

Ogden Marathon 2016 Heidi Neuffer

After experiencing what I went through at the Ogden marathon, I think I can almost envision what a slow death might feel like. I NEVER want to be cold again. And wet. Let's just say, "I never want to be cold and wet again." Crawling into a U-Haul truck at mile 17 of a race, because it seemed like the best thing to do, is probably the thing that saved my life...or at least saved me from more cold and being in more pain.

I was prepared for all the pre-race waiting around in the cold, with a "throw-away" thick jacket, fleece "Superman" pants, a rain poncho, and plastic bags for my shoes so they also stayed dry. We boarded the busses at about 4:45 a.m. and were taken to the top of the canyon around the lake into the area where we'd start. It's always a bit daunting thinking that as long as the 26.2 mile drive takes to get us to the start, we have to RUN the whole way back. Nothing else to do but do it!

The temperature seemed warm for the slight drizzle we encountered as we disembarked somewhere above Huntsville, probably somewhere in the 60's even! I hung with friends from Boise: Todd Kirk, Denise Otter, Alex, Kara, Patrick, Ashley, Sean and a few others. Between porta-potty lines, fueling with the food we brought, stretching to stay warm and chatting about race strategy, the time flew until we had to line up and get going.



As I headed to the start, I ran into my Utah running buddies: Lauren Griffin, Emily Barrett, Kyle Petersen, etc. We ditched our warm gear at the side of the road to be donated. This was something I soon regretted doing. The National Anthem was sung. There was reverence and excitement, then we started and were off. I lost everyone I knew in that instant. But a marathon is always run alone, even if friends are in the mix.

It was raining lightly at the start, something I actually loved. Learning to run in Oregon gave me plenty of opportunities to, well, run in the rain!! So I was actually in my element. This was going to be a fast race...even though I did not have the training I'd wished for and I was hoping for the quick downhills that I loved so much to give me a boost.

By mile 3 I couldn't feel my hands. The rain had turned from light to heavy and there was wind--strong, heavy wind! I was moving slower than planned but meant to take the first 6 slowly anyway, to see if my slightly injured hip would hold out okay. I didn't want to take it too fast in the beginning and drag at the end. Save the best for last...where the downhills were then I could let it all go.

I had taken a pair of long wool socks, cut the tip of the toe out and put them on my arms, planning on ditching them when it was warmer during the marathon. Turns out that they basically kept me "sane" during the whole 17 miles I was running. I pulled my right arm warmer over my right hand but my left was uncovered due to my Garmin watch on my left wrist. The rain and wind were so heavy that around mile 10, I put my left hand inside the right sleeve where my less frozen right hand could warm the left. I ran like this for about a mile, two hands in front of me. Not the best running form by far, but considering my head bowed often to keep the pelting rain and wind out of my eyes, this wasn't a huge difference.

Mile 6 was to be my first Gu (quick nutrition that's condensed into a gel-like substance in small packets). It was a struggle getting the top off and squeezing the gel into my mouth. I was able to do it eventually and even hold onto it when I found an aid station to toss the trash. This was actually a huge feat! I am not a litterbug! So far, so good. Volunteers were stalwarts as they stood there in the pouring rain and intense winds handing out water and Gatorade. Wow...the volunteers were amazing. Thank you and kudos to them!

Now was the time to really let loose, but my body wouldn't let me. The winds were coming heavy against us. The rain was torrential and coming in buckets. And sometimes as we passed the lake, I swear the spray from the 3-4 foot whitecaps were blowing right into our faces. The lake looked like the Oregon coast in a storm--brown, angry waves leaping and crashing. Some people reported that it was sleet. I could hear the wind whistle and it was quite loud in my ears!

By mile 12 I was able to get my Garmin off with my teeth, pull the sock arm warmer on my left arm down onto my hand, and replace my watch. This made me slow considerably, but by then I really didn't care. My hand was now able to partially thaw. The rain felt like needles pounding

into my skin and eyes. I had to look down at the road at times to see if I was making any progress, as the winds pushed me backwards. Sometimes the gusts came from my left and it would blow me to the right as I was mid-stride. This was absolutely crazy, but I tried to enjoy the excitement of the storm. I love running in storms and remembered this wasn't much different from the run I took alone on the trails the day before Christmas Eve during an intense snow blizzard. But I was dressed appropriately that day. The wind was at my back and I wasn't far from home...and had a phone in case I got in trouble. This race was different. I remember thinking that the race must have to be stopped and cancelled...the conditions were truly intense and even scary at times. At least there wasn't thunder and lightning as was forecasted!

Thoughts of the race and running a good time kept me going. I was frustrated with my poor training, that I may not get a PR (Personal Record) with this marathon, but I was encouraged by the long downhills that would come after mile 17. Did I mention that I love running downhill?

I heard my name being yelled out at mile 13 aid station after I drank in a gulp of water handed out by a volunteer. It was Mike! He was out in that crazy rain and wind too...and he was a sight for literally sore eyes. By this point I could hardly stand how cold I was. I wanted to just shuffle my way home. ("Not finishing" NEVER came to my mind!) But when I saw him, I decided I'd still give it my all and still hope for a slow 3:15, even though I hoped for not much slower than a 3:07 or so. I knew I could still make up the time. I stopped briefly and gave him a kiss and remember that his face was so warm. I was so, so cold and told him so. He asked if I needed anything, and I just said to pray for me. That's all I felt he could do.



I saw many, many people running with garbage bags on their torsos. To me, this was crazy. It was NOT aerodynamic! Why in the world would they do this? It never dawned on me that they were people who were passing me. I don't usually, at this point, get passed in a marathon, at least not by many. The plastic must have been keeping them WARM!!! Some even had raincoats and running jackets on. I didn't know how they could possibly be running with all that garb on. I was, by this time I believe, not in my right mind.



At mile 14, I started talking to my mother who had passed away last year. Something that I had done in the past as I felt her presence. I just matter-of-factly asked her to please help me to get warm. I immediately felt a warm, tingling sensation down my right arm, then my torso, and then my left shoulder. She used to use her finger tips to tickle our skin like this...and this was not a coincidence that I was feeling this again. She was there although of course I couldn't see her. It seemed to warm

me up, and I was able to pour on the speed a bit. I even smiled at her and put a spring in my step. Soon after, I spotted a foil emergency blanket on the side of the road. This was another miracle because NOTHING could stay on the side of the road without being blown away if it wasn't nailed down. At the aid stations, trash cans, cups, signs, etc. were being blown all over the place. But this "manna from heaven" blanket just sat there and I picked it up. I said, "Thanks Mom!" and I laid it across my torso and arms. Because the headwinds were so strong, the blanket stayed on the front of my body and I felt immediately felt so much warmer. I continued running and actually started making up lost time. But the headwinds were still a huge detriment to me.

There was a time when the water was running so deep on the road that it flowed right over and into my shoes. I also opened my mouth and was amazed at how I could actually get a mouthful of water to drink, especially during the huge gusts that came up every couple of minutes! I would close my eyes so the rain wouldn't pelt them and realize a bit later that I was weaving around like a drunken fool. I would look down at the road to see if I was making any forward progress because the winds were so strong. I couldn't see if I was moving anywhere. Sometimes I wasn't. I was at times even blown backwards! I was thankful that the forecasted thunderstorms hadn't materialized though...and there was no lightning that I'd seen. I remember thinking that I was surprised they didn't call off the race. But I kept running.

I knew I needed another Gu by mile 16. But my hands had no functionality in them and I couldn't get to the packet I'd pinned to my shorts. Besides, the blanket was now in my way and I wasn't about to let it go. So I forged on until I came to my senses at 16.57 miles to let go of the blanket and grab that Gu. I yanked it from my shorts with all the strength I could muster, and because I couldn't tear off the top with my fingers, I held the Gu in two hands and tore it off with my teeth. This was a mistake, and I inhaled the top foil tab as it must have blown into my mouth. I struggled for breath but instinctively knew I shouldn't breathe in for fear of it going further down my windpipe. I bent over on the side of the road, struggling to dislodge it by pushing in my stomach (kind of like the Heimlich maneuver). It was "every man for himself" as I

watched several runners pass by me without knowing I needed assistance. Everyone was struggling.

Finally, and not too soon, the cap somehow popped out of my throat onto the ground and I sucked in a huge breath. In hindsight, this was the scariest part of the race so far, but I couldn't dwell on it. I continued running and finally sucked down the sticky nutrition. One nice thing about the rain was that I didn't have sticky fingers from those Gu packets! Haha! I'm thankful for small mercies!

Mile 17 aid station was up ahead and I knew I needed water to wash down the electrolytes. The first volunteers were handing out Gatorade, which I didn't need...I needed straight water because the Gu had enough electrolytes in it, and I didn't want to overdo those. But there was a tiny little girl, probably no more than 2 years old, standing with her mother and she held out a cup of Gatorade. I felt very strongly that I needed to "make her day" and take that cup from her so she felt she'd served and done her part. She was standing in torrential rain and wind to do this, and I'm a "sucker for babies." So, despite my desire to never stop running, I decided to stoop down and take the cup from her. In doing this, I had to stop completely so as to not knock her down with my clumsy movements. My hands were not functioning, so I took the cup with two hands, thanked her, and stopped completely to drink the liquid which, at that time, seemed like the most AMAZING elixir I'd ever tasted. I was mesmerized by this cup of Gatorade, thinking it was the best thing I'd ever had to drink in my life. (I look back on this and realize I was really not in my right mind!)

It was just then, that I saw and heard another wind gust and rain wash coming. The rain and wind never subsided, but there were intensely huge gusts that felt like the Oregon Coast when they would have 50-75 mile per hour gusting winds during a storm--this felt the same. I didn't have the blanket anymore and I knew then that I couldn't handle another one of these bursts of cold air and water, and I decided to duck behind a U-haul truck to miss the wind for just a minute. I was just too cold and I'd had enough. I just needed 30 seconds of reprieve. So as I went to the back of the truck, volunteers helped me get into the back and told me to sit down. I didn't know what they were saying, because I was just going to stand there a second for that gust to pass. My body felt very strong to run again, but I was just so very cold and needed just a tiny break. They insisted that I sit down, and a couple of girls ran to cars and grabbed what they could find and ended up wrapping towels around me to warm me up. I couldn't fight them.

I was embarrassed, felt they didn't need to go to the trouble, and I felt that I was fine. One girl held my face a few inches from hers and asked me my name. I remember I couldn't tell her for a while, and I was trying not to cry. I had to finish my race, and I was fine. By then I was shaking so uncontrollably from the cold, I couldn't stand if I'd tried. She kept talking to me I guess, to keep me alert. Everything felt like it was coming from another world, like I was talking in a swimming pool. I waited there for probably 10-15 minutes, and there was talk among them about ambulances and EMT. I truly didn't believe they were talking about me. It was for some other poor soul who was doing poorly. Before I knew it, EMTs were pulling me from the back of

the truck and walking me carefully to the back of an ambulance. This was probably the scariest moment of my life. I didn't need an ambulance! I was completely fine and could finish my marathon. I'd set out to do it and I would. I felt I just needed to be on my way running so I could run to get warm.

The EMT opened the doors and I saw two grown men and two other ladies in there that looked like they were in really bad shape. If they were there, then maybe I wasn't such a baby after all. They were all shaking like leaves on a tree and all very pale. I don't think I would have gotten in if I hadn't seen others in what I thought was worse shape than I, and they were tough guys!! I later learned their names and history, but Curtis Eppley, an ultra-marathoner who was very experienced and Dan Mills, a PT and the winner of other marathons welcomed me in as if it was their home and started warming me up with other blankets and things. The heater was on full blast and it felt so good. Amber Green, the amazing Olympic trials runner, and another woman was in there too...I can't recall her name.

The EMTs put a blood oxygen monitor on one of my fingers, handed me warm blankets and a hot pack for my completely white-turning-blue hands. I was extremely emotional and couldn't get myself under control. The whole ambulance shook from our "palsy-like" movements. After about another 30 minutes, I realized I'd not stopped my Garmin. I'd been trying to get warm for about 45 minutes when the EMT took our temperatures. I was shocked when one of the guys' was only 96 degrees F. Wasn't it supposed to be over 98??? Then they took mine and it was 91. And I was already feeling warmer. Wow. I still didn't know to what extent I had gone. Because I have very low blood pressure anyway, it isn't unusual for people to be surprised at how low it reads out. Their equipment couldn't get a reading this time at all though. They tried both arms and 2 different cuffs. I knew I was alive however, haha!

We had to say our names and I couldn't even spell Heidi. I remember I just kept saying, "H. H. H." I could think it but couldn't say it. It was almost comical! And dates of birth. I knew that I was turning 52 in a few days, but other than that, I couldn't remember my birth date...let alone my address and phone number. It actually hurt my head to think that hard.

They let the other patients sign a form that they didn't want to be transported, and they were finally led out of the ambulance to the warm school bus that would take them down the mountain. I was left alone and wanted to lie down and sleep on the bench. I tried to get comfortable but the shaking, although it was subsiding, was not allowing me any comfort at all. I asked why I couldn't get on the bus too, because I was worried about Mike not knowing where I was. He said I was the worst he'd seen all day and needed to stay until I was stabilized. This wasn't any comfort to me, of course, but I finally resigned my fate of not finishing the race and to stay there until I was well enough to be let go.

I recall asking the EMT if I could just get back out and run, so I could warm up. He said that no, it would be like going out into 30 degree weather and running naked. With the wind and rain conditions on our skin, it was as if it was 30 degrees. It was probably in the 40's or so, without

the wind chill and the wet. I heard later that some runners felt it was like sleet hitting them, and I'm pretty sure that's what it was in parts, especially around the lake.

Eventually I was able to sign the form that I didn't want to be transported and because my temperature had gone up a bit, and I was guided gingerly into the warm school bus. I felt badly that everyone else had been waiting for me for so long. We all then waited more, talked and rested until the bus finally picked up a few other people and started down the hill. I was very sick but put on my game face until I couldn't stand it anymore and admitted that I was very, very nauseous and lightheaded. Our muscles were seizing up and we were not feeling good at all. The other runners were talking but I felt like their words were coming to me through water or even another room. Now I can feel that these people will probably be friends for life!

I had been very concerned for Mike, as I knew he would be worried because I hadn't finished in the time I planned. I had watched from the ambulance windows as the pacers from the 3:35, 4:00 and later speeds passed and these were well outside of my projected goal.

I remember also feeling embarrassed if any of my friends passed and saw that I'd given up. I felt like a wimp. I remember seeing Rachel Moody passing too, with the wheelchair and passenger she was pushing. I knew that Mike was waiting probably around mile 20 and was worried, but the ambulance couldn't even radio out because there was no reception. There was a phone someone had on the bus that I borrowed when we finally had reception further down the canyon. I was pretty sad on the phone to Mike but he was relieved to hear that I was safe. He said that a guy standing near him had a friend that had gotten in our situation at one time and had actually wandered off into a pasture and started talking to the cows. I'm glad I had the miraculous sense to stoop down and get that drink from the little girl so I stopped and couldn't get going again.

We finally got to the bottom of the canyon to the finish area. I somehow walked to retrieve my drop bag with things I'd put in it at the start line for after the race, called Mike with my phone, and made our way to get some food from the finish line. Because I hadn't actually finished, they wouldn't at first allow us in, until Mike told them the situation. I drank chocolate milk, oranges, and a delicious slice of bread. I was fairly nauseous but the EMT had said that it was because I was under nourished for what we'd been through. He said it was like running a double marathon, with all of the trauma, stress, and shaking my body was going through. Yes, I must have been hungry because I kept it all down. I was actually surprised. I'm glad I forced the food. The best thing was the free hot chocolate we found in a booth outside of the finish area. It made a lot of difference!



We passed the stage just as the winners of the marathons were being announced and my cute friend, Emily Barrett, finished in first place women! I was so excited for her!!! And Kyle had finished 6th! But seriously, how did THEY get to finish the race and

I didn't? What was the difference between us??? This is still a question yet to be answered.

After a nice hot bath in the hotel, we made our way back to Provo, which was about an hour away. I was completely exhausted and still quite sick. It's now 5 days later and my 52nd birthday today and I still feel like I've had something hit my head pretty hard. I've picked the brains of nurses and other runners and have found that this is normal...that the head will suffer the trauma the longest. Sleepiness, insomnia, dizziness, foggy thoughts, headache and even nausea are plaguing me. But with our son speaking in church on Sunday, graduation from Seminary that night, Monday's high school graduation and Tuesday taking his first trip to the temple among other things to get ready for his mission, I haven't been able to stay down most of the time, along with other usual duties. I guess it just takes time to feel better!

I'm pretty sad I have a DNF on my record, but at least things didn't turn out worse. They said there was really nothing I could have done to stave off the Hypothermia in these conditions, but my fear of rain, wind, and cold will soon ease I suppose, and I'll be off and running in no time. I'll give it a week, as the EMTs suggested, and see how I do. I'm assuming I'll just be more determined to beat the time and not let the elements beat me ever again!

