

In Search Of Punishment
The 2016 Vol State 500k Race Report
314 miles – 143hours:00minutes:23seconds

By Andrei Nana

Ultra runners all over the world are frequently asked the same question – why do you run x race? – especially when talking to non runners. The answer is typically unique for each athlete and most of the time much, much more complex than can be put in just a sentence or paragraph.

I cannot and will not comment on why others are running and more precisely why they chose to run the Vol State 500k. I can only answer and elaborate why I chose to do so and how it went this July in 2016.

Last year I ran the Spartathlon in Greece for the third time. While I had some injuries I also knew the course and had the experience of having competed in 2013 and 2014. The Spartathlon is always difficult and nothing can be taken for granted. However, after a great first 20+ hours, running mostly in high humidity and high temperatures, during the second morning the weather changed and severe rain storms hit the areas where I was running. Being tired and hurt, I walked several hours, feeling sorry for myself. I was not in the worst shape, and I should have pushed harder... I chose not to and after the race, replayed every step, turn, and mental reaction. I realized I needed some “remedial training” – I needed to punish myself.

Looking at the competition calendar and at my proximity to races, I picked the Vol State 500k. I had heard much about the race and having several friends who had run it, I made my inquiries. I asked advice from Johan Steene, James Adams, Sung Ho Choi, and George Maxwell.

They all gave me great advice regarding logistics, what to pack, what to wear, how to resupply, etc. I made a concrete plan of just how to run the race – mostly based on proximity to food and rest areas – after talking to George.

Being 500k or 314m, I gave myself between 4 and 5 days to finish, hoping for closer to 4 than 5. As I like round numbers, I picked the 100 hour mark as a goal. Boy, was I wrong...

Having looked at the map and distances I had decided that somewhere between 75 and 80 miles per day was doable. I would run all night, take it easy during the day and rest during the hottest part of the day. Napoleon Bonaparte once said something like “no army ever won a war without a plan, but every plan flies out the window as soon as combat begins.” That was the case at Vol State.

First, about the race: Vol State 500k is as the name states a 500 kilometers or 314 miles race which touches five states. It starts in Missouri, then runners cross into Kentucky, then Tennessee, followed by Alabama, and finish in Georgia. Nevertheless, the bulk of the mileage is through the state of Tennessee, in effect crossing the state diagonally from NW to SE. There are no signs, only a set of directions and maps. Two categories exist: crewed – where an athlete is supported by a vehicle and his/her crew can assist with everything except pacing. The other category is called “screwed” and the name fits it perfect. Athletes are required to be self sustained during the entire time and they cannot receive any help for the crews of other runners or race officials. The only exception to the rule is related to Road Angels. Road Angels are individuals not associated with the race who offer support in form of water/liquids or food simply out of the kindness of their hearts. These road angels have heard over the years about the race passing through their towns, and they either organize resting places in their front yards or just place coolers on the side of the road with “help yourself” signs.

With several weeks before the start of the race I was still injured from my last competition, the 24 Heures de

Brive in France. My doctor Drew Farretta worked tirelessly trying new approaches to my injured leg. The treatments finally seemed to start producing results about three weeks before the start of Vol State. In those three weeks I was able to log somewhere between 50 and 60 miles each week, a record low for me. I knew I was severely undertrained, but I wanted to run the race nevertheless.

The trip from South Florida to Tennessee took 14 hours by car. I reached Kimball on Tuesday evening and met George Maxwell at Motel 8 where we shared a room. Kimball is only 14 miles away from the finish line and the closest town with a motel. We had dinner at the Chinese restaurant with many of the other screwed runners. The next morning we drove our cars to the finish line where buses were waiting to take us to the start line following the course.

During the bus ride, George pointed out some of the most important landmarks. Also in the bus was John Price who has completed the race ten times and published the book/guide about running the race (*The Last Annual Vol State Road Race Road Book: A Vacation Without A Car* – available on Amazon). John talked non-stop giving everyone a guided tour of the course. Unfortunately way too many turns and places to resupply were not easy to remember. After realizing I cannot memorize the course I relaxed and enjoyed the bottle of red wine I had with me.

The buses stopped for lunch at the Glendale Market, the store famous for the landmark known as the Bench of Despair (featured in the book *Bench of Despair* by Dallas Smith – available on Amazon). It is approximately 180 miles into the race, just past the halfway point. There, we had some amazing Tennessee BBQ. Later in the evening, we reached Union City, which is on the border of Kentucky and Missouri. This was where we would spend the night and have dinner – also known as “the last supper.”



Glendale Market – Pre Race Group Photo
by Ray Krolewicz

Early on Tuesday, July 14th we boarded the buses and departed for the start line. The start line is in Missouri however as soon as the start is given all athletes board a ferry and cross the river into Kentucky. In a way, the real race starts in Kentucky as soon as the ferry docks.

At the start line, I had the opportunity to chat with old friends and meet some new ones. Having already known about 15 of the runners, I soon became acquainted with several others.

My goal for the first day was 80 miles. I started running at a moderate pace in the company of Brian Trinkle. Soon after the start, a storm front moved over us and it started raining. The rain felt good as it kept the temperatures down, however after several hours of rain my skin was very tender. As soon as the rain stopped, the sun came out and the temperature increased by about 30 degrees Fahrenheit in a matter of minutes. Without thinking much of it I pushed forward running and chatting with Andrew Snope.



Day 1 – Photos by Carl Laniak

As the temperatures increased I suddenly realized it was much harder than expected to run. Going through towns and paying attention to turns became an unexpectedly mental drain. Trying to find water to resupply takes even more mental energy and I was constantly looking for faucets. Also, my usual consumption of about 100 calories every hour had to be eliminated as there simply were not many places to eat. I had the first food in the afternoon and it consisted of a burger and a cola in the city of Martin.

When the night came, the temperatures dropped a bit and it was more enjoyable to run but I was already very tired from running in what felt like a sauna. I was overheating and having to take many walking breaks. The only good part was being able to talk with other runners who I was passing or they were passing me in “leap-frog” fashion.

I met the first Road Angels at a fresh market where a table was set up for the Vol State runners. Next, were the volunteers in the town of Gleason. There, at the fire station, two wonderful women named Angie James and Kim Borneman were waiting for athletes with a huge table/aid station they had set up. I stopped and while having a PB&J sandwich was told that both ladies had learned about the race a few years ago and decided to set up an aid station. They partnered with the fire department Chief and created an enviable aid station by all standards – stacked with food, drinks, mats, chairs. It was a nice break from the stress of trying to figure my way around and to relax for a few minutes.

However, my rest was short-lived, as not long after, I was charged by dogs. Over the following several nights, dogs charging myself and several other athletes became commonplace. Although I never felt in great danger, a huge part of psychic, physical and mental energy is devoted to survival, and more precisely, ensuring it. I always had my hand on my pepper spray – ready to defend myself against the vicious dogs, yet thankfully, never used it. I just made sure I was always facing the dogs – playing the alpha role – and never allowed myself to become surrounded.

At the conclusion of the first 24 hours I had the chance to spend some time running with Kelley and Joe Fejes. They were hurting too but moving forward while chatting about race strategies. While with them, I soon realized I only had about 78 miles done and I was completely exhausted. As the heat was setting in, I decided to take it easy and rest. It was a bitter/sweet rest. I was able to sleep well for about 2 hours but also realized that I

would not be able to reach my goal of 100 hours. I gave it everything I had and barely made the minimum in the first 24 hours. I was exhausted, chaffed, and blistered.

The next few days became a daze as memories somehow became woven together in fractured and unrelated threads. As I became increasingly exhausted, I became focused exclusively on survival, which consisted most of the time on finding water, food, a place to rest, staying on course and not being mauled by dogs. As I started feeling more negative I realized I will have to find a way to make peace with myself. Luckily, when I readjusted my goal to just finish the negative feelings dissipated. In a way it felt like the weight of the world was lifted from my shoulders... I even started to enjoy running – especially at night when the traffic was slow and the full moon lit the sky.

What I did not realize was that my untreated chaffing was getting worse. I was able to block the pain, but suddenly I started to smell of “sweet burned leather.” My chaffing had started to bleed and had gotten infected. As the body’s natural reaction to infection is to develop fever, running in the sun became increasingly taxing. I simply couldn’t seem to cool down. On top of that, the sun light hitting the areas infected created the sensation that my skin was being boiled – I knew I had to address things. Steven Smith had informed me that in Columbia there is a CVS where I could find supplies to fix myself. I was looking forward to reaching Columbia when Kathleen Wheeler showed up cheering on the side of the road. She too encouraged me to “fix myself” as soon as possible. Reaching Columbia was a great relief indeed. However, I was soon to realize that the CVS I was looking for was a few miles off course. I checked into a motel, dropped off my hydration pack and headed to the CVS. I hated having to walk “extra miles” but I also knew I needed some supplies. At the CVS I was able to pick a cleaning solution, gauze, tape, an anti chaffing Burt’s Bees ointment and a pair of women’s tights.



With Steven Smith – Photo by Kathleen Wheeler – Day 3

I made it back to the motel, got directly in the shower fully dressed and took off one item at the time, washed it with soap and continued with the next one. When I finished undressing I took a small towel and put it in my mouth, used the cleaning solution with another towel and scrubbed off the infected areas. Screamed in pain, I managed not to pass out. When all was done, I applied the ointment and let my skin recover. While I was not really able to sleep as the pain was intense, I was happy to have cleaned off my infected areas, drain the blisters and taped my toes.



The Bench of Despair

Once the temperatures dropped a bit I started walking again and after leaving Columbia I reached the Bench of Despair. Unlike its name, I felt relaxed and happy to have crossed the halfway point. It was the third day so I was way behind my original plan, but my body was just not responding the way I had envisioned. Soon after the bench, I encountered the next Road Angel set up in a front yard of a nice house. Two families were waiting for runners with tents, chairs, towels, food, water, batteries, etc. There I met Kim Staggs, Jimbo Nutt, and Annette Prince Dykes. Once again I was amazed of the kindness of strangers. It was very motivating and another confirmation that in a world where many times evil wins, there are human angels.



With Sandra Garrett – Day 4 – Photo by Kathleen Wheeler

The second part of the race was spent running with different athletes Karl Studtmann, Nathan DeWall, Sandra Garrett, Patrick Doring, and trying to understand what had happened, why I was in so much pain, why I was so exhausted, and why at times running 200 yards seemed like running 20 miles. Introspecting, I realized something important – **In life if you want to have performance, if you want to push your own limits you cannot have fun. Having fun and high performance do not mix. You can have fun while running such an event, but you have to give up your preconceived goals. Or you can try to control everything in your power to reach those goals but having tunnel vision on maximum performance will take away any ability to relax enough and to “have fun.”**

During the second part of the race, I started to leap-frog with Karen Jackson and Bo Millwood. Soon afterwards, I saw them resting at a gas station with a small dog next to them. Jokingly I asked them if they made a new friend. They informed me that the dog followed them for a few miles and although it did have a collar, had no tag to identify it or its owners. As I was looking for a place to sleep, I told them I would keep moving. As soon as I left, the little scruffy dog started to follow me. In the beginning it was kind of funny, but I soon realized the dog wandered into the road every time he saw “road kill” to investigate. Being late at night, the traffic was slow, but it still led to several tense moments when trucks almost hit him.

Shortly thereafter, I lost him in one of the towns where a lot of young people were looking for pokemons and I guess the dog decided to follow one of them. As soon as I left the town and found a gas station open, I stopped to get some fried chicken. I was sitting on the curb eating my chicken when suddenly I see Henry Lupton running towards me followed by the dog. As they approached, I fed the dog some chicken and once again he decided to follow me. Several hours later I found a church with a paved porch and a wall which provided the perfect place to sleep without being seen from the road by passing cars. As I went to sleep the dog climbed on my legs and not wanted him to become attached, I shooed him away. However, my attempts failed and I fell asleep with him on my legs. When I woke up about 1 hour later he was gone. Unknown to me Karen and Bo had passed by and the dog recognized them and decided to follow them again. A fortuitous move for him as he ended up being adopted by Karen and he has a great home now.

The last day was a mixture of emotions from disappointment regarding my performance to experience new levels of pain and exhaustion. I finished the race in 143:00:23 only about 43 hours later than anticipated. At the finish line Carl Laniak, Gary and Sandra Cantrell told me that anything under 6 days was a respectable time, but I was less than able to understand that. I was just speechless and confused as to why it was so hard, and why it took me so long to finish.



Day 5 – Finish Line – Photo by Gary Cantrell

Looking back, I realize now that a combination of activities unrelated to running (finding food, water, shelter, keeping on the course), dealing with the medical issues while running in high humidity/heat, and not going to the race fully committed to the performance were the cause of my “pain.” However, the few good things I did prior to the race helped quite a bit. Training with a tire and gaining a few extra pounds helped me run while exhausted, hungry and in pain.

So..., next is the Spartathlon in just a few weeks, followed by the organization of the Icarus Florida UltraFest. It is time to put behind the Vol State 500k by thanking to the organizers for such an incredible experience, the Road Angels for their kindness and most importantly by hoping that Vol State 500k made me a better runner. It

definitely made me understand some new things about myself, connect with my most primordial “animal” like instincts, and gave me a new understanding of how hard “30 miles” can be and why running it in 12 hours can seem like the most impossible task sometimes...



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As I gained a new respect for the distance and heat, I also decided to offer a registration discount to Vol State runners who are interested to race at Icarus in November. Of course, there is a small application to go through, but most certainly the Vol State runners can easily qualify for Icarus.



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