

2016 Superior 100 Race Report

Friday morning's start was warm. I quickly realized that I didn't need even the light jacket that I had brought for the occasion. I checked in at Gooseberry Falls about 30 minutes prior to the beginning of the race. I returned to Superior this year after a heartbreaking DNF last year at mile 85. I had trained all year for the opportunity to come back to Superior's North Shore and successfully complete my first 100 miler. After months of anticipation I found myself antsy and ready to go as the minutes ticked down. 8 AM and after the final brief from RD John Storkamp we were off with a whoop.

Gooseberry to Split Rock (mile 9.7)

The opening leg again followed the paved Gitchi-Gami State Trail for the first 4+miles. As I was running alone this year my strategy was to get some miles in the bank early so that I would not feel the pressure of the time cutoffs like I did last year. I didn't want to go out too hard, but I felt like this runnable first section would be a good time to get some easy distance underneath my feet. The view of Lake Superior on my right was inspiring and the morning quickly warmed up even more. I settled into a comfortable pace and it felt good to be moving. 99% of my running is done alone, so it was exciting to be with hundreds of other lunatics who share the same mental disorder as I do. I love races as much for the shared camaraderie as I do for any other reason. The group energy is something tangible that you can feed off of and makes what might be otherwise toilsome miles seem at times effortless. After the deceptively gentle warm up on the GGST came the sharp left turn through the tunnel that leads off of the bike path and up to the Superior Hiking Trail. The trail at this point starts out with a relatively long gradual ascent towards the Split Rock aid station still some miles away. Runners on this part of the course are clumped together, and as there is very little room to pass or to be passed, pace is determined by the group you happen to be in. We settled into the standard rhythm; power walk the uphill, run the flats and the downhill, all the while picking our way through the ever increasing tangle of roots and scattered rock. I was mildly surprised that I was the only one in my cadre to stop and connect the twin monoliths for which this section of the race is named. The day grew steadily warmer and soon I was shirtless and sweating as I trotted into the first aid station.



Split Rock

Split Rock to Beaver Bay (mile 20.1)

After a quick turnaround I left the aid station at Split Rock at almost exactly 10 AM-right on schedule! My primary goal this year was obviously to complete the race, however 34 hours was my target time. The trail to Beaver Bay is mostly runnable single track, however traversing the bare rock on the ridge tops is like running on concrete. Last year I had developed knee problems at mile 15 that plagued me for the rest of the race. To combat this I decided to wear my street shoes until my first drop bag at Silver Bay (mile 25.) My strategy seemed to be working so far, although I quickly realized that my soft road shoes offered little toe protection from the repeated hammering that my feet were taking from the smaller loose rocks that are abundant on the trail. The course overall was relatively dry up to this point, with only the occasional black mud holes that seem to be a permanent fixture on the SHT.

Beaver Bay to Silver Bay (mile 25)

Another nice little runnable stretch out of the A.S. Temperatures were in the mid to upper 70's. Warm but not too warm. My legs had just begun to whisper the first faint rumors of fatigue but otherwise I felt strong. The elevation changes become more severe through here, but the scenery from the ridges (Lake Superior always to the right, with smaller lakes and ponds dotting

the valleys to the left) more than make up for the effort in getting there. I ran the downhill into Silver Bay feeling good and ready to pick up my first drop bag. As I came into the aid station one of the volunteers (who I found out is a past Sawtooth winner) found me and took it upon himself to attend to me during my entire time at the A.S. (Thanks John!) He grilled me about my caloric intake and hydration. I was confronted with the fact that I was already getting behind in my nutrition and resolved to correct this as I knew it could come back to bite me later. A quick shoe change (into my trail shoes...ahhhh) and I was out.

Silver Bay to Tettegouche (mile 34.9)

This is a rather long section run during the warmest part of the day. I spent the summer months training in the balmy piedmont of South Carolina, so this year's heat wasn't too much of an issue for me. Still, I realized that I wasn't carrying enough water for this leg, but since I hadn't brought extra water bottles there wasn't much I could do about it. My legs were starting to feel the 30+ miles but all systems up to this point seemed to be running well. This was the hottest section of the race and I did end up running out of water about 2 miles out of the A.S. but as I was still moving at a good pace this didn't end up being much of a problem.

Tettegouche to County Road 6 (43.5 miles)

The miles continued to pass steadily underfoot as the sun began to descend behind me and to my left. Somewhere on this section I popped my first Advil. About 3 miles from the A.S. I felt a sudden surge of energy and I kicked it into relatively high gear. I was running decently even on the uphill and passed several runners on this stretch. County Road 6 is deceptive in that you can see and hear the aid station from your vantage point on the bluff a mile or two before you actually get there. The shadows grew long and much to my satisfaction I pulled into the A.S. before actual nightfall. This was the first A.S. to have hot food and the chicken noodle soup after nearly 12 hours of running was awesome. I picked up the jacket I had abandoned at the start (my brother was volunteering and dropped it off for me), although the night ended up being warm enough that I didn't need it.

County Road 6 to Finland (mile 51.2)

Headlamp affixed I headed out into the gathering dark towards Finland A.S. and the halfway point of the race. I wasn't running as hard as I had been but I still felt pretty good. Mentally the dark always presents its own challenges, but it definitely makes running more interesting. The world gets reduced to a little fishbowl of light, surreal and at times otherworldly. I was surprised at how many runners were still near me at this point, as last year at this time I had this section relatively to myself. The darkness was not bringing with it the anticipated cool down and it remained warm and humid. I began to experience my first real bouts of nausea, but I was still managing to keep everything down. The miles rolled out over the seemingly endless climbs and descents of the trail. The Sawtooth Mountains are fittingly named.

Finland

I pulled into Finland A.S. just shy of 10pm and about an hour behind my projected pace. Finland is the Mac Daddy of aid stations and I had earlier resolved to resist the siren call to dally at this particular waypoint (Finland is one of the more accessible aid stations and as a result has a large number of crew and supporters which give it an almost party-like atmosphere. That, coupled with the hot food, drinks, fire, and even a real heated bathroom, is an invitation to sit down and not get back up. It is probably no coincidence that more than a few runners drop at this aid station.) My brother Scott and friend Kathy had said they were going meet me there but failing to see them on my way in I grabbed my drop bag and plopped down alone on an available bench. I simultaneously felt hungry and nauseated. Scott and Kathy arrived several minutes later and helped me get my kit together for the long night ahead. Despite my stomach issues I managed to down a hamburger and some more soup. I popped a ginger chew and my brother encouraged me to take it easy on this next section to give my stomach a chance to settle. I had planned on changing socks here but as my feet were giving me no real problems I decided to leave well enough alone. I made a quick call to my wife Corie, which was a real morale lifter. My wife is my biggest cheerleader and even though she was some thousand miles away hearing her voice really lifted my spirits. She worries about me when I'm running at night, and I reassured her that there were plenty of runners near me and I would be alright even if something unforeseen happened (running all night through the woods, what could POSSIBLY go wrong??). A couple of adjustments to my gear and it was back out onto the trail.

Finland to Sonju Lake (mile 58.7)

Following my brother's advice, I started this section relatively easier, walking much of the first part. The mud-covered roots seemed to increase during this stretch so this was not a hard decision, especially in the dark. Not surprisingly I began to get passed by what seemed like a lot of runners. Competition in a 100 miler is not the same as in other races. You might see the same runner who was looking strong as they passed you at mile 20 lying by the side of the trail covered in vomit at mile 50. Conversely push too hard and you might be the one lying there. Nonetheless I began to get annoyed that so many people were having to go around me, so I decided to start running again. The mud was getting worse here and despite my resolve I was still reduced to walking a considerable portion of this section. At least I wasn't getting passed as much anymore. Trippy gas-generator powered Christmas Tree lights hanging in the trees like a scene from Apocalypse Now marked the entrance into Sonju Lake A.S.

Sonju Lake to Crosby Manitou (mile 62.9)

A light rain had started but because of the temperature it was barely noticeable. The going was a little easier through this section. I continued to take an advil or tylenol every couple of hours just to take the edge off of the growing ache in my legs. I felt a little like this was cheating but Kilian Jornet I am not.

Crosby Manitou to Sugarloaf (mile 72.3)

After leaving the famous Crosby pancake aid station, I headed into one of the longer sections of the race. I remember this part of the trail seeming like it stretched out forever last year, and I was not disappointed again this year. After the steep vertical leading up and away from the Manitou River runners enter a corridor of seemingly endless meandering climbs and descents that makes one feel rather like Frodo and Sam aimlessly walking around the front door of Mordor in Lord of the Rings. It was also about this time that the light rain turned into an all-out deluge. As I had shed my rain jacket at Sonju, out came my 89 cent emergency parka from WalMart. As the rocks and boulders became slicker, the mud got deeper. There were spots that I came through surprised that my shoes were still on my feet. I was at the head of a large column of runners and forward progress was reduced to a crawl as we picked our way through the morass. I fell several times and I'm glad that my mother was not present to hear my commentary on the situation. This was a low point in the race for me. The night morphed into a seemingly endless death march; hand over foot scramble up the slippery rock faces, sliding/stumbling down the backsides, black mud that was calf-deep at times, tripping over the jurassic-sized roots, mutter expletive(s), ask God's forgiveness, repeat. Rugged, Relentless, Remote. It was the relentless at this point that was kicking my butt. As much as I disliked the cliché, I nonetheless had to admit that the predawn darkness somewhere around mile 68 did seem to be the darkest. It was at this point in the race that I was not only questioning the logic of attempting to run 100 miles, but quite frankly my own sanity for doing so. I made the decision that I never wanted to see another pair of running shoes in my life, or even another tree for that matter. I resolved that if I ever did complete this odyssey of lunacy my running days, like Forrest Gump's, would be over. That was fine with me. I could take up lower-impact hobby like needlepoint, or ornamental horticulture. Finally, almost imperceptibly, the corners of my vision lightened, like the slow waking from some vexing dream. I was startled at the suddenness of the dawn. The rain stopped and I stumbled out of my swamp into the long, gradual uphill that leads to Sugarloaf aid station. The relief that the terrain afforded was short lived, as this last 3 mile section seemed to stretch on endlessly. I had entered some weird zone whereby at every corner in the trail I expected to see the aid station, only to be greeted by more trees and trail and mud. One of my fellow running mates agreed that they must have moved the aid station this year just out of spite. Finally I ran/limped into Sugarloaf and glanced at my watch. It had taken me 4 hours to cover less than 10 miles! Then another runner at the A.S.(who seemed like he was running strong when he had passed me) told me it had taken him 4 and a half hours so I didn't feel quite as bad.

Sugarloaf to Cramer Road (mile 77.9)

A couple of pancakes and breakfasty meats later and I was back out on the trail. This section is relatively short but the mud from last night's downpour was slowing us all down. One consolation was that I had yet to be passed by any of the 50 milers (who had started at Finland at 5:30 this morning) like I had been by so many last year at this point so at least I knew I was

keeping a better pace. Of course they were all somewhere behind me battling the same mud that we had just come through.

Cramer Road to Temperance (mile 85)

At the A.S. at Cramer I met up with Scott and Kathy who had been there to help with the start of the marathon (the 100 and 50 milers, plus the marathoners all run the last half or quarter of the course roughly concurrently by stacking their start times and then having the same finish and cutoff-10pm Saturday night at Lutsen.) I had hoped that one or both of them might be able to pace me at some point, particularly toward the end of the race, but as volunteers they ended up only getting 1 hour more sleep than myself who had gotten zero. They had been unable to get away from their racely duties today so it looked like I was going to be running alone. It was a big boost just seeing them at some of the aid stations though and I tried not to let my disappointment show. I had planned to change into dry socks here but my drop bag had become drenched from last night's rain so I went sans sock change. All things considered my feet were doing surprisingly well. I felt a few hot spots but nothing that I felt would keep me from finishing the last 26 miles. As it turned out it was fortuitous that I didn't try to change my socks at this point as I found out later my feet were in worse shape than I thought and it would have been bad had I attempted to take my shoes off and then try to put them back on again. I got to meet Scott's friend, Jim Stocco, who I found out is one of the founding fathers of the Superior 100. Loading up on more pancakes I hit the trail towards Temperance. It was here that I had DNF'd last year and it was with some apprehension that I embarked on the section. The last time I had come through here I had run out of gas not long after leaving Cramer Road and until I realized that my race was essentially finished I had gone far enough that turning back wasn't an option, so I had to limp, hobble, and crawl my way to Temperance A.S. (it's funny that even after you drop in an ultra you usually have many more miles to go just to get to a place where you can actually stop.) The course sweepers had caught up to me with about a mile or so to go to the aid station so I guess technically I didn't drop, I ran out of time (whatever makes me feel better, right?) The spectre of last year's defeat weighed heavily on me, and the thought that I might not have what it takes this year tugged at the corners of my mind like some annoying ugly child. I had gone about a mile or so when my reverie was interrupted by the sound of my name being called somewhere on the trail behind me. I turned and saw a figure running steadily past several runners to my rear, closing the gap between us. When he finally caught up to me I realized it was my brother's friend Jim. "You're keeping a really good pace, I ran forever just to catch you," he said as he pulled in behind me. Now Jim and I both knew that at this point the term "good pace" is comically relative, but I appreciated the encouragement nonetheless. Apparently Jim had decided on the spot that he was going to pace me, a complete stranger, through this section. Grateful for the company Jim and I chatted away as we settled into as steady a rhythm as my fatigued legs could muster at this point. It was about this time that I began to notice familiar landmarks from last year's DNF. These were checkpoints of failure, at least in my mind. I passed by the stretch of path that before I could only walk a couple of feet at a time without stopping. Next I recognized the area of forest that last year I had laid down in and promptly fell asleep because I felt I couldn't walk another step. Finally came the large rock in the

middle of the trail that I remembered wearily sliding myself down while the sweepers followed closely on my heels. This time as I completed these sections, and with each mile gained, I felt a sense of triumph welling up within me. I was passing through the valley of my defeat and still going. As Jim and I moved through the place I realized that barring some crippling injury or attack by a rabid moose, I was going to finish this year! A sense of elation swept over me. Actually making it through that part of the race knocked down a huge mental barrier for me. As we came into Temperance I felt like I was on top of the world. Only 18(ish) miles left to go!!

Temperance to Sawbill (mile 90.7)

Much to my surprise Jim said that he would pace me through this next section as well. Jim cautioned me to “beware the chair” at the aid stations, something that I really didn’t want to hear but probably needed to. We were in and out just long enough to grab some more hot food and load up on water and gels. Now I am not a fan of gels. When I’m not drinking beer and eating cookies I like to try to eat healthy as much as I can. Gels in my mind are the antithesis of natural, healthy food as they are basically pure sugar/carbs in toothpaste form. However I found that at this point I could consume one every 20-40 minutes or so with no discernible ill-effects on my stomach. I was acutely aware of my need to take in as many calories as I could hold down by this time so that’s what I was going with. This portion of the trail meanders benignly down to the Temperance River. After a deceptively easy incline leading away from the other side the trail then shoots pretty much straight up to Carlton Peak, offering the most severe elevation change in the entire race. It was at this point that I was really struggling again. I was mostly walking with the intermittent fast-shuffle to show I was still in the game. Jim never cajoled or berated me, he would just offer subtle encouragement at points by saying things like “this section looks runnable” to get me moving again. It was getting warm and the steep climb combined with the dust and cumulative effects of 30+hours of non-stop exertion were taking their toll on my morale. The hallucinations that had accompanied my run last year had been assuaged until this point, but now they were starting up again. Fallen birch trees were transformed into cars and machinery and animals. I kept thinking things like “what is that tractor doing out here?” The slivers of birch bark that littered the trail began looking like store receipts and, remembering the RD’s speech about picking up trash on the trail, I had to resist the urge to stop and stuff them into my pockets. The thing about hallucinations during a race are that I KNOW that they are not real (mostly) and instead of being scary they at times provide some much needed comic relief to my brain. I even got Jim laughing as I called out the imaginary animals that I would occasionally catch out of the corner of my eye...”Hey, you’re not a real kitty cat!” Sleep-deprived humor notwithstanding I was struggling. The highs and lows were hitting me with little to no warning. Whereby only a few minutes ago I was thankful to have Jim along, now I was wishing that he would leave me the heck alone with his constant “encouragement;” “Hey John THIS section looks runnable...” We were reduced at times to scrambling on all fours over rocks and boulders as we picked our way up Carlton Peak. I often chuckle to myself when people ask “Do you run the entire time?” Maybe on some courses, but

they call this the Superior Hiking Trail (as opposed to the Superior RUNNING Trail) for a reason. Most 100 mile races have a 30 hour time limit. The 38 they give you at Superior is not lent out of charity. As we made our way down the other side my quads were telling me that they had had enough some 30 miles ago. We again did the obligatory "Walking Dead Charge" into the aid station (smile for the kids.) I was still in the game but definitely fading.



Sawbill to Oberg (mile 96.2)

Jim again surprised me when he informed me that after a brief rest he would be pacing me in for the final stretch between Oberg and the finish. We agreed that 2 hours should put me at Oberg and that he would meet me there. I loaded up on gels and water, gulped as much solid food as I felt I could hold down, and headed back out. In all honesty I didn't know if I would be able to make it to the A.S at Oberg in 2 hours. I knew that having Jim push me the last 12 miles or so had kept me moving when I might have otherwise been reduced to a crawl. I was tired but I knew that I had less than a half marathon to go to the finish. "Heck I can do a half marathon in my sleep" I told myself. I don't know if it was because of my proximity to the end ("smelling the barn") they call it, but I began to pick up my pace. Slowly at first but I kept building momentum. Before long (much to my surprise) I overtook first one, then another of the 100 milers. The thought got a hold of me that the faster I ran the sooner I could be out of the woods and done with this mess. I continued to gain steam. Soon I was actually running many of the uphill and charging (or the zombie version of charging) the downhill. I knew I was moving at a relatively good clip because I passed almost a dozen runners through this section. I must have been making a ton of noise doing so because they all moved to the side as I approached to pass. As tired as they surely were almost all had words of encouragement for me. "Looking good man," "THAT'S more like it," "Wow, you must have gotten your second wind!" I tried my best to reciprocate but my words likely sounded unintelligible. Oh well hopefully it was the thought that counted. On more than one occasion the notion crossed my mind that I surely can't keep this up. I decided I would go as long as I could until the wheels fell off and then I would crawl across the finish line if I had to. I actually felt really GREAT at this point! One of my favorite quotes from any movie is from Chariots of Fire. In it Eric Liddle says "God made me fast, and when I run I can feel His pleasure." I felt like I could presently echo that very sentiment. Here I was, on the tail end of a 100+ mile race, having spent the last 30-some hours awake in the woods, through mud and rain and heat and sweat and I was running as strong as I had at the beginning of the race (or so it felt.) I felt ALIVE! I had tapped into something, some strength deep down that I didn't realize was there. Something primal and real. It felt really good! I ran into Oberg A.S. a full 45 minutes ahead of schedule. Fortunately Jim was already there and ready to go. "You're looking really strong John" Jim said as he topped off my water. A fist bump from Scott and we were gone.

Oberg to Finish (mile 103.3)

I had lost a little of my momentum from the last section but I still felt relatively good. Jim had told me that once you check in at the Oberg A.S. you were guaranteed a finish, even if you came in over the 38 hour cutoff (as long as you still crossed the finish line under your own power at Caribou Highlands.) I guess the rationale is that even if you drop in this section you still have to make it out of the woods, and unless you have to be carried that amounts to a finish. It was only a little after 4 PM so I was not at all worried about the cutoff. The realization that short of death or prolonged unconsciousness I was going to finish again washed over me. Having Jim running with me again was awesome. True to its motto "Rugged, Relentless, Remote" Superior saves two mountains for this last section. Moose Mountain is a savage uphill as steep as any

on the course. Jim and I continued to overtake runners, even one or two marathoners (The Moose Mountain Marathon started at Cramer Road at 8 AM.) Yet another brutal downhill on the backside ("death by a 1000 paper cuts" I have heard in reference to Superior.) Mystery Mountain is the last real uphill on the course, and I was pleasantly surprised that it turned out to offer a less severe gradient than Moose. We passed another 100 miler on the way up. This poor guy was clearly struggling, with a pacer in front and a pacer behind him. He stumbled as we passed by on his left and for a moment I had the horrified thought that he was going to fall off of the trail. "Easy man, we'll go around YOU, you're doing great" we said as Jim and I gingerly stepped off the trail and back on to give him an extra wide berth. It was sometime around here that Jim informed me that I had officially completed my first 100 mile race, however due to the generosity of the course designers, we were able to experience an extra 3.3 miles. As we came around the crest of Mystery Mountain we could actually hear the noise coming from the finish line somewhere in the valley below us. It sounded tantalizingly close but Jim told me that we still had another mile or two to go. As we wound down the backside Jim said that we would pop out of the woods onto the access road that leads to the resort at Lutsen and then it was a mere half a mile to the finish. As the trail gave way to asphalt Jim and I both gave thanks to God for His faithfulness. It was right then that we looked up and were greeted by the sight of a beautiful rainbow in the sky over the finish. Wow! As we ran together down the road I was overwhelmed with gratitude. We passed several more runners as we cut down behind the resort. "This is your moment John, enjoy it" Jim said as he veered off to allow me to take the final lap alone behind the pool to the finish. Crossing that line I had officially completed 103.3 miles with 42,000 feet of elevation change in 34 hours and 39 minutes. John Storkamp was there holding my finisher's medal and my brother Scott and Kathy (were those tears in your eyes Scott?) were there to congratulate me as well. As I plunked down in a nearby chair I couldn't believe it was over. I was overcome with a hundred different emotions. This race that had begun a day and a half prior had actually started for me long before that. Crossing the finish line was the climax of a grand adventure that I had embarked on many months and even years ago. As I remembered my previous midnight resolutions to never run again I could only ask myself one question...

When can I sign up for another race?

