

Are You Experienced?

Have you done this before? The last four out of five times this race has been run, it is this question that is most often asked among unacquainted competitors and one that leads to hours of conversation of our passion, training experiences and any other life experience we choose to share while out on the trail. For me, it conjured up images of last year; the cramping, digestive issues and suffering that is now fondly embedded in my brain. From this question we become fast friends and brothers in arms.

My preparation for this year's race had auspicious beginnings. I had several physical setbacks that required interruptions in training and several months of P.T, so I was relieved to even find myself at the start line for my fifth Manitou's experience. In doing so, I scaled back my goals and decided to simply enjoy the day and shoot for a P.E. (Positive Experience). The race start had its familiar understated beginnings as years past but deep down, you knew you were in for a day to remember.

I started out running with Chris and a young guy named Darius, who was doing this as his first fifty. He had the look of speed, so naturally we picked his brain about high school track times and P.R's he's had at various distances. This kid exuded positivity, graced our presence for the first six or so miles and floated into the distance as we prepared for the first big climb up Blackhead Mountain. He was concerned about going out to fast. I assured him he'd be under fourteen hours, easily.

It was a wet day, clouds obscured most of the views with the exception of a few which showcased clouds sitting below the ridgeline as we approached Stopple Point. The trail was wet but only seemed to become more slick as we approached the ledges beyond North Mountain.

Arrival at the North Lake aide station was with relative comfort. The volunteers at this station as in all the others were exemplary in the care and attention they gave to each athlete who came through. Thank you, Thank you, Thank you.

I headed out of the aide station alongside a woman named Deb, who had her kids cheering and chasing behind. We chatted a bit and as it would turn out spent periods time of with one another from that point onward. I recall her talking of doing the escarpment run some seventeen years ago and thinking, "what were you 12 years old then"? I would soon learn that she is a woman who possesses serious gazelle like running skills on the down hills.

From the Palenville aide station I hooked up with Alex from Virginia, Carlos from Canada and Deb once again. We passed the long climb up Kaaterskill High Peak discussing the virtues of paleo diets, funky foods that go down surprising well during ultras and the various ways we find balance and enjoyment in life beyond the pursuit of running.

The route up Kaaterskill is known to be a mud fest at best and in wetter years stream-like as you approach the high plateau that lasts longer than you would like. This year was surprisingly drier than anticipated given the amount of rain we have had and was tough but went reasonably well.

Alex, who I enjoyed the better part of three hours with, had reviewed split times previously in anticipation of a potential finish time. I shared my general experience of doubling the time it takes you get to Platte Clove plus twenty to thirty minutes to calculate your finish time.

We arrived at Plate clove at 7:03. Given my calculation, this was a time that could get us to the finish in about 14:30, which would be a personal best for me. Knowing how easily the wheels can fall off during the second half of this race, I headed out with anticipation of what the Devils Path might deal me on this day. Unlike the purgatory of solitude of the previous year, the presence of new friends and others I encountered along the way lifted my spirits and quickened my pace. On this day, I actually preferred the climbs over the treachery of slick bouldery descents that each of those three peaks had to offer.

Mink Hollow aide station, always the welcome oasis amidst the harshness of the Devil's Path, provided a fine collection of food and personality that didn't disappoint. I arrived earlier than I had in any year previous but tempered any thought of this unlikely day turning into anything beyond the suffer-fest I was expecting. I felt good as I headed up Plateau Mountain, the last big climb of the day. High up on the climb I ran into Chang, a spirited compadre of mine who I have yet to meet outside of the mountains. Seeing him for even that brief moment, so late in the race placed me in quick company.

The run down from Plateau actually involved some running. An MPF runner caught up to me and again helped quicken my pace to Silver Hollow. He mentions he's doing a hundred miler in two weeks and hopes he can recover in time. I comment that he's young and will recover quickly. I learn that this twenty-five-year-old looking kid is 42. I nearly laugh out loud when he asks me if he's going to need a headlamp. From the silver Hollow aide station he is gone and not to be seen again until I cross the finish line. From his looks and form, I'm sold on those amino acid tablets he was touting.

The trek from Silver Hollow is the last leg of this journey but I know all too well what a hellish nightmare it can be descending to Warner Creek. I'm alone for some time, cursing the gods, as I stumble my way down and from behind comes that gazelle, effortlessly picking her way through the wet leaves and loose moss covered boulders that appear to be strategically placed for the sole purpose of taking you down. She glides by and we chat a while. I tell her how the trail improves as we cross the creek and what sections become more runnable; as if she needs to know. Deb will go on to be the overall second place woman finisher. No surprise.

The climb up from Warner Creek is tough but the trail is in fact improved and runnable in sections. The last true climb takes you to the Willow aide station. The local free and easy crew of Joe, Stewart, John and Mark are there to greet me. I'm not much of a conversationalist. At this point in the day, you feel primal, every fiber of your being is focused on inhaling sustenance and forward motion.

I took off from Willow unable to calculate when I might finish and decide to go as hard as I can for the sake of being honest in my effort. This is a beautiful section of trail whether you are just stepping in or have covered nearly fifty miles. I arrive at the summit of Mt. Tremper at 13:43. There's another athlete standing on the summit with the biggest smile I've seen all day who says "it's all downhill from here!" I realize that if I make it down in 50 minutes I will have a P.R. With an incredible sound track pumping through my ears, I ran as fast as possible, all the while recalculating the minutes per mile I need to get in at that time.

The gods of Manitou shine kindly on me and I arrived at the finish line at 14:23 completely elated. Charlie, in his typical mild mannered way, presents me with a five-year finisher pullover.

The scene, as all of you who were there know, is a buzz of healthy energy, each athlete who came in before and after me glowing in the rarity of experience that this race has to offer. I'm grateful for the good karma of all those who passed through my life on this day.

To Charlie Gadol, the gentlest soul I know, all the volunteers who helped organize this event and the performance enhancing tracks of Jimi Hendrix, Thank you!. The gods willing, I look forward to returning next year.