

Leadville 100 Mile Trail Run – Race Report by Steve McNeil

I thought it was a 100K race! Not really, I was swept of the course at mile 61.5. I missed the cut off by 15 minutes. In the 100 mile trail runs there are specific time cutoffs at certain points of the course.

Leadville, Colorado resides at 10,152 feet. The 100 mile trail run (topo map below) traverses an out and back course with a thirty (30) hour time limit. The course goes over several mountains with the highest being the 12,600 foot Hope Pass that has to be run over twice within a ten mile portion of the race. I traveled to Breckenridge, Co. (9,600 ft.) a week before the race to acclimate.

The race course is spectacular. The views were breathtaking. I was fortunate to have one of the best weather days in the history of the race. The temperature at the (4:00 AM) beginning of the race was in the low 40's. In the afternoon the temperatures peaked in the low 70's. At altitude, it seemed much warmer. There were ~650 starters and ~350 finishers, a 54% finishing rate. Historically, the finisher's rate has been ~48%.

My race began without any difficulty except (after months of micromanaging my strategy) I started the race without any gels or energy bars (MISTAKE #1). Our first aid station, after running around Turquoise Lake, was mile 13.5. At this point I was ~30 minutes ahead of the cut off and feeling great. The next portion went up a long gravel road over Sugarloaf Pass 11,071 ft. The downside was a rough, rocky trail that did not allow much running. I pulled into Fish Hatchery (mile 23.5) having lost some of my buffer. I began to realize (MISTAKE #2) that I did not need to carry a full 70 oz. Nathan pack between aid stations – unfortunately I didn't take the pack off until mile 50. Another tactic that may have backfired (MISTAKE #3) was to use trekking poles. There were great benefit going up hills but were cumbersome to carry on the flats and down hills. I found myself relying on them and walking when I should have been running. In addition, I had not trained with them. The good news (as was my plan) is that my quads did not suffer and I suffered very little post race soreness. At this point, I walked much more than I should have on a relatively flat part of the course. I went through the Half Pipe (mile 29.1) and Twin Lakes (mile 39.5) without any difficulty except, that I was losing time to the cut off. Coming out of Twin Lakes you hit the lowest point on the course at 9,200 feet and you see the leaders coming back heading home. You immediately begin going up Hope Pass. And I do mean up. It is a 3,400 foot climb over a 5 mile segment. It was by far the hardest thing I have ever done. I felt like I was climbing Mt. Everest. I would walk 30 steps, bend over hands on knees, breath for a minute, then walk again. I repeated this process the entire way to the summit. I realized (MISTAKE #4) that over 50 % of the field is coming up the single track trail. Trail etiquette is that you yield to the faster runners. Thus I was unable to run more than a few minutes before I had to pull over to let runners go by. In hindsight I should have used more energy running faster and being in that group instead of conserving energy for the last 50 miles. The peak is at mile 45. I hit the 50 mile turnaround (~13:52) with only an 8 minute buffer. As I ran back towards the mountain I started doing the math in my head. Okay, I was expected to run the last 50 miles only two hours slower than the first 50. I hit the base of the mountain with a good friend, Lee Topham whom was to pace me for 10 miles and hand me off to another friend, Robert King who was to pace me the last 40 miles. Heading up Hope Pass my mile splits were 42:41, 38:34, 33:57 and 29:04. Ouch! The sun went down and I was flying down a rocky trail in the dark with a flashlight. Okay, 20 and 19 minutes miles seemed like I was flying compared to 42 and 38 minute miles. Needless to say, I arrived back at Twin Lakes (mile 61.5) 15 minutes after the cut off. Race over. Altitude sucks. I met a couple of Texas boys on the mountain, one from Lubbock, getting oxygen and another from Dallas sitting on a fallen tree (he was dropping at the exact spot he dropped the year before) whom had succumbed to the difficulties that go with running a race at such a high altitude.

So, 30 weeks of training, maxing my weekly mileage at 120 miles, several 3:00 AM run starts (to beat the heat), numerous sacrifices by my family to put up with me during this period came down to a DNF. After a couple of weeks to reflect, I am glad I attempted the race. The trip was quite an adventure and Colorado in the Summer is hard to fathom after the weather we have had in Corpus Christi. My recommendations for this race are:

1. Go to Colorado three (3) weeks in advance to acclimate,
2. Go light – hand held bottles, no pack,
3. Go out hard and hang on – get ahead of the back of the pack, everybody walks in the dark,
4. A pacer is very important,
5. If you decide to use trekking poles, train with them, and
6. Hit the stair master or a treadmill that goes to 30% for hours and hours.

The (end of the) prerace speech I recorded with my iphone. Use head phones – very inspiring.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbcaS67WLYU&feature=youtube_gdata_player

