

The Year of 100's

Bite Off More Than You Can Chew, Then Chew It

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Written for Joe Harney and the PTC



In the fall of 2011, I had slipped into a very low mood. It was a long lingering blah mood; one of vague boredom. The solution came to me slowly at first, and then it quickly grew into a gigantic monster of excitement! It was a big, bold, adventurous, time consuming, indeed all-consuming plan. It would demand my attention and require serious focus. With this solution, I would feel excitement during the entire process of planning, attempting, and especially accomplishing. Inspired by TX ultra runner Claude Hicks Jr, who ran one 100 per month for a year, I decided to follow suit in the hopes that it would relieve my low mood. I sat down at my computer with calendar and credit card. I chose seven ultra distance races (four 100's, two 24 hour races, and one 127 mile race) spread out from February through September. Instantly I felt better! I was energized and had so much to look forward to! I had travel plans to work out, logistical race details to think about, and training plans to create and follow! Maybe I'd bitten off more than I could chew, but I couldn't possibly know that until after the fact. No matter, I was high on the audacity of my plan.

First up was a February event named Rouge-Orleans. "R-O" as they call it, is a 127 mile point-to-point race from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, LA. The course follows the Mississippi River and is run entirely on the levee. The race is designed for relay teams with crew vehicles. However, after speaking with the race director and learning where and how often water and food would be provided, I decided that I could do this as a solo runner without a crew vehicle. With the information provided, I planned perfectly to the last detail. I calculated the calories required, capacity of ounces of water I'd need to carry between the aid stations; and I planned for the cold, windy weather. Yep. It was perfect planning! I was all set to succeed, yet ultimately did not. I could not. Water was supposed to be every 12.5 miles. The first water wasn't until after 25 miles. There was no food as promised. I could not count on water being anywhere it was supposed to have been. I ended up approaching random team crew vehicles along the way and asking if they could spare water. By mile 97, I was so disheartened by the lack of promised course support that I dropped. A DNF (Did Not Finish) can be a real downer... but not when you're in New Orleans! I finished up the weekend having a very good time visiting the French Quarter with my daughter and son-in-law.

Race #1 – DNF at 97 miles.

Next up was a March event in Moab, UT. I had every reason to succeed this time. It was a 5 mile loop course around two buttes. It was absolutely gorgeous and the weather was ideal. I was physically trained and ready. All went well until around mile 69... then it happened. I got tired. Not so much physically tired, but just a blasé mental laziness. Once the thought of stopping entered my mind, I wasn't able to shake it. I made up every reason to stop, all of them sound and logical to my oxygen deprived brain: "It's dark and dangerous; I might fall into a crevasse. If I finish the race, I won't have time to get back to the hotel before checkout. I'll have to fly home without a shower. I'm out of breath, what if I have a terrible asthma attack? What if a mountain lion jumps out and eats me?" With great conviction, I made the decision to quit. I stood by my decision too, all the way home. Three days later while soaking

in the bathtub with a glass of wine, it hit me. “Why didn’t I just finish?” All my reasons had evaporated and what I was left with was another big fat DNF! Urgh! I felt sick inside over having quit. I felt I had wasted all the training, planning, airfare, hotel, rental car, and time off from work. So much went into that race and I just gave it up for no reason at all! They say we learn more from our failures than from our successes, and now I see how. This is when I learned that mental preparation is just as important as physical training, if not more! I learned that I must be ready when my brain says “quit”. I have to have a plan to make it beyond that point. Lesson learned.

Race#2 – DNF at 69 miles.

In April I entered the third race in my series. It was our local VA 24 Hour Run for Cancer in Hampton, VA created and directed by our very own George Nelsen. Although I was the current female course record holder, I was going into the event feeling uncertain and doubtful due to my last two DNF’s. It’s hard to have confidence on top of two failures. So this time I really buckled down mentally. I had to make my mind tough. I rehearsed how I would handle the quit point, so I would be ready when it came. Another failure would’ve ruined me. I couldn’t quit again! While running that race, I knew I could not afford a single crack in my tough mental resolve. Knowing a finish can never be taken for granted, I went the entire race with a mix of determination and panic. I stayed alert and on top mentally, never letting my guard down for a second. No weak moments. I had cold, wet, hungry, and slow moments; but no weak moments. Staying mentally strong took tremendous focus and energy; more than the physical requirements to finish. That is especially true when races become grueling, as this one did. (Thank you to local runner George Fiscella for pacing me 20 miles) Mission accomplished! Had I bitten off more than I could chew? I was in the middle of a big bite and chewing away...

Race #3 – Completed 100 miles.

June 2nd was the date of my next big race. This one was called The Kettle Moraine 100, in La Grange, WI. I was going in with a success under my belt, and a still-fresh respect of how easily a finish can slip away. Because these races were one right after another, I was gaining knowledge and experience at a very fast rate. My lessons were stacking up and I was learning! Confidence was coming back, but unaccompanied by arrogance and complacency. It turned out that this race was H.A.R.D! If it had been first, second, or third on my schedule, then I wouldn’t have been ready for it. But coming along at this perfect juncture in my series, I was ready, exactly and perfectly ready. Like in weight lifting, this race was my one-rep max. It was the maximum load I could successfully handle at that time. It took me 26 hours and 30 minutes to finish. It was a serious challenge and I got through it! Yes, I was feeling pretty satisfied with myself. Side note- George Nelsen and his daughter Rebecca also went to Kettle Moraine. They completed the 100K division together, father and daughter!

Race #4 – Completed 100 miles.

The next race, Burning River in Cuyahoga Falls, OH, was in July, and this one was truly special because it was also the USATF 100 Mile National Championship! Runners could choose to be in the regular race category, or register to be in the USATF category. USATF competitors had to follow different rules though. The one that would impact me the most was “no personal listening devices”. I could have run in the regular category with my music, but if I wanted a shot at a national title, I’d have to run without music. Music is a big motivator to me so it was chancy to attempt to run 100 miles without it. I then decided to do the next best thing- I would sing my way through 100 miles! I printed out a list of the first lines of lyrics of over 200 of my favorite songs. I laminated this sheet and carried it like I would an iPod. The neat feature I found is that the music automatically paused when there was anything else happening, like coming into an aid station for example. Plus, the volume never needed adjusted and there were no cords to deal with. It worked out well enough. I finally finished in 27 hours and 11

minutes. Surprisingly, that time placed me 9th female overall, which meant I had made the top ten in a national championship!! Needless to say, I was ecstatic! I was on a roll. I was on a good roll!!

Race #5 - Completed 100 miles.

In August I went to the Lean Horse 100 in Hot Springs, SD. I was flying high on my successes and felt there was nothing I couldn't do. My confidence cup was overflowing. I was ready for another 100. No, I was more than ready! And Lean Horse was my target 100, where I had set my sights on a new personal record. I intended to shave off hours from my last two 100's, yes *hours*. I knew it was a flat, fast course. My mind was strong, and I knew my body would do what I told it. So I flipped the switch and didn't look back. I ran that race hard, continually pushing the edge of maximum exertion. I persisted with the confidence that my body could handle. My now-powerful mind stayed in charge of my performance-thought police you could say. And I did it! I finished the Lean Horse 100 in a blazing 21:30:59. That was almost six HOURS faster than my last race. Everything had come together for me- the training, the experience gained in the other races, the weather, the course, everything. Even the moon shone brightly for me that night so that I didn't need a headlamp. It was purely magical.

Race #6 – Completed 100 miles.

Although my next scheduled race was five weeks later, I squeezed in a 100K race. I was still elated from Lean Horse and could not resist the chance at yet another success. So when Claude Hicks Jr invited me to run a race in Michigan called the Woodstock Races, I said yes. Both 100 mile and 100 kilometer options were available. I decided to enter the 100K division in the hopes of saving something for my next scheduled race, three weeks later. Starting this event feeling on top of the world meant that I could handle anything this race dished out. I didn't have to make myself feel strong or stay mentally tough anymore; I WAS strong and I WAS mentally tough. I no longer had to try, I simply WAS. It was a good thing I felt that way too, otherwise I would certainly have DNF'd. The race actually was very difficult, but more than that, it turned into a comedy. In fact, it became entirely ridiculous. It started raining in this race, and then it rained, and rained, and rained some more. It never stopped raining. It rained all day and all night, hard. The soft trail in no time became the muddiest, sloppiest, messiest course imaginable! I slipped and slid, soaking wet, all the way through the 100K – in the darkness. The race started at 4pm, which meant that most of my race was in the dark. Each loop the mud pits grew deeper and wider. At the bottom of a hill I slid and fell into one and it nearly swallowed me whole! I managed to roll over onto hands and knees. The mud was deeper than my lower legs and covered my forearms almost to my elbows. I tried to stand, but fell back down because my legs were so stuck. Again I tried, this time standing, but when I tried to step, I fell again because my feet were in so deep. I tried again and again, always falling back onto hands and knees. Realizing the ridiculousness of the situation, I started laughing. I looked up at the pouring rain through my headlamp and was overwhelmed with amusement at the hilarity of the situation. There I was- stuck in the mud, in the middle of the night, in the pouring rain, somewhere in Michigan. I eventually rolled out of that pit and finished the race. My time was 15:51, and that placed me 2nd overall female. Yippee! That was my reward for accepting, enduring, and enjoying the absurdity of the night before. I will never avoid rain again.

Bonus Race – Completed 100K.

Three weeks after my slapstick in the mud, I went to the final race on my schedule- the Hinson Lake 24 Hour Ultra Distance Classic in Rockingham, NC. Even though I originally planned to run 100 miles at this 24 hour race, I was no longer hungry for it. Like a person at a dinner buffet who is already sated, I didn't have an appetite for 100 miles. Being a timed event and not a fixed distance, I had the luxury of choosing when to stop. So instead of forcing it, I took along my family and had the attitude that I was just going to have fun. And that's exactly what I did! Both of my children and their spouses also came

and participated. The Hinson Lake race is ideal for families. It's a 1.5 mile loop course around a lake. Because it's a short loop, people of different ability levels can spend a lot of time together. There is even a fully-stocked aid station maintained round the clock. And so it was a great way to spend a day with my family, all of us doing loops with each other here and there. Everyone got some miles in, my son didn't stop until 50 miles. Even my one month old grandson went on a few loops! When I reached the 100K mark that evening, I felt it was an ideal time to stop. The kids thought so too because they were now cold, tired, and definitely ready to go! So I packed up and took my family home, wholly content with the 100K finish. This finish is also my 101st race completed of marathon distance or greater.

Race#7 – Completed 100K

It was the fall of 2011 when I first decided to do these races. Now the year has passed and looking back on all of it, I am happy and satisfied. Attempting those races felt brave, bold, adventurous, and exciting. My low mood improved immeasurably simply by signing up. Besides the accomplishment of the races I finished, I was exhilarated by the entire adventure, even the DNF's. I traveled and experienced so many things!

With my own eyes, I got to see 97 miles worth of the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge almost all the way to New Orleans. I ran right next to it, on the levee itself. I am now acquainted with that river in a way not possible otherwise. I know how it smells, how it sounds, even how it looks depending on the light. Likewise, I felt the hot, dry air in the empty wilderness north of Moab, UT. I watched a desert sunset beyond the buttes. It lit up the rock walls, a red/orange glow like fire! I saw it, and it was so much more than a picture could ever be. *I felt* it. Also, I spent 26 hours submerged in the Kettle Moraine State Forest in WI. I breathed that lush, heavy, forest air. I was *in* it. Unlike driving through in a car, separated by metal and glass, I was in deep. I was part of it. And then I spent a weekend on Hell Creek Ranch in MI, rolling around in the mud and rain. I have an extreme familiarity with the earth there. Heck, I even know what the dirt in Michigan *tastes* like! Additionally, I saw a herd of wild buffalo roaming the plain near Hot Springs, SD. They roamed right up to the car until I wanted to scream "In my office!" like the TV commercial. I saw Mount Rushmore and I even ran right past the Crazy Horse monument currently being carved out of the mountain. I ran all night long under a South Dakota moon that was so bright it lit up the crushed limestone trail. The trail essentially glowed in the dark. It was magical!

In the beginning, I thought that the races were the point. I now realize that the races are just a means through which we can experience more. Whether or not I bit off more than I could chew is irrelevant. I tasted it, and that's what matters.