

Ouch! That hurt. A 2012 Vol State race report.

by Paul Lefelhocz

The Last Annual Volunteer State Road Race (Vol State) is a journey run. Like every journey, it had a beginning, a middle and an end. For me, every segment developed differently than expected, despite the fact that I ran the race just last year.

The beginning - not your typical Vol State weather

A day or two before the start, I saw a weather report that said Thursday - Saturday (the race started at approx. 7:20 am CDT on Thursday, July 12) would bring mild weather - highs in the low 80's at most - and some chance of rain. Then, Sunday would start to heat up with Monday getting to 90+ which is starting to approach typical Vol State weather. Based on that, I figured getting a few more miles the first few days was not a bad idea and then maintaining an even effort level into Sunday and Monday would result in a slow down based on the heat, but be ok. Once the race started though, I didn't look for weather reports, but figured the weather would be what it would be.

To start Vol State, typically you ride the ferry from Hickman, KY to Dorena, MO where the official start is and then ride the ferry back to Hickman to start the actually running. This year, the ferry wasn't running. This was a particular bummer to me because I started the race 17 hours late last year which meant I didn't go to the traditional "Last Supper" the night before the race or ride the ferry as it wasn't running at 12:45 am when I started on Friday. Coming back this year, I did get to go to the last supper, but still haven't ridden the ferry. I did sit and stand on it for about 20 minutes with everyone else though. It was a good chance to see old friends from last year and meet some of those I didn't know. With its small size, there's a real community feel and a lot of camaraderie among the runners.

Actually, the start was at the top of the ramp to the ferry where Gary Cantrell (the RD) lit his cigarette. No one seemed to be paying attention, so I "sprinted" to the early lead figuring I could say I had been in the lead early in the race. More on that later. Once we got to the end of the simulated ferry ride, I walked back up the hill with everyone and people started going their own speeds. I talked to Diane Taylor for a few minutes and then just went into a comfortable walking pace. Eventually I did a little running and made my way to Union City (now in TN) and headed into the Subway where most of the uncrewed runners stopped for lunch. Some were just getting up to leave and others were mid meal. A few came in as I sat down to eat. It was good to chat with friends, meet some new people and talk about race plans.

Race plans

Coming into the race, I thought I had a good shot at making less than 7 days if I ran a smart race and a few things went the right way. Last year, I was a little over 8 days with the late start and based on generally running better this year than last, I thought I could improve my time enough to get under 7 days so that was my race goal. I set a "best case" goal of averaging 50 miles a day which would be a little more than 6 days, 6 hours for the 314 miles. At the last

supper, Abi Meadows and I were discussing goals/plans briefly and I mentioned the above, but in one of those moments of unplanned honesty, I said I'd like to win. I didn't think it was a realistic goal nor did I think it could be this year, but there it was. I voiced it. Abi said her goals were based on what she wanted to accomplish and not others and I thought, "yeah, Abi is smarter than me. That would be a better way to go."

Leaving Union City

Leaving Union City, Carl and Gary were standing by the side of the road writing down placements and split times. I quickly figured out that it must be the unofficial 20 mile mark so I stopped to take a look at the list, curious how the real race was developing up front. I don't recall the order, but saw some familiar names up front and a few unfamiliar ones. The unfamiliar ones were mostly folks I had thought could do well based on short conversations at the last supper. My best recall is I was in 20th place of 23 runners so there were only 3 people behind me at that point and the main contenders were already at least an hour and in some cases more in front of me.

Into Dresden

Through the first day, I ran and walked steadily and stopped for food and water when needed. As evening approached, I approached Dresden and looked for a place to get food and water. It was still early, but there's not much in Dresden. I got through town without finding anything so backtracked a bit and found a pizza shop. Saw Sulaiman here too and we helped each other find the right way through town (it's a bit tricky, but there are some arrows painted on the road to help).

I walked into the pizza shop with my "cape" wrapped around my waist (an old long sleeve shirt, extended with the second half of another to keep the sun off the backs of my legs in the afternoon sun) and saw 2 cops and 2 emt's sitting at the table. Normally I'd stuff it in my pack before entering a store, but had forgotten. I got some strange looks, but no trouble. I didn't want to wait 20 minutes for a pizza and had plenty of food in my pack so bought a couple of sodas, filled my water stores to the max (Gleason was next and I thought everything might be closed there) and moved on.

Coming out, I saw Juli Aistars which I thought was strange as she had been one of the ones up front early. But then I realized she was running with Jan, and they had sat at a restaurant and eaten dinner so it made better sense then. Juli was taking it real easy the first day and would start moving when the time was right. Jan was having trouble with her pack so we tried to fix it with some duct tape to no avail and I suggested a technique I've used in a similar situation that isn't a perfect fix, but is serviceable. At the Vol State, serviceable is often the best you can ask/hope for.

Shortly after this, we saw Sulaiman again. Also, some guy in a truck started handing out bananas. Juli and Jan ended up with more than they wanted so they handed them to me and I ended up with two. Eating only one, I put the other in my pocket as it would get beaten up quickly in my pack. I thought about saying something like, "Hey Juli and Jan, I am happy to see

you, but that really is a banana in my pocket,” but held back as I had just met them the night before. Too bad Lynnor wasn’t around because then I would have just said it. Missed opportunity.

Into the Night

As day changes to evening, runners of equal strength will often find that they start going different speeds. Everyone reacts to the change to dark differently and at least for me, sometimes I slow down more than others. As it ended up, Juli and I were going about the same pace, but she was a little stronger than me. She didn’t want to run alone at night so I told her my plan was to be in Lexington for breakfast, it might be a late breakfast because I wasn’t going to push, just try to make steady progress. If she wanted to run together through the night, I was game. We stayed together and took a couple of naps. Juli is a super strong and determined runner and the couple of times she called for a nap break, I was relieved and ready for some rest. I learned a lot running with Juli and enjoyed our conversations as well.

Coming into Huntingdon, we slept on the front “porch” of a county administration building. After the race, I was talking to my mother-in-law, and on hearing this, she said “you slept on concrete?”. Well, yes, but only for an hour or so, not trying to get a good night’s rest, just enough to recharge a bit and get going. It’s a tradeoff, there’s fewer bugs and if you face away from the light source and put your hat over your head, the light won’t bug you too much if you’re tired. Then, when you wake up you’re in good light to see what you are doing (e.g., put shoes back on, find light).

While Juli and I stayed together, we didn’t run side by side the whole night. You see, I have a tendency to run a while and then walk a while with the mix varying based on how I’m feeling and how hard I’m trying to push. Most ultrarunners develop a “shuffle” that is somewhere in between and can do it continuously for long periods of time. I’ve never figured out how to get my body to do that. Thus, when I pass someone, they often think, “man, that guy is flying”, when in fact I’m just running for a while, but my average pace might be pretty close to theirs.

Day 2 - Getting myself going

By morning, we hadn’t made as much progress as I’d hoped, but we were doing fine. Juli and I split up. Stopped for first breakfast near Parker’s Crossroads and saw Juli again briefly. Then by Parker’s Crossroad proper, I was moving very slowly so I stopped in Subway for a breakfast sandwich and 1.5 cups of coffee with cream and sugar (I’m a black coffee drinker when not running) in the hopes of getting myself going. It was still early enough and cool enough that I didn’t want to sit and eat, but it seemed like the best idea given how slowly I was going. Vol State is a series of tradeoffs and small decisions. The weight of them together determines how well you do. The advantage of a correct decision is small, but the penalty or disadvantage for an incorrect one can be quite large or take valuable time to correct. In some ways, I think it is like golf even though I have never played. If in doubt, it’s usually better to lay up before the green than to go for it all in one shot, especially if there’s a water hazard in the way. Figuratively speaking, there are a lot of ‘water hazards’ at Vol State.

Sitting and eating in Subway was one of those small decisions and I felt a lot better when I got up to go. Also, the person behind the counter said she'd seen "a lot" of us runners that morning so I figured there were still quite a few people in front of me.

Next come Lexington and I stopped at the BP on the corner of the turn for chicken fingers and potato wedges. Lunch would be on the go. Last year, I had gotten to Lexington late in the day on day 3 and stopped at a hotel for the night so I felt good getting here early on day 2 and figured if I could run about the same miles per day the rest of the way as I had last year, I could meet my 7 day goal.

Seeing Carl and Gary

Part of Vol State is that Carl and Gary take a drive up and down the course each day to see the runners. Early in the race when the runners are close together, they might go back and forth a couple of times and if you are resting when they drive through, you might not see them at all, but generally you see them once a day. Being early in the race, I wasn't surprised to see them heading out of Lexington.

However, I was dumbfounded when they got out of the car and Gary told me they thought I was in first place. I explained that someone had told me Joshua was way out front. They refuted my assertion with the fact that he was resting in Lexington. I proceeded to run through a list of other runners who surely must be in front of me. They mostly told me they were behind me, but conceded they hadn't found a couple. They also explained that they had been up the road and hadn't seen them so it was likely they were behind me. I then explained to them that I had been in 20th place and surely there was no way I had moved to first. I don't remember how they refuted this one, but they did.

At this point, we changed topics. They asked how I was doing. I explained that I was doing well, I had only quit 4 times today and cried once, but it was only for about 15 seconds - just a passing thing. Also, the sternum strap on my pack had gone missing last night, but I had rigged something up to make do and the bite valve of my water reservoir had also gone missing, but it was one with a manual open/close valve, so it was no big deal. Importantly, I had no blisters to speak of - my feet were holding up well. They just laughed that knowing laugh that in the world of the uncrewed Vol State runner, I was in about as good a situation as could be expected.

Being stubborn, I returned to the topic of what place I was in and kept trying to make my point. I explained that I was barely making 3 miles per hour, if that, and this surely would not lead to me being in first place. Carl laughed and said one of those classic Vol State things, something like "Dude, they are back there doing 2 miles per hour trying to figure out how to catch up. You are pulling away." (he was exaggerating about the slowness of those behind me). I can't remember who relented first, but eventually this match of "wits" resulted in something close to a stalemate (in my opinion, they may have thought otherwise) with Carl and Gary saying they would be checking on more runners and be back with my official status. (perhaps it was a match of a

dimwit (me) and an idiot (Gary), but that's a different story)

I also said something like "Don't tell my wife," but didn't think much of it.

Some time later, Gary and Carl pulled up again, right next to a shady spot (nice of them to find a place for me to sit) and Gary came out of the car with his index finger raised saying "you're first man". So I asked how many women were in front of me, figuring he was telling me I was in second or third, but the first man on the course. This time there was no stalemate. I lost the match of wits outright. I was in fact in first place.

They also commented that they couldn't text my wife (Vicki) because they didn't have her phone number. Before thinking (I had been up most of the night), I said that Carl had her email address (I would send an email to Carl and Vicki with the updates). Mentally, I immediately smacked the heel of my hand into my forehead knowing what Gary would do as soon as they got in the car - tell Vicki (if he hadn't already).

Gary and Carl left and I was left to move up the road and contemplate what the hell to do about it. I knew it was too early to be in first place if I was racing. Certainly too early to contemplate end of race strategy with a little over 200 miles to go. I knew leading early wasn't necessarily a good way to win the race unless you were just going to run away from everyone which I wasn't. I didn't know exactly what the right approach was, so I just kept moving forward and thought about it.

Parsons

Entering Parsons, I knew going through another night was not a good idea. My thoughts were something like, I need sleep, someone (or more likely someones) should get 20 miles up the road and I can go back to running my own race since I'm not a serious contender in this thing anyway. The hotel was one I hadn't stayed at before and was in the wrong place. I had to walk/run up to the grocery store and Subway for diaper rash cream, breakfast and dinner and then backtrack to the hotel. The hotel gave me pause and I considered moving on, but it was actually nice once you got in the room. Clean, comfortable bed, the bathroom a bit small, but serviceable. I called Vicki and we chatted a bit with her encouraging me. It was actually a good thing about her knowing where I was. I can't remember if it was here or later, but she told me she had let a few people know that I was in first and they were all excited and rooting for me, but to just keep running my own race as it was early with a lot of miles to go. However I did, first or last, was fine, but it would be cool if I won. With these happy thoughts, I ate, went to sleep and got up in the am.

I think I left the hotel around 3:15 or so and made good progress eventually getting to the Tennessee river. Before the race, I was hoping to get to the convenience store on the far side when it was open as they had great fried chicken last year and I saw a group of motorcyclists with some interesting bikes. I didn't expect the bikes to be back, but it was a neat memory. Since I was making good progress, I think I got there about 4:45 and moved on. Shortly after

sunup and the report in, I was approaching Linden so reported my miles. I also saw Naresh which was great! He took a few photos and I moved on.

I had stocked up in the convenience store 3 miles out of Linden so the relatively long 15 miles to Hohenwald passed uneventfully. If I had been following my original race guidelines (I don't think you really plan for Vol State, unless your name is Diane Taylor, perhaps; I make guidelines and then apply them based on how things develop), I would have stopped in Hohenwald, as it is a long 35 miles to the next hotel in Columbia.

Given my position near the front, I pushed on. Later in the afternoon, I saw Gary and Carl again and they told me I was still in first place and that I had a larger lead than the day before, 4 miles (apparently it had been 1 mile the day before). I figured that was about the same as a 0 mile lead given the distance covered and yet to cover, but they attached some significance to it being a little more than the day before.

Gary also asked me why I carried an umbrella when it wasn't raining and didn't have one when it was. I made some comment like having my reasons and Gary just laughed and said those Vol Staters sure do have strange habits. At the time, it felt like one of those classic Gary things to say. I also mentioned that I'd had someone yell out their car window "It's not raining" at one point when I was carrying mine. It turns out this would be the last time I saw Gary and Carl before the finish.

This was shortly after a thunderstorm that was torrential. I generally like to run in the rain and through puddles as long as I don't get cold and as long as I don't do it for so long that I get blistered feet. Well, I wasn't cold and my feet weren't blistered yet, but I could feel that they were turning to prunes and I was getting some hot spots. There was nothing to do about it at the time, so I pushed on to Hampshire. I made it to Hampshire 5 minutes before the convenience store there closes - about the same time, but a few days earlier, than last year. Ahh, a real bathroom, soda pop and some real food. The small pleasures of Vol State.

The middle - at first things seem fine, but there have to be some trials and tribulations for the protagonist, otherwise, it wouldn't be the middle.

Hampshire

Then I sat outside the Men's club in Hampshire (not that kind of club; they play cards and drink beer) and took off my shoes and socks. They were pruned, but not blistered. I resolved to sit there as long as I needed to dry them out and have them deprune. It took an hour and 45 minutes so it was tempting to just get going, but I stuck with the plan. It also gave me a chance to chat with the guys hanging out at the men's club, one of whom remembered me from last year. They were nice guys, very generous. One offered to let me use his shower and sleep in his apartment, but I declined given how much of a mess I was.

As I was getting up to leave, Dan Fox ran into town. We had a short conversation about how our races were going and I told Dan about the offers I had gotten and I thought he could/would

get the same if he played his cards right. Dan thanked me and I moved on.

So, at this point, we were about 2.5 days into Vol State. We'd had uncharacteristic weather with a lot of overcast skies and a good amount of rain. So I guess I showed that I can go reasonably well for 2.5 days in rainy weather with wet feet, but I did need the stop in Parsons to get an extended break and some sleep. According to my original run plan, that would have been perfect. Good progress toward a 6.25-7 day finish and allowing some slow down as things heated up and maybe I needed to spend more time tending to issues like my feet or taking more time to sit and eat rather than eating on the run.

The thing is, I found myself in a race. It was no longer a run. At some point along the way, pretty much the only thing I thought about other than the necessary things for the race (like which way to turn, what do I need to eat, should I be running or walking, etc.) was "what is a strategy that will get me to the finish first?" I kept coming up empty. For about two days (I think), I kept trying to figure it out and never did. I figured a "sprint" finish (say things are close with less than 50 miles to go) was something I would lose because I had seen the first 20 miles splits and they weren't even close. Now, things can change late in the race, but I knew at least some of my main competitors could certainly push through pain and exhaustion as well or better than I could. Dan Fox only gets tougher as the race goes on, Juli Aistars held off Joe Ninke to be King of the Road and Joshua Holmes ran a really fast 5k last year just because he decided he wanted to. So I figured if I was going to win, I needed to build a lead. But given how close things were so far, I didn't see how to do that. So while I was doing this for 2 days, I tried to make "best available speed/progress" and figure out the puzzle. I never did figure it out.

Getting to Columbia

On leaving Hampshire, I was thinking I would go through the night, maybe getting a couple of naps by the side of the road as I still seemed to be moving well. Along the way, some of Joshua Holmes crew stopped and asked if I was Josh (it was dark so all they would have seen was flashlight). I told them no and they said they figured I wasn't as they thought he was further back. It did let me know he was close though.

Somewhere between Hampshire and Columbia the plan to go through the night changed. I slowed down a lot, took a short nap that didn't revive me much and eventually stumbled into the convenience store on the outskirts of town (coming in) for some food. It was another 4-5 miles to the outskirts of town (going out) where the hotel was. I called ahead to make sure they had a room and alert the night clerk that I would be heading in. He was super nice and said to just knock when I got there and he'd let me in. Checked in, showered, ate, slept and then got up to go after a quick breakfast, but it was a late start so I wouldn't be getting good miles before the heat of the day like I had coming out of Parsons. About ½ mile down the road, I realized I still had the hotel room key. I called back and begged them (well, hopefully it came out like an ask) to not make me come back and they said no problem, they could make a new one. I still have the key - a memento of Vol State, perhaps.

At this point, we were 3 days into the race and I had covered about 180 miles. So I did the math and figured 20 miles a day for the next 7 days would get me to the finish. I didn't think it would take that long, but it was good to know. Also, leaving the hotel, I hadn't taken much water because there is a convenience store 5 miles up the road. The bench of despair store. When I got there, it was closed. It was Sunday. I remember thinking that it was good that I was here so much earlier in the race than last year, but not planning on things being closed on Sunday was not good. I sat on the bench for a second but it was in the sun so I moved to the side of the building and sat down. Ate some food and moved on. The next store was 4 miles up the road and I'd make it on the water I had. Got to the next store a little after 10 and they were closed too, but they did open at 11:30. Thought about whether I should go on or wait.

As I was sitting there, Dan Fox came running up. This was a big surprise to me as I figured with my stop during the night he would have moved well past me. As we were sitting there, someone who worked at the store got there early and brought us some water. There was also a pop machine, so it ended up being ok. I think Dan could tell I was going through a low patch as he gave me some of one of his magic potions/powders. In general, these things don't work for me or if they do, they don't work for long, but Dan's did help out. Even though Dan took off, I did catch a few more glimpses of him up the road over the next 5-10 miles, but those would be the last times I would see Dan during the race.

The next town is Lewisburg and entering it, I knew I needed to do something to get myself going again. I figured there were two things I needed (at least) protein and fresh fruit. I stopped at a bunch of places looking for protein powder to no avail, but there was a grocery store where I stopped and bought small quantities of a bunch of different kinds of fresh fruit. I believe it helps with hydration and a bunch of nutrients your body needs so can be great for recovery. Also, there was a drug store on the way out of town which had protein powder and protein bars so I thought that was good. However, it was already 4 pm so I decided to stop for some rest and then hopefully start running early in the am. While I slept a bit, I really couldn't so I got out of the hotel by about 8:15. I wasn't sure how fast I was going, but when I got to the next store (which was closed) in about an hour for the 4.5-5 miles, I felt good and hoped to make good progress through the night.

The Long Road to Shelbyville

I had eaten the fruit at the hotel, not wanting to carry it, but still had plenty of food. Onward to Shelbyville which is a long stretch, but I thought I could make good time. At first, I think I was and I felt like I was still moving well when I saw my shadow off some street lights. I remember thinking "uh oh", if I'm moving as "not fast" as it looks, I'm not doing well. It is strange how our perception of how fast we are moving and how we are actually moving can be off - sometimes faster and sometimes slower. Eventually I made it to Shelbyville.

Shelbyville - O'dark thirty or the puzzles of Vol State

Realizing I'd slowed down from my fresh start early in the night, I knew I needed to get going again to have any chance to catch Dan. It seemed unlikely, but I told myself I have to try. Plus,

I can feel an onrushing wave of runners behind me who are getting stronger as the days progress and will pass me soon if I don't move.

Nothing's open, but I finally find a soda machine and it's a "good" soda machine which means it has both pop and water, not just pop. So the puzzle is something like this, you are in Shelbyville, TN at o'dark thirty and tired (exhausted even maybe), moving too slowly to make any progress on the competition. You're in front of a soda machine with plenty of singles to get what is there and you have a pack with a bunch of food you don't want to eat, what do you do? Answer: Mix up some of "Paul's, I hope it gets me going, sports drink" hoping that it works well enough to get you to Wartrace in a reasonable amount of time and eventually be renamed, "Paul's famous homemade sports drink". Into the camelbak bladder goes a water, a Pepsi and what seems to be the right amount of chocolate flavored protein powder. Carbs and protein. Some fat would add to the mix, but hopefully this will work. Ending the suspense, I'll say that I'm not renaming it, but it seemed to help a little and I did make it to Wartrace. It didn't taste too bad either, but I also don't expect it to replace French wine on any 5-star menus any time soon.

Wartrace and still trying to race

Once I got to Wartrace, I figured Dan had extended his 20 mile lead overnight so I figured I'd get some sleep. When I checked in with Carl though, he told me it was a 10 mile lead. I figured 10 really meant 15, maybe more, but if I'd made any dent in the 20 mile lead, I should keep trying. Took a short nap and got going again. What ensued was a cavalcade of slowness. I won't go through too many of the gory details, but for much of it, I averaged 1.5 miles an hour or less (the 20 miles took me almost 13 hours). I got kicked off a deserted store front because it was private property (probably a liability to the owners if the building fell on me), kicked out of the campground because it was too late except for the campers (at least they let me lay down and sleep for a while before they kicked me out) and kicked off some guys property because he had to pull his truck and trailer around the corner. Some were nicer about it than others. Some offered me a ride.

As an example, here's an email exchange Vicki and I had from the campground:

Vicki: Hey, how are you? I heard you were in second place, less than 10 miles behind Dan.

Me: I'm sitting in a campground at mile 143 (*it was actually 243*). Slept for a while but still can't get myself to get up and get going. I also drank water and a pop and ate some food.

9 miles to a hotel.

Feel like I need scrambled eggs, not sure what else, but that could be psychological (sic). Maybe I need something else. I just had half a protein bar which has carbs too so I figure it's something specific or I just need rest/sleep.

This is 11 miles from where I left at 10 am and it took me 7 hours to get here.

In short I am in a pickle. It's a puzzle I haven't figured out yet, but I'm still trying.

I assume Dan is way up the road. Others may have passed me too. I just don't know.

Vicki: You'll be ok -- I really think it's between you and Dan. Keep up the excellent work! Get what you need!!!! Surely someone has an egg!

Me: I'd bet dollars to donuts Dan is long gone. And that Juli and Josh will make good progress soon so will pass me unless I figure this out. At the end of the day I need to focus on doing what I need to do at this point.

They're kicking me out of the campground so I'm going to get going.

Vicki: You are doing great. Keep going. You will figure this out. Listen to your body and get what you need.

I wasn't moving fast, but at least I was lucid. As a silver lining to this happy jaunt, a nice lady in a convenience store a few miles down the road made me some breakfast sandwiches even though it was early evening- "It takes about 10 minutes if you don't mind waiting" No, I'll wait 10 minutes for eggs at this point even if they are on a breakfast sandwich. They were very friendly and offered to let me sit in their break room and eat with them. Also, once I got to Manchester, I did make it to the drugstore 5 minutes before it closed and subway 10 minutes before it closed and the Days Inn accepted my credit card and found me a room that I didn't have to walk too far to get to. I fell asleep before eating or showering.

The end - it still feels like the middle for a while, but eventually things start to look up.
Manchester and asking for help

Once I got up, I was still pretty tired, but ate my Subway and lay back down for a while. I emailed back and forth with Vicki and talked with her and she figured out I was not in great shape, but was very encouraging. She said Dan was close to the finish, but I was still doing well overall.

Then I got up and could move around the hotel room pretty well. When I went out to get second breakfast in the hotel lobby though, I could barely move. My brain did something like this "Ok, what changed? Moved from A/C to heat and put on shoes. Hmm. The heat won't slow me down that much. Damn, it's my toes. I've been resisting cutting my shoes because it will let road grit in and cause blisters, but I need to cut them open. My pinkie toes have only gotten worse and aren't getting better anytime soon." So in the hotel lobby, I asked the clerk if he had a knife or something I could use to cut shoes with. He said he didn't, but the one other person there said she didn't have her cutting tools with her. I thought that was a strange response and we started talking. Apparently she has foot problems and often needs to cut her shoes or helps others. She did say that the Raceway next door would likely have something though. I thanked her

vociferously and went next door.

It was a painful trip just to go next door, but I did procure some scissors and a tire repair kit that had a tool I could use to puncture the shoes with before cutting. Ended up I only needed the scissors so the Days Inn cleaning staff is probably wondering why someone left a tire repair kit on the dresser of room 108. I wonder what they'd say if they knew the full story?

At this point, I did some math. 22 miles to Monteagle, plus a bit off course to a hotel. That's a long way. Even with cut shoes, I'm not sure about making that on my own given what a late start I'll get. I may need to lay up here a while and see how I feel, but I can't lay up so long that my body goes into recovery mode. This sure is a pickle I've gotten myself into. Then 26 miles to Kimball and 14 miles to the finish or 40 miles straight to the finish, that's an even bigger "ask", but maybe I'll be feeling better or can get an earlier start tomorrow and I should let tomorrow take care of tomorrow. Hmm. Maybe I need to keep the math simpler, but think outside the box.

Today is Tuesday. If I do about 15 miles a day (maybe a little more) until Friday, I will be done. It's 15 miles to Pelham, but there's no hotel there. Hmmm. No, wait for it. Wait for it. Got it. I sent an email to Carl saying to congratulate Dan on his win (I figured he was to the Rock by then; turns out he was close, but not there) and asking if there was anyone who might be willing to crew a sorry, tired, runner who could use some help. During this "advanced math" session, I also read the instructions for the last few miles of the race and recalled what it felt like to get to Castle Rock. That sure took some of the quit out of me. Experience helps.

At this point, I was exhausted from the mental and physical exertion and lay back down for a while. Then I looked at the clock and realized it was within an hour of checkout time so I needed to make a decision soon on whether to get up and go or lay up for a while longer and maybe wait for evening. Checked my email and Carl said that Dan wasn't quite there yet, but once he finished, Abi Meadows would come by and crew me in.

Realizing I shouldn't lay around if I had help, I got up, got my stuff together, checked out of the hotel and went to Subway for third breakfast. I sat to eat and about halfway through, Abi called to ask where I was. When I told her I was sitting in Subway eating, she sounded disappointed I wasn't moving up the road. I assured her once I was done eating, I would get going if she wasn't there yet. As I finished and went outside, Vicki called and I gave her the update. She told me I'd made a good decision and should finish no worse than fourth. I told her I was just trying to get up the road and needed to focus on that now. She said that was fine, but once I was feeling better, I should try to move up. This is a great example of how Vicki is a great coach when it comes to ultras. Always supportive, but knows there are times when she should push me a little bit.

I'd never run as a crewed runner before so when Abi got there, I sat in the car and said she'd need to help me out with the ground rules/how it works running crewed as I had never done it

before. She told me not to worry, she'd never been crew before. Now, the one thing I know about crewing a runner is that there are times when the best course of action is to lie to your runner. Based on my experience with Abi as my crew, I think this was one of those times where she may have lied to me. She did a great job!

She also told me Juli wasn't too far ahead and she thought I could catch her. I explained my 15 miles a day thoughts and that my focus needed to be getting today's 15 miles and once that was done, maybe I could work on some of Friday's 15, but not in a way that I wouldn't be able to do Wednesday's 15 miles tomorrow. She nodded and smiled and said that was fine for now; we'd talk about catching Juli later.

The next 10 or so miles were a series of short runs, stops at the car for food and then to cut the shoes a bit more. I knew that once I cut something, I couldn't put it back, so was cutting conservatively to get just the right amount of pressure relieved, but retain as much of the shoe as possible. Before Vol State, I had never cut the toes of shoes before. Eventually the shoes seemed ok and I quit cutting and just ran.

How different is running as a crewed runner?

Recall the Shelbyville "incident" mentioned earlier. I went from that to being able to walk up to Abi as she got out of the car asking what I wanted and say, "I'd like some Sun Drop, an S! cap and a few cheese cubes." Then, three miles later say, "I'd like some blueberries, maybe a little other fruit and some protein drink. Oh, can we refill my water bottle too?" Or if I would forget something, Abi would remind me to make sure I was getting enough protein or carbs or salt or maybe I should back off on the food for a while since I'd been eating a lot. Running as a crewed runner sure is different especially when your crew is an expert ultrarunner.

By this point we were to Pelham which was the 15 miles for the day so I started to work on Friday's miles. It was tempting to think about running straight through and how quickly I could finish as I seemed to be starting to make some good progress, even in the heat of the day, but I knew I was getting ahead of myself. Focus on getting the Friday miles. Also, I had gotten to Pelham at about 3 or 4:00 whereas last year I had gotten there at 1:30. Last year, from Pelham to Kimball had taken me until almost 1:00 am so I figured I'd be getting there in the wee hours, even if I kept going. Maybe 2 am if I could move faster than I had last year. I'd be beat by then and might need rest or I might need rest before then.

After a few more flat miles, it was time for the climb to Monteagle. Looking at the time, I dropped my umbrella and started the climb. It went fairly well. I even ran parts of it that were in the sun so I could get to the shady parts sooner. I was a bit surprised at the strength of my recovery even though I also knew I wasn't setting any land speed records. I was at least passing the trees and rocks like they were standing still (as they say).

Passing Monteagle, I was a bit concerned because I went through a fairly rough patch on the way to Tracy City last year. Fortunately, I kept moving well and passed several landmarks that I

recalled having stopped at last year for some rest. It did seem to be taking me a long time to catch up to Abi though. I expected her about every 2 miles and while I wasn't wearing a watch, it seemed to be taking a bit longer than expected. Sometimes a bit more than a bit longer than expected so I figured I was moving, but not maybe as well as I thought. Eventually, I figured out that what was happening was she was going further up the road and I was actually moving pretty well (for 280 or so miles into the race, that is).

Tracy City and on to Jasper

At the first stop past Tracy City, I figured the Friday miles were done and it was time to work on the Thursday miles, and maybe I could think about running straight through (not that I hadn't thought about it, but I figured it was now reasonable to think about it). I also asked how far it was to Juli. Abi said I was in front of Juli, so I asked how far. She said not to worry about it, she was behind me and not moving as well as I was. She also said Josh was still well in front of me, but based on my pace vs his, Gary and Carl were "giddy" with excitement that I might catch him and there would be a bit of a race to the finish if our relative speeds stayed the same, but it would be dark soon and a lot changes when it gets dark.

The stretch past Tracy City is a long one before you begin the big descent into Jasper. At this point, I was still moving well. I misjudged the distance though because I thought I'd see Abi one more time before the descent and could get some food and water. When I saw the sign indicating a 3 mile downhill at 7% grade, I was surprised. Not knowing what else to do, I kept running. In my mind, this downhill is the single most cruel part of Vol State. I had been anticipating it from about mile 2 of the race. I mean, it is just a ridiculous thing. It seems like way more than 3 miles even though it is downhill. I had also hit it in the dark again this year. Although there's a silver lining in that there is probably less traffic at night.

So I told myself to just run lightly and make steady progress, what else was I going to do? At some point along the way here, it started to rain. A light rain at first, and I thought it was no big deal. Not carrying my pack though, I didn't have my raincoat or hat. I knew I had to keep moving or I could get cold quickly.

From the ridiculous to the really and truly ridiculous

So here I am on this long, ridiculous downhill in a light rain with nothing but shorts, socks, ventilated shoes and a t-shirt on. At least I had my trusty water bottle with me. I don't remember if it happened gradually or suddenly, but the light rain turned to a torrential downpour. It was like I had twisted the top off the water bottle, turned it over my head and then someone refilled the thing as fast as it had emptied and kept pouring more. But not just on my head, all over me and the rest of the road too. At this point, I just laughed to myself and remember thinking that while I had thought the downhill alone was ridiculous, this was now well, really and truly ridiculous.

I ran 250 miles with a pack that I had a rain poncho, hat and plastic trash bag in, any of which would have been useful at the moment, but no, I had run into some problems and switched to

crewed status 35-40 miles ago, so for this downhill, I had what I was wearing, the water bottle and a small light. And since I wear glasses, having a hat to keep them a little less wet is helpful to see where I'm going, but at least I could see well enough and I had a light with me.

No matter, I am a Vol State runner and this is merely an inconvenience. To the good, I am not cold, making good progress down the hill and while I might get a little hungry and slow down a bit as a result, I'm not going to freeze to death or get struck by lightning. Yeah, the Vol State can change your perspective somewhere along the way.

And somewhere in all of this, Abi drives by heading down hill, rolls down the window and tells me I am almost off this mountain. Now, there's nowhere to stop along the way and the road is just wide enough to be a two lane road, so I thank Abi, but wave her on, not wanting to cause an accident should someone else be heading up the hill or coming down behind her. And eventually, I do make it to the bottom, but it was one of the more ridiculous things I've experienced in my running adventures. Maybe you'll be fortunate enough to have a similar experience some time. Looking back on it, it was a hoot. A truly ridiculous hoot, but a hoot none the less.

Once I got to the bottom of the hill, Abi informs me that Josh is 6 miles ahead, but sitting in his crew car, waiting for the storm to pass. So I kept running. Last year, the stretch from the bottom of the hill to Kimball seemed to take forever. Supposedly it's only 4 miles, but it felt more like 10 last year. This year, it went by more quickly. It felt like 9 this year. If I ever run Vol State again, I'm hoping I can get the perceived distance sub 8 miles, but I don't think it will ever be less than that. It's not a particularly difficult stretch, but it just takes forever. I'm not sure why. Maybe because you are getting closer to the finish, but not really that close yet as it's something like 15-20 miles more to go.

The other thing that happened along the way here is that I had to jump over a downed tree limb. Just as I jumped over, I noticed a black rope like thing right next to it. Luckily I was past it and ok before I realized I had just jumped over a downed power line. It was dark and rainy, but I was not wearing sunglasses.

Kimball and on to the finish

Along the way here, the rain eventually lightened up so I figured Josh would be out and running and that catching him in the last bit of the race was not going to happen because he has a strong finishing kick. It turns out he did the last 10k in well under an hour despite the significant uphill that's involved. I don't think I could do it that fast fresh, much less past 300 miles of a race. Wow.

Also, by this time, I was starting to pay the price for my 13+ hours of effort so far that day. I was slowing down. At one point, Abi asked if I was starting to feel the finish and I said I was just feeling the pain right now. Knowingly, she said something like yeah, I'll bet or I'm sure. I felt like it was one of those very real, no sympathy, no pep talk, we are just doing this run, doing what

we are doing kind of moments. Let's keep going and get this done. So I ran and Abi gave me food and water (and coffee! It was late.) and got to the finish.

There weren't many people there - Carl to make sure I didn't fall off the cliff, Gary to record the time, Naresh to take some pictures, Abi who I had asked for some whiskey and I called Vicki even though it was about 4 am for her and woke her up. She congratulated me, but we didn't talk for long. Then everyone else congratulated me and I got to take in the view on the cliffs above Nickajack lake. What a view, even at night. It has to be one of the best race finish locations. And even though I said something similar in last year's race report, it's still true, so I'll say it again. I had more than a physical view, but also a mental view of what amazing things we can do. Maybe not exactly as planned, and certainly not alone - even the uncrewed runners have support, but in some combination of individual effort and receiving support, each in different degrees, we can do amazing things. And not just in a race across the great state of Tennessee, but in everything we do. The race just helps some of us realize that a little more and maybe focus the effort along the way. Wow, what a view!

Thanks

There are too many people to thank, but I have to mention at least a few. Thanks to Vicki and Suzy for all of their support on this Vol State and all of my running adventures. To my parents, brothers and in-laws for being such great family. To Gary and Carl for watching after us runners. To Abi for jumping in to totally unplanned crewing duties (and supporting a lot of the other runners from what I've heard!). To all of the other participants for each running and encouraging me both before, during and after the race. Especially Dan Fox, not only for winning the race, but for lowering the standard for uncrewed runners and helping me a bit along the way. Very impressive run!

Especially to Marvin Skagerberg. None of my reporting of Vol State would be complete without mentioning what he said to me last year when I didn't really know what I was getting myself into - "This race isn't really that bad." Marvin, you proved it this year!

And a final thanks to Vicki for finding just the right way to call me lazy earlier this year when she said "Don't you think you should train for all these runs you do rather than just going out and run them?" My protestations that I did train were met with nothing short of ridicule - "You call that training? No, I mean *Training*."

Epilogue

After finishing, I got some sleep and came back to the finish. Juli had just finished so we were able to congratulate each other. Juli ran a strong race, totally uncrewed and was first woman finisher. Very impressive! Then Sulaiman was due in, but he took a bit longer than expected (still finishing strong and in an impressive 5th place!). There were a few others around, but Abi went off to make sure Sulaiman didn't miss any turns and Carl had to get home to go back to work so I got a chance to chat with Gary for a few hours. Gary is great to talk to. I got to hear about some of what his kids did when they were younger, some of how dysfunctional different

governmental entities can be and of course a bit about running. I think I only fell asleep on him a couple of times and I also think he understood. Sorry Gary, first I kept you up getting lost in the cornfield and then I fell asleep on you waiting at the finish.

Fortunately, I was able to catch an earlier flight home than originally planned and Vicki and Suzy made a great dinner and had some friends and family over so I could tell lies, I mean, stories, about the race. Somewhere along the way, the conversation turned to the difference between being crewed and uncrewed so I explained the basics and compared the Shelbyville story above to what I had asked for when crewed. Immediately, my father in law pipes in with "I'll crew for you next year." The only response I could muster was "It's too early to even think about that"

Notes (i.e., wait there's more? aren't you done yet?)- a few notes that didn't fit into the report:

Dogs

I didn't have any problems with dogs this year. Some yipped and yapped. Most stayed in their yards. Many had fences or were on leashes to contain them. A few came into the road so I faced them and yelled to go home and pointed. That slowed them down or got them going back where they belonged for long enough for me to move up the road.

Actually, at one point, I realized I needed to fear the dogs a little more. I can't just ignore them. Just because some are behind fences or on leashes, don't assume they all are. I realized I needed to keep my guard up, especially at night.

I don't remember for sure where it was, but I think it was coming out of Union City, I actually picked up a "friend" for a while. I noticed that there was a dog trailing about 20 feet behind me and maybe 15-20 feet off the road, just trotting along as I walked or jogged a bit. I figured he'd find his way home soon so kept going and didn't pay attention. A while later, I noticed he was still there. This went on for at least a few miles. For a while I got concerned that I would reach Martin and possibly beyond with my new friend. Somewhere along the way, he must have wisened up because eventually I noticed that he wasn't there any more. Strange.

Comparing this year to last year

Much was similar, there were good moments and bad moments. I was still traversing 314 miles across 4 states (never made it MO either year). Last year, I saw a lot of my fellow participants. There was a fair amount of passing back and forth over stretches of a couple of days as each of us would go through a good patch or a bad patch or rest at different times. I got to talk with people and get to know a few. This year, I didn't see much of other participants after the first day. Dan Fox a couple of times. Even when Juli and Josh passed me or I passed them, I never actually saw them. It was definitely a more solitary run this year. In some ways, I feel like I missed out on that aspect of the race this year.

Scenery

I don't know how many times I thought it this year, but it was more than a few. There would just be moments when I was tooling down the road and I'd look around and think "man, the Tennessee countryside really is beautiful." It really is. Flat in the West and then a bit hillier as we move East. Also, both time I crossed the Tennessee river it was dark. It was very peaceful. Stars overhead, the water below, hills in the distance. Just very nice.

Gear, food and such

I used a camelbak pack that I've had for several years so I don't know the exact model. It has a good sized main compartment and a smaller compartment on top for easier access. I opted for the 2 liter bladder rather than the 3, but also took two water bottles so I could drink different things. I didn't use the bottles that much; if I was going on a long stretch between towns or it was early evening and I was planning on running during the night when things would be closed, I'd fill one or two of them up.

I used 10-13% (A&D or generic equivalent) zinc oxide cream on my feet and later 40% zinc oxide cream (Desitin). After the first day, I had a few blisters on the tops of most of my toes which I treated. All got better except the aforementioned pinkie toes which just got worse through the race, especially the left. I attribute this to the shoes I wore which are actually good for running. What I discovered is that with a walking stride, the toe problems develop. I hadn't done much walking in training. The soles and heels of my feet didn't blister at all during the race with one exception. Mid to late race, I developed small blisters between the first and second toes of both feet. They never got large or painful and didn't pop so I left them alone and they self resolved within a day or two after the race. If the race had been longer, I suspect I would have had to figure out a strategy for treating them.

I had never used the 40% zinc oxide before, but when I needed more, the store I was in didn't have anything else (I was still uncrewed at this point). It worked well. I also used both creams on my waist band and thighs and had no chafing problems other than a minor annoyance around Monteagle. Last year, I had significant chafing problems throughout the race and developed heel blisters early on, but was able to deal with the blisters at least.

I did not wash my clothes during the race. Not once. Even when I stayed at hotels. Last year, I had washed my clothes each time I stopped at a hotel and in the morning they were always damp. Yuck! This year, I just hung them up and by morning they were dry or pretty close. Either way, they were going to smell. They also got pretty wet more than a few times in all the rain we had this year. I started with one shirt, one pair each of shorts and compression shorts and 4 pairs of socks. Each pair of socks was used "once" (i.e., I might take off and put back on the same pair to preserve having a fresh pair left, but I never reused a pair once I had switched to a new one. I kept them all with me rather than pitching any "just in case". I also started with a long sleeve, white shirt which I pitched in Columbia. I went through three umbrellas, opting for light ones rather than sturdy ones. Also, I would often put one of my trash bags on top of the umbrella to better block the sun (using the "prongs" on the umbrella wires to spear the bag and hold it in place).

Being uncrewed for much of the race, I mostly ate regular food. Started with some protein powder and instant mashed potatoes and acquired more protein powder and instant oatmeal along the way as well as peanuts, sausage and cheese sticks, peanut butter crackers and the like for the longer stretches between stores or for when things were closed at night. Eggs continue to be one of my best protein sources and I feel like I should have eaten more along the way. I also developed a real taste for the steak and cheese subway sandwiches with both mayo and mustard even though I don't normally put mayo on things. Chicken tenders were available at many convenience stores and were good with potato wedges. By a couple of days in, I also started drinking more soda than any non-ultrarunner should - about as much as the average American would be my guess. I drank a lot of Sun Drop again this year which is not generally available in Ohio (that I know of, I actually drink very little pop when I'm not running). Oh, and chocolate milk.

I used both S! caps and chicken bouillon cubes for supplemental sodium on occasion, but for the most part was able to get plenty of sodium and other electrolytes in the food I was eating.