was going on? After my attempted pull over nap, I’ve got on the highway and drove the wrong freaking direction... I smiled and turned around... Passed Atlanta and stopped at a Waffle House to eat. I guess I was so pathetic looking that I’ve got quite a few free things including a lot of coffee... Honestly I do not remember the rest of the drive home... It took me 20 hours and made it just in time to take a shower, nap for 1 hour and then go to the office. After 6 hours in the office, my head hit the desk hard... I left for the day, knowing I have another race in 5 days... I was not able to walk and was hoping for a miracle. It did not happen.

3 more long days at the office and Thursday night after work, you guess it, back on the road for the next race, Hinson Lake 24hours in North Carolina... Easy..., well not that easy. I still had the rental car, my VW was at an auto shop in Atlanta and learned I had blew up the engine so I purchased a different car from the same shop

(did not see the car, did not bargain for the price, did not care – it is an older VW Passat with a rebuilt engine with over 115,000 miles, the car had to prove it was able to handle high mileage :-)) – yes, I am poor so it is pretty much all I could afford). So I decided to drive to Atlanta, drop the rental, sell the old car and pick up the “new car I just purchased.” This time the trip went uneventful and was even feeling able to walk (with a limp).

Once in Rockingham, I went to Tom Gabell’s house to check in. Felt bad as Tom had invited me to run the race and I knew it will be a poor performance, but there was not much I could do. Had beers, vodka, ibuprofen and a desire to run no matter what. Met Sung Ho Choi, Kristie Matherne, Maria LittleJohn and Dustin Rhodes and went to get food. This time I went for something basic, two double burgers with fries. Made it to the hotel, had a few beers and was time to get some sleep as I have been up for more than 36 hours again.



Pre Race Dinner in Rockingham, NC

Hinson Lake 24hours is a great race, it is around a lake with a circumference of 1.5+ miles/2.4+ kilometers. Over 300 runners with their families and pets. Not your tough athletic atmosphere, a very family oriented event with less pressure and every one having a party attitude. I knew in a 24hours event I just had to keep moving forward, the time will drag me to the finish line...

It started at 08:00 and pain was present from the first steps. The toes were bleeding as one toe nail was ripped off at the GJ100 the previous weekend and quite a bit of meat from the toe came off with it. Had it bandaged pretty good and was hoping it will not bleed to the point of making me dizzy. The ankles were swollen (barely fitting in my tight shoes) and any twist or turn was sending shocks through my whole body. The strategy was to run hard and numb the pain, plan B was to drink a lot of beer and vodka, plan C was the ibuprofen...



Start of the Hinson Lake 24hrs UltraMarathon

Started running fast and soon I ended up running/talking to Cherie Yanek a great runner (she won 1st female), then spent some time with Abigail Meadows and then Amy Surrette. Amy's son Drew, was there running the course as an official athlete. He is 9 years old... He completed 45 miles/ 72 kilometers. By far the most inspirational part of the race! Because his name is Drew, I know he will be successful and determined :-)

At the beginning of the race I briefly talked to Kelley Hanna Wells and Joe Fejes who were there on a mission, Brandon Wilson and his family racing as an ultra family, the legendary Ray Krolewicz, Vikena Yutz, John Adamof, Cheryl Larger and several friends from Florida, Rebecca Hansen, Kathleen Wheeler and June Leland. At times the pain was too intense to be able to talk to anybody, at times it felt better. I tried to socialize as much as possible with others, not only because it feels great to make friends, exchange stories, but because it makes you forget about time for a while.



Focused and in serious pain

The race went on uneventful but the pain was only growing in intensity and I started to display signs of trouble. While at most races people encourage me to push forward, this was the first race where a high number of runners said things like “dude, you look pathetic” or “you have to f..g stop” or other similar pleasantries... I guess they did not realize the more someone was telling me to stop the more I wanted to push forward. Why? Well, because I have a serious problem with quitting. There is very little in the world I respect less than someone quitting (not necessarily only in races, but in general). During the Olympics two American runners quit during the marathon due to injuries... I was embarrassed (for them) beyond words... I was embarrassed for myself and for the flag they were carrying. There was no reason for either one to quit, they could have walked the course in 7 hours (no matter in how much pain they were) and hold their heads high at the finish line. They chose to cry and that will NEVER be acceptable to me. I was thinking of all this as I was trying to find any power to push forward... Got to the point of finishing all the beers, the vodka and towards the morning started to take ibuprofen. Took only 4 when Sung ask for some and he finished my supply. I was happy he actually did it, as I was so pissed I wanted to feel all the pain and knew I would not ask anyone else for any pills.

At one point during the night I was freezing and went to the car, turned the heat on and rested a bit. It made me feel better, except for the moment you get out of a place where it is 90degrees (in the car) to cold outside and your body is in excruciating pain. Nevertheless, decided to get moving even if at that point my walking was giving me 3 miles/hour... Finished the race doing a last loop with Kelley. Always feels great to finish in the company of a beautiful woman :-)) ended up with 70.2 miles/112.3 kilometers. Embarrassing for my level, but a learning experience on how to race on bad feet and never quit.

Loved, loved Hinson Lake 24. It is an amazing race, Tom Gabell does a phenomenal job at putting together the race with the most food. I probably gained 10 pounds at the race... I mean there was pizza, potatoes, sandwiches, sausages, burgers, and everything else you usually find at ultras. The atmosphere is extremely

friendly and people are great. Quite a few beginner ultrarunners, makes it a great race for someone wanting to push through a 24 hours.



Attempting to force a smile

It took 10 days for the swelling on my feet to go down, I still have bruises under my skin but I do not believe anything is broken. Today, 2 weeks later I went out for a 3hours and 30minutes run (2:30 of that dragging the Black Swan over the Key Biscayne bridge). At the end I was in some pain again, but very little swelling and just a great feeling of knowing I am back to training much, much stronger mentally.

So why I pushed myself through this? Because it is important to know that no matter what, I will finish my races. No cost is too high for that. Looking back at September, it seems beyond crazy to have ran the races, especially the second one but in reality it was the smartest thing I did...

The lessons I have learned from these races are not ultrarunning lessons, but life lessons. Physical, my body will heal and be stronger, mentally I am already stronger and so much richer from a spiritual point of view.

Thank you all who ran with me, encouraged me, worried about me, send me emails, texts and facebooked. Thank you to Frank Lilley for the photos from the HL24 (sorry no photos from GJ100), and especially thank you to Karen Pearson and Tom Gabell for keeping the ultra world alive with such great events.

Next, a few weeks of training and then 7 ultras in 4 months, 3 of which on consecutive weekends in February.