

## Graveyard 100 Miles UltraMarathon – Running on Vodka

My 5th Ultra of either 100+ miles or 24 hours in the last 3 and 1/2 months was Graveyard 100 in the Outer Banks, North Carolina. While the other 4 ultramarathons were in Florida, this one was in North Carolina where the temperature was expected to be very low from the point of view of a guy who moved to Miami because of the weather. Graveyard scared me because of the cold. While I can handle well 100 degrees weather, cold is not part of my comfort zone.

I was blessed to have one of the most amazing grandfathers possible, a man with an incredible moral character, a determination beyond belief and a common sense so rare that it seemed a super human power. Being raised on a small winery, my grandfather used to give me a glass of wine with meals since I was two. I also remembered his stories of surviving the war while being shot multiple times in the cold climate of Siberia. Whenever possible he used moonshine to keep warm, keep the blood moving while crawling for days until was found by the German military and taken as a prisoner to a hospital to have surgery.

I generally run on beer, it is no secret and I feel beer is better than any sports drink on the market for ultra athletes. But I drink beer when I run in high temperatures. So, what to do at Graveyard? The answer came to me by the way of my grandfather's memories: run on Vodka! Never ran on Vodka before, but why not? Purchased my small Vodka bottles and put them in the drop bags, in the idea to take a shot, mixed with an energy drink at every/after every aid station.

At the race briefing on the evening before the start, the room was full with ultra athletes and their crews. An amazing site, to be around such an elite crowd. Some of the athletes' resumes are more impressive than words can describe. Quite a few familiar faces, and some new ultra runners taking their chance to a "100 miles." Brandon Wilson, the race director, started the presentation of the course, rules, etc. After being on the move for over 36 hours without sleep I could barely keep my eyes open and could not focus on anything he presented... Unfortunately with 100mile races, somehow all race directors believe you know the course as well as them, or hope you can remember every turn and detail for the next 20+ hours of running. I've learned to just let go and try to figure answers on the go...

Morning of the race, outside temperature 38F with strong winds. A 5am start required a 4:30am meeting at a park in Corolla from where the shuttles were supposed to take us to the starting line on the beach. Apparently some of the volunteers for the race did not show up and the start was supposed to take place whenever all runners were at the starting point. That is the reason I HATE the idea of crewed races, you have to depend on others. If my life taught me anything, is that the only person I can depend on is myself, been disappointed way too many times to ask anyone for anything anymore. Perhaps that is the reason I run ultras, it is not a team sport. If I fail is on me, I cannot blame it on anyone else.

At the start line I spent the time drinking a Murphy's Stout and talking to Sergio Radovic. I could see Liz Bauer, Claude Hicks, and Scott Brockmeier. Sergio completes pretty much any race he participates in, including the UltraMan, EpicMan, finished Rouge Orleans 126.2 while his face was bleeding from the cold. Liz and Scott are experienced ultra runners with a goal of completing 30 ultra races of 100 miles or more in 2012 and have already ran with them several races this year. Claude is a machine. Other impressive athletes were around, and we were all shivering in the cold waiting to start running, not as much because of excitement, but because we did not want to freeze and die on the beach in the Outer Banks :-)

The start was given at 05:08. Started running fast and I was surprised to see several runners taking off in what seemed a sprint. Oh well, I did not go to Graveyard to win; I only compete with myself in ultras trying to finish before the "voice of reason and doubt" inside my head succeeds to stop me. I knew at that moment I will finish the race, however had no idea in what time.

Made it to the first aid station, around mile 22 and had 3 half sandwiches, one ham and cheese, and two with some spicy cheese. All, very good. Have to say, the night before a race I eat 1-2 pounds of meat (meat is slow to digest and full of protein – perfect for me). After the food, I took my Monster drink, Vodka and started running again. Before this aid station I briefly talked to Scott Raegen, Paul Kelly and Dane Rauschenberg. Dane's crew, beautiful Allison Smith, was more or less driving and stopping within short distances of me. It is always nice to see familiar faces during the run, and it was nice to wave at her from time to time. Around that time, the Sun came out and it turned out to be a beautiful day, very cold, but beautiful.

I was running faster than my usual pace and knew it, however felt good and decided to push it, knowing the faster I reach the finish line, the faster I get to some warm place... The water stations were supposed to be on very nice free standing structures built by Brandon and easy to spot. Because of that, I decided to run with only a hydration belt (4 small bottles). After the first aid station I did not see any water stations, I later found out the volunteers did not make it to set them up, I was really in the front and Brandon and his wonderful wife actually dropped water jugs in the parking lots around the route. All these factored together, I ended up running about 12 miles without water and started to get dehydrated fast. By the time I was ready to get into some store and buy water I finally saw a water station and drank "to make up" for the missing percentage. Several crew members waiting for their athletes were staring at me while drinking like I was about to die. Good thing, I trained to drink fast, in large increments with disregard for the "doctor's advice."

This entire time I ran by small housing communities, residential neighborhoods, but after about 30 miles or so, that changed and the run was on the highway with not much to look at but road and cars. Occasionally some vehicle filled to capacity with young women would scream when passing by. That was the only entertainment for quite a while. On such circumstances you start to deal with your most inner issues. Just a few days before the race, I received the "no, thank you" email from Badwater. As a guy, foreigner and "poor" I am extremely used to rejection, but Badwater was a dream and I took it personally. My entire life I've been told I was not good enough and it seemed no matter how much one accomplishes, rejection continues and it is part of life. That feeling of not being worth much, pushed me to take huge risks in life, to always try what was considered impossible, and on Saturday pushed me to move faster. I found myself running at a pace I never ran before, and pushing faster and faster. Usually, I take short walking breaks here and there in ultras, but not this time. Everything "bad" that happened to me resurfaced and I started to remember every NO, every laugh, every rejection. It was pure fuel and by the time I reached mile 45 I was way ahead of anything I ever ran time wise, about 6 hours and 15 minutes if I correctly remember.

At the aid station I was hungry and was happy when cheeseburgers were offered. I eat two, got my next bottles of Vodka and Monster with me and started running again. Not much after that station the Bonner Bridge was in sight, a 3 miles or so bridge which was a small point of dispute before the race as several people expressed concerns about running the bridge. Brandon, offered the option to run extra miles (the equivalent of the bridge) and have a car drive the runners across. I was happy to learn that of the 100 or so runners, only 5 chose that option. I was happy for two reasons: first, it is a road race, an ultra-marathon and felt wrong to "catch a ride" and two, the bridge provided the most amazing view in the race. Absolutely mesmerizing..., many runners reported stopping for a few minutes and taking in the view. Miles and miles of water with the land in between, dunes on the sides of the road with the wind blowing sand in what seemed a memory from the times spent in Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan but with a warm, friendly feeling attached...

The fuel from inside was still strong and I was pushing it at a good pace. I caught up with Michael Bailey and we chatted a few minutes. He was running a different pace so I continued alone. He informed me about the water jugs in the parking lots and I really started to pay attention as I soon realized there were no more crew vehicles around. I was alone as far as I could see forward and back, no more stores/gas stations either. I was happy to see the jugs, now on the side of the road, easy to spot. I calmed a bit the fear of running out of water. I

reached the aid station at mile 63 in about 10 hours, a personal best time and much faster than what I imagined possible at my fitness level. I could only attribute that to the anger inside combined with the Vodka... :-)  
Reality is I have been running in average 100 miles a week for the past 4 months, no matter if I had a race or not. Training was paying off.

Because I reached the aid station so far ahead of the “plan” I forgot to take my head lamp and realized that about 5 miles after leaving the station. I knew the night will be upon me before reaching the next aid station at mile 87, where I had another spare lamp in my drop bag. I do not really care about light, in fact I like running without light, but was not sure how the race director will feel about that. I still had my red lights for front and back and reflective belt from the morning. Theoretically, I was still visible to vehicles.

The next portion of the race was ugly, just a straight highway as far as the eye can see with no end in sight and bushes on both sides of the road. The Sun went down and if until that time I had a great race, things changed in an instant. The cold overwhelmed me and very soon I realized the signs of hypothermic shock starting to creep on me. The cold drained me of energy and I had no more Vodka in my pockets. I decided to start running in small sprints to warm up, then walk fast to conserve energy. The weather was winning fast and soon I was not able to control my body, which lead to improper running form, slamming my feet on the ground, overcompensating for the lack of balance, etc. Pain started to make known the fact I was breaking down fast, the ankles, the knees, the hips and back started to hurt more and more.

I knew at that point, I will have to give it all to reach the finish line. Knowing Sergio was behind and he never quits, I was more determined than ever to push it forward. Reached the aid station at mile 87 and was broken... I was hoping for a warm room and discovered was an open tent outside a light house (the second light house aid station)... A small heater provided some help while I got on the ground in the fetal position and covered myself with a blanket having the heater on my back. At mile 87 I had some clothing I planned to use for change. I did not change, just threw them on top of my other ones. 3 shirts, 2 pair of pants, 2 hats, gloves. My stomach would not take anything in, but I knew I needed energy so I forced myself to eat a cheeseburger. The idea of Vodka made me sick so I decided to skip it (in hindsight, big mistake). As I was about to leave the station, Michael just rolled in, followed by Tatyana Spencer who was flying through her 100K race. Tatyana was on a mission so we just wished each other luck and left. I knew Michael had a very good chance to catch me, I wished him luck expecting to see him soon. After leaving the aid station I saw Claude running strong reaching the aid station himself. Claude has pushed me during races before, he is an amazing runner and knew he will eventually catch up with me. We wished each other luck and continued running. By that time, Tatyana flew by and realized she will finish way ahead of me.

The last few miles were a nightmare, but what else can one expect in the middle of the night, in cold weather after running over 90 miles? Brandon at some point, pulled up next to me in one of the vehicles by then I recognized being part of the race. At that time there were almost no cars on the road. Brandon asked me how I felt. I told him I was "done", will finish the race, but will take me a while to reach the finish point. He told me, he will take off to make sure he will be at the finish by the time Tatyana reaches it. He also told me I was on first (1st male) and that if I continued like that I will win... After he left my mind slowly started to revisit his statement and try to make sense of it. Me in the first place? There were at least 5-6 male runners ahead of me and I just passed one, what happened to the rest? Was he, Brandon messing with me? It happened before when friends told me things that were flat wrong and being tired I believed them. But I did not know Brandon well and he did not seem the type to play pranks... Oh well, better focus on preventing the hypothermic shock from taking over. That was what was going on through my mind. Soon I noticed a white light approaching, I knew it was Claude, and I knew he was closing on me slowly but steady.

After what seemed an eternity, I reached the finish line and realized I finished in 19 hours 27 minutes 48 seconds, taking second place overall in the 100 miles race. Tatyana was there waiting for me to finish and had the heater in the van turn up to the maximum... :-)  
Tatyana finished her 100K in 8 hours and 16 minutes, a

world class time. Brenda Carawan finished in 1st place the 100 miles race, with over 3 hours ahead of me. She was truly impressive. Claude finished right behind me at less than 2 minutes difference. It was time to go to the hotel room, take a hot shower and relax!

At the finish line I also met Marie-Ange Smith, the second place winner in 100K who finished in an amazing time as well, Kelley Hanna Wells who finished her first official 100 miles race. The following day felt like a zombie, but was happy to meet several other runners who completed their 100K races, Samantha Gosseck and Elise Robocker. One of the best parts about running ultras is being blessed to meet many amazing athletes, positive, determined, sweet, and humble individuals.

Thank you to Brandon for an amazing race, to his wife and all the volunteers. The help at the aid stations was so great that made me sad to leave every aid station. Not only the volunteers helped with anything needed, they dealt with the shortage of manpower. At AS3 I received a nice red, white and blue key chain, for having served in the military (a small gesture which is more powerful to a soldier/former soldier than any political speech), from the volunteers led by Tim Garriss. The name Graveyard 100 comes from the fact that over 1000 ships are recorded to have sunk in the area. I have not seen any sunken ships, however I never seen as many dead birds, small animals and deer on a road. At times especially on the bridge, there was a dead bird every few yards. It made up for the missing site of sunken ships. :- ) A race, I truly recommend, keeping in mind even if it looks easy on the paper, it is extremely tough.



**Graveyard 100 UltraMarathon**

**Photo by Jamie Connerton**

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