

The BEAST of BURDEN 100m
“Don’t try this at home!”

Ultrarunning represents to me the willingness to conquer the impossible, to push the limits to discover who we are. After a very successful end of season race, the UltraBalaton, and a successful 2011-2012 ultrarunning season I decided to take a break from running (1) to prove ultrarunning is NOT an addiction and (2) to allow any injuries to heal.

Nevertheless, at some point during the break I “was helped” to agree and make my first run after the break a 100miles/160kilometers race. Why? We always use “catch” phrases in the ultra world: “running 100miles is mental” or “all you need to finish an ultra is determination” etc. Most people who use these phrases have never proved anything, they merely copied someone else or even worse, they are the ones who fail in ultras - “just talk.” I guess it sounded good to actually try and see if I can run 100miles without running 7 weeks prior to the race. My instinct told me it will be OK as I worked out during the break (upper body exercises, swam, and a few miles of walking)... What a grandiose stupid idea :-)

Went to Lockport, NY confident I will finish the race, but unsure regarding the time frame. Trip to NY looked great as several friends were racing as well. Craig was the first person to sign up for the race and he organized most of the logistics. Shared the “honeymoon suite” at Lockport Inn & Suites with Craig, Dave and Sung.

Morning of the race body felt good and was looking forward to a great race. My friends all know that running ultramarathons was started as a refuge and medicine to the most painful emotional experience of my life. Never tried to avoid pain in an ultra and always welcomed it. As sometimes happens, on July 31th a new personal experience made me reconsider the running/pain attitude and for the first time wanted to “feel happy” during a 100miles... Very ironic as the Beast of Burden just made it to the top of “the most difficult/painful ultramarathons” list. :-) Off course, the pain is due to my incontestable stupidity of running 100miles without training and has nothing to do with the race itself.

Unlike other races starting at 5 or 6 am, the Beast of Burden had a 10 am start. That gave us enough time to wake up slowly, have breakfast and get ready for the race. At the package pick-up started conversations with other athletes and hugged friends. Anyone who has attended an ultramarathon knows the amazing positive atmosphere present at such events. Athletes, unlike in any other sport, are encouraging each other, veterans offer the best advice to new runners (virtually the competition) of the best way to perform, etc. Took some photos with the Florida UltraRunners present at the race: Jodi, Craig, Dave K, Dave C, Sung, Ed and talked to friends part of the International 100+UltraRunning Club: Marie-Ange, Kathy and Rick.



With Dave Krupski at the START line



The Beauty at the Beast - Marie-Ange Smith



Florida Ultra Runners & members of the International 100+UltraRunning Club – All started, all finished

The first 10 miles went well and felt good, probably because I had 3 beers in the minutes before the start. After about mile 10 I started to feel my gluts tighten up and starting to hurt. Next the calves and the quads... Just miles afterwards my right ankle started to hurt pretty bad, followed by the left knee and right hip. During a regular race I always fall back on my training as confidence builder in my ability to move forward. However this time was different, I knew I did not train and was feeling the results. I started to create my mental “happy place” and refuge in there. In a perfect situation I would just stay there and push forward. It is never a perfect situation so I had to find a different way to cope with the pain when my mind lost connection with the “happy place” ... I started to think of the painful body parts as something foreign and not part of my body. Instead I imagined them independent and not required to move forward... Played this game until about mile 60 while talking to other runners around me. At one point I spent quite a few miles running with Joanne who was doing her first 50miles ultramarathon. She is a great runner and talking to her took the mind away from my situation for a short time. Joanne decided to move faster when my pace slowed down and I was left with just the vision of this gorgeous Canadian. After running with her I ran with Kai a few miles as well and had great conversations.

Around mile 60 the pain moved to my back and could not run anymore. The lower back side of my spine area started to swell and mess with the nerves... Shocks were being sent through my legs and hips and my eyes started to fill up with tears (yes, I cried)... From that moment on it was pretty hard to hide the pain. Found out that bending forward from the waist relieved some of the pain as well as pressing very hard with my thumb on the inflamed side of the spine. From time to time, I had good results also with pinching hard the side of my hip to relieve/change pressure on the nerve.

There was not much to go on mentally except remembering that 1 year ago I dragged my left leg for about 30 miles in training after taking a wrong step and messing up my ankle... The extremely slow progress did not help either as what before seemed to be 1 mile of terrain covered, at that time was just hundred yards and that was messing up the mind’s perception of “what is going on.” I knew I had more time than needed to finish and that was never a worry, but wanted to still have a decent finish time... When I started the race I had the unrealistic goal of 20hours..., by mile 60 I realized it is not going to happen, so I set up the new goal of sub 24... To reach it, I was not allowed to stop much so the only stops were at the aid stations... Passing benches and bridges with what looked like a perfect place to lie down was tough. Wanted so bad to just lie down and stretch my back but knew once I make one concession, that will lead to multiple stops which in turn will increase my finishing time.

So what was to be done? I started to create this alternate life in my mind, I forced myself to dream about someone very personal and dear to me. Not sure how likely to transform that dream into reality, but it was a wonderful dream (anything is possible, so I am keeping up the hope). Was looking up the night sky for the most part for shooting stars. Every time I noticed one, I convinced myself this was the way the Universe was communicating with me, letting me know my dream will materialize soon. Not sure how much it was pain induced dream, how much was the vodka or beer I had at aid stations, but everything seem so real and so out there for me to just grab it... The problem, the morning was coming and during day time it is harder to dream... :-). The last few miles, had to get back to my “military approach” just screaming (in my mind) at myself to move forward...

Because the race was on a 25 miles loop, I had the chance to see other runners passing me many times. Each athlete had a positive influence and was a motivation for me to continue. As mentioned before, I knew quite a few runners and most of the others become “friends” right away. Seeing Dave Carver run so well and always giving hi5s, seeing Sung having a hard time then regrouping and running extremely well, seeing Dave Krupski being careful, mature and in a good mood the entire time was inspiring. Rick Meyers had an extremely strong race as well, he started relatively slow, but increased his power through the race to have a very strong finish. Marie-Ange started the race fast and at some point it was clear she ran into troubles, however she maintained her smile the entire time and encouraged me (and others) at each passing. To smile and be sweet to others when

in trouble is the true test of great character one has. Marie-Ange showed she is not only a great runner, a gorgeous woman, but an amazing human being. Kathy was doing her first 100m and she ran pretty conservative, however very well paced (what else can you expect from her when she had an amazing crew from i2P and was coached by her husband, Ray Zahab).

Kathy was always positive and smiling, but the last encounter with her at mile 87.5 aid station was a little miracle. I was sitting down eating pancakes, feeling sorry for myself when she ran into the aid station. She stopped just a few seconds, however she had this amazing smile of pure happiness and an expression I equate with a child seeing Santa. It made me understand in a second, it reassured me, that whatever pain I was in was worth it. There is something so magic about ultras, and seeing that expressed on Kathy's face was priceless.

On my way back from the last aid station I saw for the last time on the course, Ed Hanson struggling to run his last lap but with a clear expression of determination on his face, then I saw Jodi Weiss who ran much better than she expected even if she had problems herself. She is another example of someone positive, sweet and smiling the entire time. Then I saw Craig and Kai...

I crossed paths with Craig when I was leaving the aid station for my last lap and he was just coming in to complete 75 miles... The way he moved towards the aid station is hard to be described as walking... I remember thinking that Craig needs a miracle to finish the race... I have no idea what happened, but a miracle took place because the next time I saw him, I was approaching the finish with just a few miles to go, he and Kai were wobbling starting their last lap... They had about 20 more miles to go, Craig was "sporting" a cane and Kai seemed in as bad shape as Craig... They both finished... To describe what I saw will borrow a quote from Dave Krupski: "Picture a 90-year-old walking 25 miles on one leg. Best performance of the race."

Another very impressive person was Patrick from NY. Met him on the course. He is a heavy set young man, military hair cut and based on his performance I venture to say this was his first 50miles ultra and he was clearly not prepared... I congratulated him and encouraged him every time our paths crossed. He finished in over 18 hours, but he FINISHED and each time I saw him he was extremely polite, smiling and could feel his happiness for being there, part of the event. I am sure he will do extremely well in the future because anyone has so much determination and can draw so much joy from the experience his possibilities are limitless...

Many other runners displayed so much grit, so much determination and together helped in creating this unbelievable weekend. The race itself is phenomenal, flat course, little bit of concrete but most of it on a dirt road, loop of 25 miles away from traffic and pedestrian paths (so safe to run at night), amazing aid stations and volunteers. Perhaps another aid station would be the only improvement necessary. During day time a 6-7miles run between aid stations in high temps is too long and could use more water/hydration.

Sam, the race director is an amazing guy, a great athlete himself, easy to talk to, funny and relaxed. The night before the race, met Mark who finished in 2nd, a guy with white and green hair, a positive attitude, and a taste for fun. It seemed everybody in the volunteer/aid stations were that way. They worked the entire 30hours (+time to set up/clean up) and were the entire time smiling, friendly, funny and accommodating with anything I needed including their own "vodka and vitamin water on the rocks" :-)

Have to say thanks to Jim who made these great jello shots. Will have to incorporate that in my ultra nutritional gear for future events. Had vodka before in an ultra, but only in very cold weather. This was the first time to have it during hot weather as well. It just felt great!!!! Not to mention that it was the only thing that brought me back to life at the end of the race (had about 8 jello shots as soon as I crossed the finish line – finish time 23:19:01).



Sweet victory and in desperate need for vodka 😊

All in all, a phenomenal race. Highly recommend the race for next year and I can promise, you will not regret it.

So at the end of a fantastic weekend, I can only say, YES it is stupid to run 100miles without training but it is possible. YES, I was incredibly dumb for doing so, but I do not regret it for a second. My life is so much richer after such an experience...

Thank you all for such a great weekend, thank you for the cheering, encouragements and support. It seemed appropriate for the title to be: “don’t try this at home” or... perhaps do... :-)