

Friends,

Some of you know that I ran the North Central Trail Marathon in Sparks, Maryland on Nov 29. The marathon is organized by the Baltimore Road Runners club and is a rails to trails marathon in the Gun Powder Falls State Park area. The trail supposedly runs for more than 100 miles all the way up to York, PA. The marathon limit is 500 runners with maybe another 200 in the 2 person relay. For a small club marathon, it is very well organized.

The race appealed to me because of all of the running I do on the Columbia trail and I wanted to do something different than the Philly marathon this year. This is about as low key as I have ever trained for a marathon, only deciding about a month ago that my training was good enough to sign up and give it a try. My weekend training on the trail has been good with some long marathon paced runs and a long run 3 weeks before the marathon of 23.5 miles, but not as much time for weekday runs. In addition, I needed more rest days this fall as I have been trying to work through some tendonitis in my left knee.

I left my house around 4:45 to drive the 3 hours down to Sparks. It was clear and cold but the weather was predicted to be warmer and sunny and it turned out to be a beautiful day for running. One thing I like about these smaller marathons like this one Steamtown and Bay State - runners get to hang out inside a local school to stay warm, and there are plenty of bathrooms and refreshments available (is Dunkin' Donuts good running food?) As I arrived around 7:45 and found the transport bus to the local elementary school for the 9:30 start, I realized that the terrain was very much like the rolling hills of Hunterdon County, which had me a bit concerned give that the first and last 1.5 miles were on the road.

My concern was confirmed at the start when the first 1.5 miles were mostly downhill (meaning the last 1.5 miles would be mostly uphill back to the school). The trail started before the 2 mile mark and hit the 2 mile mark at 14:47 (wow, gravity works!). I backed off a little to set myself at 8 min pace. The trail surface reminded me more of the trail down in Frenchtown than Columbia. The trail was relatively flat up until mile 6 and then it rose from mile 6 to the turnaround around at 13.5 miles. I was able to hold 8 min pace all the way up to the half marathon mark, hitting that at 1:44:30. However, with the grade rising after 6 miles, I felt like I was working hard to hold 8 min pace. I was able to hold pace until about mile 17 and then started to slow a bit. I hit 20 miles in 2:43 so I was clearly slowing and my legs were starting to feel sore. Some people had warned me that, even though the softer surface might not feel as hard as the road, you have to work harder to run at anything other than easy pace on the trail. I was finding that to be true as at 18 miles, I started to feel like I was hitting a wall, a new experience for me since I usually am done in by cramping, not by the bear jumping on my back. The cramping came a little later, between miles 20 and 21 miles, when the adductors in both legs started to cramp up (at least my calves were holding up as I decided to where the compression socks I had bought last year but had never raced in). From there, the wheels came off with a combination of cramping and carbo depletion. I had to run/walk the rest of the way just to survive. Interestingly, I did find that when I finally got to the road at 24.5 miles, the running did not feel as hard, again confirming that running a race on the trail is harder than I realized. But anytime I had to run a little down hill along the rolling hills, my legs cramped badly, almost making me think that this might be my first DNF. I did get back to the school with a combination of running/walking/limping and massaging. I was determined to stay under 4 hours at this point having never been over 4 in my previous 10 marathons. I limped across the line in 3:59 and change (official time not yet available).

I'm not sure now what I need to do to fix the last 6 miles of the marathon since I was hopeful that running on a trail might do the trick. I'm thinking I might go back to a very flat course road course next year, maybe Jersey Shore in the spring or Bay State in the fall (still my PR at 3:27). Today, I'm still sore but I'm getting around very well and the stairs have not been bad (I'll never forget my first marathon on 1996, the Marine Corps, where I could not walk up and down the stairs for 3 days afterwards). I'm going to look at this marathon as an excellent training run to vault me into some good training and racing in 2009.

Even though my performance was not what I had hoped, I would say for anyone looking for a small, low key marathon late in the fall season, I would definitely recommend this race.

One final thought. For every marathon, there is a scene during the run that always sticks in my mind, so here is it for this year. There was a family out on the trail cheering on the marathoners with two young boys in tow. One of the boys, about 5 years old, was holding a sign - "Beer at 26.3 miles" You have to love that kind of inspiration from a 5 year old!

Good running!

Mike