

A Rocky Raccoon 2012 reflection.

It has taken me a few days to gain some clarity and perspective about this year's rocky raccoon 100, and I have been remiss in tarrying to thank the many who helped me—esp the DamNation crew that NTTR put together. Seeing you out there assures that the material aid we need will be rendered in a competent, fun way. But moreover, it gives each of us a huge boost because you have an authentic servant's heart. You are not just giving us aid, you are aiding us from a true place of care and concern—and that blend of experience and joy is simply priceless. Many thanks are due to you all: esp to Lynn for heading up the effort. I believe that Jacob Evans is utterly correct when he suggests that working the aid station is harder than running the race! Also thanks to your kids, spouses, jobs, pets—all of those many souls who bless your going down to help a bunch of strangers meet a dream. Indeed we are the beneficiary of so many....

As for my race, I suppose there are two windows through which you might look at it, First the objective one. Objectively my race worked great. I have a time goal I have been working on for about 5 years, and I just made it for the first time. Hooray! My nutrition was spot on, no issues. The only real problem was that I had to tie my shoes tighter the normal to keep the damn mud from sucking them off. Resulting bruises on the top of my feet hurt, but really that is all. No blisters, no stomach issues, just one fall and not too bad, that one. What worked very well for me was that I had a whopping two pacers. I'd have been lucky to have Buddy or Brian either one, but to have BOTH gave me a huge advantage as they both were smart, creative, communicating well with Juliana, and effective at keeping me moving well. Looking back, I am surprised Brian could run at all—given the truly colossal ass-whipping that is his recent HURT 100 success. And Buddy too had been facing some nagging pains and such. In the end I am thrilled they had both the ability and the willingness to run work very hard on my behalf. They really did the work: I never saw a number greater than 60 as I used just my chrono, took a gel on the half hour and an s cap on the hour. An occasional bottle/bolus of bigger calories, and that was it. They dialed in the paces and just told me to follow them, which was so key to my success. Thanks, guys. I also owe special thanks to Joe P. who has been counseling me for years. I credit him with much of the change in my thinking as he encouraged me to think more about being comfortable and relaxing a bit. I also thank Joe for posting splits, without which I'd have not a clue as to my numbers. Thanks to Brian for catching these numbers:

loop 1 - 3:14 (9:42 pace)

loop 2 - 3:35 (10:45 pace)

loop 3 - 3:41 (11:03 pace)

loop 4 - 4:07 (12:21 pace)

loop 5 - 4:49 (14:27 pace)

overall pace: 11:40 for 100 miles

3:14:32	6:49:07	10:30:02	14:37:43	19:26:29	Matt Crownover
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The subjective piece is a little less neat, but I know that's where something big went right. I have always said that the "non-running" pieces matter more the longer the race is. I am certain that my getting the time goal I was after had more to do with this aspect. The running and training stays the same for me most seasons, there were no big changes this year. I ran pretty much the same way I did this time last year. What changed is still coming into focus, or being revealed, or whatever, but I think it has something to do with letting go, with trust, and with tolerating, even celebrating paradox.

I've always been drawn to that essentially different way that ultras exist/ behave apart from more orthodox running events. The latter seems to emphasize "management" of all the details: don't screw up, don't eat the wrong thing, and don't "blow" your race. When we start an ultra however, we are stepping into a space where we know we will become vulnerable--for we simply cannot control all of what happens if we set out to cover 100 miles on foot. And isn't life just like that? There are days when this job, this parenting, this relationship—whatever, just does not seem to be working the way I want it to. So what do we do? Freak out? Get mad? Indeed I have tried both, and have taken some bruises on my marriage and friendships and even my body from that.

The wiser path might be to trust. Of course trust cannot be simply a trust in my plan, that would still be my ego controlling it all, so what am I trusting in? Not sure, exactly. But I recall in seminary I had a professor who used to talk about the difference in optimism and hope. Optimism is based on the evidence, he said. Hope is in spite of it. We are not called to be optimistic, but hopeful. Hope has plenty of room for suffering; it just does not render it definitive. So yes there very well might be a shitstorm and yes it might really suck—but that does not have to be the end of the story. Hope is all the stuff that remains, that lies beyond the plans and the goals and even the success or the failure.

So I was wondering how to get this in my running. I've seen my cancer patients do it when they identify the parts of themselves that cancer cannot touch. I've seen my wife have 4 children naturally, and had her talk to me about "letting go and trusting, and about the ultimate difference between "pain" and "suffering" being more about what it all means, and what redemption could look like....but how to get it together for the run?

I'd like to say that I knew. But all I know is that it worked at this year's 'coon. When the skies opened up at 5am, Brian and Buddy and I sat there for a long time in silence. Finally it was broken by our bursting out laughing. Maybe this was an auspicious start, as taking myself too seriously has rarely been a good path. I voiced my concern that I did not

really have a well-defined plan B. I've been talking about sub 20 for years, and mud could very well be the real threat this year. What would I organize around for a new goal? PR? Sub 24? Did I have it in me to focus on "just" a finish for another 'coon? I was not sure, and told them I'd try to figure it out by mile 40 or so.....And that is where the paradox thing comes in.

I had been thinking about this Ansel Adam's quote, he is reported to have said with respect to catching good photos that: "*chance favors the prepared mind.*" So I knew I had to stay open, calm, grateful, etc but I also knew that I had to create the conditions for something fast to happen. I was thinking about this other saying, something like: *no one catches the wild ass by running after him, yet only those who run after the wild ass ever catch him.* As a pastor/chaplain/teacher, I'm struck often by how uncomfortable we Modern people are with paradox, even though so much of my own spiritual tradition loves it—or at least used to (Jesus is both a man and deity; Mary is both a virgin and Mother; our lives are unique and precious; and we are a speck in the universe; a loving God is with us, and some really terrible shit happens.) Anyway, so that was how I was running: I had to: be open to failure, pain, etc., let go and trust/hope, but I also had to do some work to set the stage for what might happen later. It was kind of a paradox.

So really that is kind of it. I tried to stay present, running harder than I normally do, but not worrying too much about the things I normally do that are future oriented. What if I get too tired?—what if I blow up and let down my pacers?--and all of that. I tried to stay present and just run where I was.

One funny episode: Loop 3 was my loop to run by myself, with music, which I hardly ever do. I have an ipod that Juliana and friends made me for 2008 western states, and it remains only for 100s. At the Dogwood aid station, starting loop 3, I somehow managed to get crotch lube all over my ear buds, so I was suddenly burdened with trying to get totally into my music just as I struggled with what appeared to be a superb lube job on my auditory canal, thereby causing my ears to birth the ear buds every few seconds. So I was trying to get in this zone, and hold my hands to my ears to hold the ear buds in my ear canal which was inconveniently slicker than owl shit. I must have looked like quite a spectacle. So anyway, I was listening to some song that made me really grateful and also a little humble as I thought about all the dumb ways I let my wife down, take her for granted, etc. I got to thinking about some of my patients that were dying, how they'd love to be out here with my big fancy problems, how I wish I could be a better dad, husband, whatever...and anyway I got tears in my eyes and now added blindness to my new-found palsy born of hyper-lubed ears. I did not realize that I was almost at Nature center when I succumbed to my newly-acquired handicaps and fell flat down on the trail. Of course the sand adhered immediately to my auditory canals, which were covered in the superfluous lube. So I get up to realize that I am essentially IN the aid station, which of course I'd missed due to my sudden onset PMS and whatever transcendent state it took me to. So anyway, here I come, rolling into the aid station covered in dirt—I'd clearly fallen—and crying and bitching about sand in my ears. They thought I'd gone crazy. Everybody was really nice to me, and

figured that I was crying because I'd fallen, but it was funny to know that actually it was the other way around: I'd fallen down because I was blinded by my sudden tears, themselves made more distracting by whatever upper body routine I was employing to keep my hands over my damn ears. Very funny moment. Juliana asked aloud if anybody had any Pamprin or Midol at the aid station, and that made me laugh. She also told me I was an okay husband and father after all, and that maybe I needed an extra gel to get my blood sugar up, and could we maybe talk about our marriage goals after the race? It was funny, classic ultra moment for me.

Finally, one thing I loved was that the lectionary text for the next week spoke perfectly to the race. It was psalm 30, which is among the finest pieces of poetry ever in my opinion. This tension between "going down to the pit" and "turning wailing into dancing" or "being in the realm of the dead and weeping in the night giving way to joy in the morning...well running 100 miles kind of puts you smack dab in the middle of all of that!

In the end I am recovering well, and continue to marvel at the wonder of it all. Funny, but I still cannot get my head around running 100 miles. But really it's the other people that humble me. When you are a kid, your friendships and your hobbies and all of that just kind of happen. You are in school, you are on this team, whatever. My wife encourages me by saying: "what does friendship look like now that you are a grown up?" She said this by way of insisting that I help Drew at the Slam, or Jeff at Leadville..... I am so grateful that I have friends and family that are willing to say back to me: "hey, let's go help Crownover make a dream come true." How often to you get to be a part of that? The Greek word from which we get "eucharist" means thank you. And in all cases it is something that is shared together with others. Thank you, I'm so glad I got to run that day.

Psalm 30

I will exalt you, LORD,
for you lifted me out of the depths
and did not let my enemies gloat over me.
LORD my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me.
You, LORD, brought me up from the realm of the dead;
you spared me from going down to the pit.

Sing the praises of the LORD, you his faithful people;
praise his holy name.
For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favor lasts a lifetime;
weeping may stay for the night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning.

When I felt secure, I said,
"I will never be shaken."

LORD, when you favored me,
you made my royal mountain stand firm;
but when you hid your face,
I was dismayed.

To you, LORD, I called;
to the Lord I cried for mercy:
“What is gained if I am silenced,
if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it proclaim your faithfulness?
Hear, LORD, and be merciful to me;
LORD, be my help.”

You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.
LORD my God, I will praise you forever.