
Hellishly Magnetic

By Jerry Turk

Hellgate, a race that has drawn me back like a magnet for the fourth time; it is a race like no other. Read any race report on the event web site and you will understand from the descriptions of the weather (mostly sub-freezing temperatures), the terrain, the hills and the first seven hours of darkness due to the 12:01 am start time.



The potatoes Dan planned to carry needed a large container

Some people attempt this race just once and not all of those will get to the finish within the cut off time. To me, the challenges it presents are the magnet that draws me back time and time again. One of my running friends has a saying; 'It is what it is' and this sums up Hellgate perfectly. I'm excited by the prospect of unpredictable weather, I run with a mantra 'hills are good', the technical sections pass quickly because of the concentration they require in order to avoid falling and running in the dark (especially on a crisp, clear winters night) is an electrifying experience. As the others that feel compelled to write about this race will say, it is a tough event but it is also a heck of a lot of fun as well!

For the past two years I've always traveled to Hellgate with one or more friends who are experiencing this type of event for the first time. This year the 'lucky' companion was Dan Broom

accompanied by his wife Jen. Dan was going to attempt his first 100k while Jen was his partly reluctant support crew. It wasn't that she didn't want to help Dan, but she did approach the start with a little apprehension, unsure how she would stay awake all night and navigate remote roads during the cold dark hours. Her concerns proved unfounded; not only did she get to where she had to with plenty of time; she braved the cold and has already started talking about 'next time'. My supporter was Kerry Arsenault; she has crewed for me before and last year ran the event so she had a good understanding as to what lay ahead.



Shrink wrapped and ready to go!

The assembly (and finish) location, camp Bethel, is a warm and friendly place. As runners gather, acquaintances are renewed and the bubble of conversation over dinner emphasizes the excitement many competitors feel. This tempers a little during the pre-race briefing when Horton describes the course interspersed with words like 'if', 'maybe' and 'approximately'. He is legendary for his guesstimate distances and runners never lose sight of 'it is what it is', that said his races are always well organized. After the briefing, each runner is left to perform their preparation rituals - we all have them. One enterprising runner wrapped his feet and calves in plastic wrap and then placed Yaktraks on his feet. Presumably his intention was to avoid the cold creek crossing, but it seemed a strange strategy. Clearly, it didn't prevent

him finishing as I saw him at the end but if he used the rule of 'never do in a race what you haven't done in training' he must have used an enormous amount of plastic wrap in the past weeks!



Ready to go with Chipper in support

The start is an adrenaline filled affair, everyone wants to get going and this year, the cold bit into our minimally clad bodies. After the traditional prayers and national anthem, we were off into the night. For the next 13 plus hours I have just one goal - keep pushing to the finish.

Frequently after long races I look back and struggle to remember much about the course. This year my recollections were:

- The view of the twinkling head lamps as they snaked up the hill after aid station 1.
- Huddled forms of Jen and Kerry in their cars trying to nap and stay warm.
- Running the leaf covered rocks between aid stations 6 and 7, this I thought was one of the most challenging section of the course.
- Joking with Horton at aid station 7 when he asked why I traveled so far to run Hellgate; 'why not', was my reply.
- Looking out for Kerry at the aid stations and hearing her encouragement, I've run without a crew before but have found it so much better to find a friendly face ready with whatever you need.
- Kerry's failed attempt to take a photograph at the 'one mile to go' marker and her request for me to go back and cross it again (I'll not repeat what I said!).



'I look back and struggle to remember much about the course'

- Finally, crossing the finish and getting off your feet; sometimes sitting down and reflecting on what you've just done is all the reward you need.

Throughout the race, Kerry and Jen had kept in contact and updated each other of their runners progress. This was also relayed back home via text and email messages. Dan, who had expressed concerns about making the 2 compulsory cutoff times was doing well and moving much quicker than anticipated.



Hide the potatoes, Dan's arrived

In training he had struggled with gastric upset and despite all the remedies he had tried, the problem was bothering him once more despite the copious supply of potatoes he had brought. Despite his love of the vegetable, they had become frozen, a situation that led to rumors of Dan saying he 'hated' potatoes (could this really be true?). With a comment like this, you wouldn't be surprised to hear that hell had just frozen over! At one of the early aid stations Horton suggested Tums and miraculously, this did the trick. When I finished, Kerry said he was expected at the final aid station any time.



Just 6 miles to go!

We waited knowing he was 'enjoying' the penultimate section and seemingly endless turns, changing gradient and, oh yes, those rocks covered with leaves. The minutes ticked by and we expected Jen to arrive anytime to confirm he was finally negotiating the last hill. He had already run further than ever before and we looked forward to a few celebratory beers later that night (assuming we could all stay awake long enough!). Then a bombshell struck as Horton confirmed a radio message stating Dan had withdrawn at the final aid station. We asked for confirmation and yes, it was true. A call from Dan a few minutes later revealed that he had run the previous section with a painful knee and not being familiar with the terrain on the last section, decided to stop rather than risk lasting injury. With the subsequent bruise that appeared over the following days, it was the right decision and any disappointment, on Dan's part, was short lived in the knowledge of the distance he had completed and the dreaded stomach upset problem had finally been resolved. Later that night we had that celebration beer, but only one as sleep rapidly consumed our consciousness.



Kerry brought 2 suitcases - one under each eye!

I mentioned earlier that one of my recollections was the sight of Jen and

The Bimble's Sound - truth lies within!

Kerry huddled in their cars. The vision brought home just what an unselfish act crewing a race is. It is far from glamorous; sleep deprivation, cold, and hours of discomfort require a special personality. This also goes for the many volunteers that run the aid stations. Without these helpers, we runners would not be able to enjoy our sport - thank you.

Will I run this race again? Hopefully, yes. Will Dan? He says yes and Jen and Kerry have already volunteered their services. Such is the magnetism of Hellgate.