

2012 Free State Trail Run

Clinton Lake State Park

Lawrence Kansas

Race Report – Ben Smoker – 40 Mile

Pre Race Preparation

For this race, the longest distance I have yet attempted, I used a brilliant and cunning plan. My plan was to come in terribly undertrained, but only enter at the last minute in order for my body to realize what horrible plans I had for it. Whilst this is not necessarily a technique I would recommend, it worked acceptably on the day. In fact, most of my hopes rested on the fact that only about 2 months ago I completed the 50k course at the Psycho Wyco, and Race Director “Bad Ben” Holmes had assured me via email that the Clinton Lake course isn’t nearly as hilly as the Wyco course. If I can do 50k on a quite nasty course, then I figured I might be up for 40 miles on a less difficult course.

A series of circumstances such as colds and work commitments had ensured that I didn’t really have any alternatives to my underwhelming preparation, so my choices were limited to “wimp out” or “have a go!”. I chose the “have a go” option. After all, that is the Australian way, right? I’ve also learned that “the ideal preparation” is an extraordinarily rare phenomenon, and if you are waiting for it to all come together before you do things in life, you might not ever get much done...

Race Day

One thing I know about trail ultra-marathons is that they seem to always start at ungodly early hours. It is a two-edged sword. Yes, I hate getting out of bed early. The other side of the equation is that it gives to the chance to get a reasonable chunk of the race underway before the body is paying too much attention to what is going on. Kind of fits well with my pre-race “strategy”.

The start of my day went like this. Out of bed at 0415. Shower and out of house by 0430, or thereabouts. Approaching Clinton Lake by 0600. Thoroughly lost by 0605. Thanks, Garmin! In fairness to my SatNav, it took me in a reasonable direction – how was it to know it had taken me to what looks like an abandoned and locked gate on a dirt road in the middle of nowhere. I eventually made it to the start at about 0630. Enough time for the usual pre-race nervous bathroom trip, lube up with BodyGlide, the world’s greatest product for runners, with the possible exception of Nip-Guards.

Race started right on time at 0700. As is my custom, I started Tail-End-Charlie – dead last. From this point, things can only get better, right? There is no hurry early on in a trail race, and for 5 miles, I made

the occasional move, and then settled in behind what turned out to be about a 20 runner “conga line”. Eventually I got sufficiently frustrated with the slowness of that group and worked my way, politely, past them in about 30 seconds. Trail runners are a very friendly lot, nobody ever seems to get upset about your overtaking maneuvers, no matter how inappropriately they may be timed! Try getting past a bunch of runners in a confined space in a marathon, and you’ll trigger a road rage incident. Do it in a trail race, and people almost apologize for inconveniencing you. Trail runners are a much more down to earth group, as a general rule.

I managed to put some space between myself and the “conga line” fairly quickly, and soon, I was on my own. And early in the day, that isn’t such a bad place to be. The stretch along the shoreline came as quite a surprise to me – calling it “technical” would be quite the understatement. On a rainy day, I can only imagine how careful you’d have to be across all those boulders!

Around Mile 7 you arrive at “Lands End”, location of the first major Aid Station, and what a wonderful bunch of volunteers they were! Throughout the day, I would come to very much look forward to meeting up with them. All day, they did a great job of taking care of everyone. Lots of my race was a blur, I can’t really remember much of the first trip through the aid station except that I had some banana, some pringles, and plenty of Coke. Plus 2 S-Caps. I think I used a whole lot of S-Caps throughout the day... And they make quite a difference.

The entire 20 mile loop was dry. All creek crossings could be made dry-shod, and some parts of the trails were even dusty. Most previous years have been very, very muddy apparently. All day I was wondering if there was anyone “out front” threatening the race record – with such dry conditions, but not too warm, surely the race record was at risk today. Well, 8 hours and 50-odd minutes after the start, the 100km race record was well and truly shattered. By someone substantially faster than such as I!

I arrived back at the start/finish line in 3 hours 58, right around where I was hoping. At this point, I had experienced some minor cramps in my hamstrings, which was strange, as normally it is my calves that suffer first. But nothing that was going to put a stop to me. Made some clothing adjustments, as things had warmed up a bit, had some more food (but as I would find out about 2 miles later, nowhere near enough carbs...), and headed on out again. By this stage, I had also started popping Ibuprofens along with S-Caps, to try and prevent ITBS from ruining my day. This was tactically good – knee pain never really rose beyond about 3 or 4 out of 10. At Wyco, ITBS nearly crippled me, so this was much, much better.

Then about 23 miles into my race, things started falling to pieces. Massive carbo-bonk going on here! Lips went numb, fingers on both hands tingling, I also dried out and dehydrated at the same time, started getting dizzy, and knew I was in a heap of trouble. I backed off the pace and had only one goal at this point – get to Lands End Aid Station without doing too much damage to my system, and hope that the awesome volunteers there could revive me into a reasonable shape to continue.

One nice volunteer, herself a runner as she explained to me, seemed to realize that I wasn’t in the best of shape, so she made sure I was well fed before heading back out again. While I was “grazing” on

banana, pringles, and M&Ms, she even shared her strawberries with me (I only had one, but I'm sure it weighed about a half pound!), and taught me about Trader Joes where her strawberries had come from. By the time I had left Lands End this time, I knew I wasn't going to be able to maintain a fast pace, but steady and sensible would probably see me home.

When I got to the 30 mile mark, I took note of the fact that, with a current race time of 6 hours 45 minutes, I was 27 minutes ahead of the time I had finished the Psycho Wyco in – and I still had 9 miles or so to go. I was very happy with this!

When I got back to Lands End, there was only 3 miles or so to go. Shortly after this, I was caught and overtaken by a lady called Erin, and her pacer who had picked her up at the Lands End Aid Station. Erin and pacer still had another lap – 20 miles – to go. I hopped in behind them, and figured I would do well to follow them back to the start/finish line. For me, it was the finish. For Erin, it was the start of her 3rd and final 20 mile loop. I read the race results later, and saw that she finished all 100km, and finished well. Congratulations to her! It really put it in perspective for me, those last 3 miles. Here was I, busting my gut to stick with someone for “only” 3 miles, knowing full well that I was able to empty the tank, but she had to hold a lot in reserve for another 20 miles. So yes, I'm happy with my current level of fitness. And yes, I am humbled by the reality that I still have much, much room for improvement.

I finished in 8 hours and 46 minutes. Before the race, I had three main goals in the back of my mind. One – finish. Two – hopefully finish inside 9 hours. Three – hopefully finish without getting lapped by the 100km leaders. I achieved all three. I finished, 14 minutes inside my goal, and about 7 minutes ahead of the 100km winner. Hey, I mightn't be a great runner, but I do seem to be reasonably in tune with my body in terms of calculating what I think it is capable of.

Thanks to Bad Ben Holmes, the Race Director. Brilliant organization. Choice of course is first rate. In fact, I'm not sure I'm ever going to bother with Wyco again after being treated to Clinton Lake. It is that much better. Some might say “horses for courses”, and I would counter by suggesting that is **exactly** what is wrong with the Wyco course! Stinkin' horses! Anyway, rather than criticize Wyco, I should instead praise Clinton Lake as a wonderful course. Very technically challenging, very scenic. I would describe it as a “true test” of the trail runner, and very fair. It is capable of rewarding, and I think it is also capable of handing out punishment...

Thanks also to all of the volunteers, especially the crew at Lands End. And to the lady who shared a strawberry with me, if I ever see you at a trail race, I owe you one!

In closing... 2 years and 4 months ago, I took up running. I started out struggling to run a half mile in 6 minutes 45 seconds. Incredibly, some 2 years and 4 months later, I finished a 40 mile trail run on a 13 minute, 8 second mile pace. That means my 40 mile pace is better than what my half mile pace was only 2 years and 4 months ago. You've got to be happy with that! I'm looking forward to what the next 2 years and 4 months might have in store!