

Bighorn Mountain Wild & Scenic Trail Run
June 19th, 2004

As I stretch my achy legs out under the airplane seat in front of me, I begin to realize that I might just have another 50 miler in these legs after all. Was it only two days ago that I thought I was through with anything more than a 50K...a FLAT 50K? I had saved the most recent edition of UltraRunner magazine for the return flight and you know, that Great Eastern 100K looks pretty good for early September...or maybe the Durango Duo or Where's Waldo 100K out West next year.

I had been curious about a mountain ultra for some time, maybe ever since I crossed the finish line after struggling through the Palo Duro 50 Miler last October. But there was way too much to do, like really prepare for and run MY race at Sunmart! Check, did it, finished in just under 10 hours and rushed home to register for the Bighorn Mountain Wild & Scenic Trail 50 Miler, run in the Bighorn Mountains near Sheridan, Wyoming.

I got all my long back to back runs in and even did what I thought would pass for hill workouts. Everything was looking good for my first mountain ultra until I actually looked at the mountains out the window of the rental car driving up from Denver.



Figure 1 First View of Bighorn Mtns near Buffalo, WY

No problem, the 50 mile course is mostly downhill, right? Now what downhill training had I done? Here I go again, all the second guessing about my preparation for a race. Surely, I was ready and those doubts were just pre-race jitters...surely.

We arrive in Sheridan after the drive up from Cheyenne, where we stayed on Monday night the week of the race. After a bit of sightseeing at Fort Phil Kearny and the monuments for the Wagon Box Fight and the Fetterman Fight, we cruise into Sheridan and have buffalo steak dinner at the Rib & Chop House inside the Historic Sheridan Inn (once partially owned by Buffalo Bill Cody!) and



Figure 2 Our Bighorn Mountain Home (for the week)



Figure 3 Sunset Views From Front Porch of Cabin

finally settle into our home for the rest of the week in Ranchester, just outside of Sheridan.

We entertained ourselves on Wednesday, by driving around “scouting” for big game, namely white tailed deer, elk, moose, pheasant, turkey and other critters. Apparently we had a close encounter with a large black bear, as we discovered one very fresh print at our picnic spot.



Figure 4 ...b b b b bear! Very Fresh!

On Thursday, I met up with Celeste W. for a short run/scouting expedition that took us to the 34 mile point on the race course and we experienced about 5 miles of what was in store for us on Saturday.



Figure 5 THIS IS MOOSE COUNTRY!... 'nuff said

We ran backwards on the course from the Head of Dry Fork Creek toward Cow Camp. The run was mostly downhill until we turned around, of course and began to realize what we were in for. Man these hills are big!

I went back to clean up and join my wife for another great dinner at the Rib & Chop House andcan it be Thursday night already???

On Friday, we do some more sightseeing and I experience more general nervousness about the race to come. I try to be cool about it, but my dear wife senses my tension and works very hard to put me at ease. She patiently goes through my drop bags with me to make sure I've thought of everything and we make a couple

of extra stops for forgotten, but not critical supplies.

We make the spaghetti dinner at the high school and I impatiently listen to the pre-race instructions and gobble down two plates of pasta before I realize it's actually pretty good, oh well, too late to do anything about that...off to the cabin for a restless night.

I land on the floor before the second tone of the alarm at 3:00 am, SHARP (note those cat-like reflexes)! In spite of having everything ready to go, I make a few last minute adjustments and take off for the bus to the starting line 52 miles west of my resting place. I jump on the third (and most comfortable looking) bus that pulls into the parking lot and find Celeste's cheery smile to greet me. We chat nervously all the way up to the Porcupine Ranger Station where we disembark and



Figure 6 Celeste & Lynn On Busride to Start

scramble for positions in the bathroom line (hey, it was a 1½+ hour ride!).



Figure 7 From Left - Celeste, Larry, Ed and Lynn at Porcupine Ranger Station, 50 mile start

Shortly, we spot “Ed-Bill & the Canadians” (sung to the tune of Josey and The Pussycats), as we called them, and begin to get to know each other a bit more than our history of chatting on the Runner’s World Forum had allowed previously. I tried not to notice the 100 miler sitting on the bench with a puddle of partially digested mush on the ground in front of her. If I didn’t acknowledge the pain and discomfort, they surely would not bother me.

After a few introductions to what seems like the entire population of Lethbridge, Alberta, we’re told GO! Celeste, Ed, Sarah, Cherrie, Larry and I join a host of other 50 mile hopefuls (why do they call it a 50 mile race when you’re required to run 52 miles to finish?) in a comfortable jog/walk up the first of the hills offered by the Bighorn Mountains. Up and over 9,000 feet and some of us are feeling the effects of the altitude, but none severely that I can tell. The time passes quickly and the Canadians are very helpful in explaining to Celeste and I that the white patches we mush through are actually made up of snow, a crystalline formation of water that occurs in this part of the country in some degree of regularity, particularly in cool weather months.



Figure 8 Celeste showing excellent form through a patch of Bighorn snow

I have chosen to go out conservatively, as we lose a total of 3,600 feet in the first 18 miles and are warned by the race website not to yield to the temptation of pushing the pace early in the race at the risk of losing the use of quads that might just come in handy at mile 40, as we plunge into the third of three canyons offered at no extra cost. The merry band of Texans and Canadians, frolic through the first few miles until one of the Lethbridgers and I feel the call of nature. I play follow the leader as Larry pulls off into a grove of evergreens for a little “relief”. As is my style, I blast in with my head down and quickly feel a sharp stab to the left side of my forehead, as I charge into a pointed limb of a tree that I thought I would water. Thinking the sharp stab was the end of it, I push on toward the trunk only to find the offended limb whipping back in retaliation to thwaaaap me on the back of the head, in whiplash fashion. In the first five miles, I have managed to sustain injuries that result in my bleeding from two different sides of my head (front and back)!

Shortly, I realize why this section of the trail is referred to as Spring Marsh, as water is running down the mountain and across our path, but not in a stream or any other organized fashion, but rather in a willy-nilly downhill, forcing us to splash through. In one particularly muddy section that some may think of as a stream crossing, many runners ahead of me are tip-toeing around the edges of the trail so as to minimize the

collateral damage of wet feet. I remember something that Mark Dick told me about the center of the trail being the firmest footing (when water is present), so I decided to accept this sage bit of advice and plunge right through, only to find myself thigh deep in shoe sucking mud. In fact it was sock, shorts and hydration pack-sucking mud that caused me to go down face first, saved only by my Spiderman-like reflexes (upgraded from cat-like) from a full face plant! Celeste was on hand to document the moment with a picture and a good laugh.

Larry, the Canadian also known as “skirun” to some Runner’s World forumites, is pushing the pace a bit more than the rest of the group and pulls away. I am running comfortably with Ed, Cherrie and Sarah and the time passes quickly. We arrive at the second aid station in this area and are welcomed by a troupe of campers that have packed in the supplies to sustain about 150 runners with snacks and liquid. This is truly a remote aid station and the dedication to supporting such an event is commendable. We are quickly in and out and I find myself marveling at the beauty of the Bighorn Mountains. The four of us pass the baton of leader/follower back and forth a few times. It seems that Cherrie is determined to catch Larry and that Sarah is in no particular hurry, taking her time coming out of the aid station. Ed and I exchange some of our running experience and I am enjoying myself immensely. In the back of my mind, I feel that I am having too much fun.



Figure 9 Ed-bill and the Canadians in an early aid station



Figure 10 A grove of Aspen beacons us to linger and worship

We push on for a few more miles and eventually I find myself running alone, as I have left my small group of new friends, pulled to a faster pace, simultaneously abiding by the laws of gravity and entropy. I can’t help but push the pace, all the while dreading the result and hoping for the best. I am now beginning to worry that the downhill running will take a toll I am unable to pay later in the race, but cannot help myself, so I push on, helpless to care enough to do anything about it. I am doped by the eye-candy offered up within the heart of the Bighorns. The stimulation is too much

for my senses and I am completely taken in. I lose track of time and pace and all things that seemed so important just a few hours ago.

As I near the 18 mile point and the bottom of the Little Bighorn River Canyon, I am running comfortably, still loving every step. I push through a few ups and downs, pulled along, seemingly in the current of the Little Bighorn River, which the race course parallels for a few miles. I can’t help but think about getting to the Footbridge aid station, which will end the first big descent and my fears about burning out my quads,

rendering my legs useless for the latter part of the course. About two miles out of the aid station, I catch up with Larry, who is hoping to be the first Lethbridger to finish the race. He seems to be on his way to doing just that. I am just ahead of Melanie, an over 50 female runner from Oregon who was staying in the same B&B as I was. As I approached ½ mile from the aid station, I was unaware of anything but the rocks, river and my quads, but was conversing comfortably with Larry, who seemed to be running quite well. Larry and I pulled through the last few yards to the aid station, where I found my drop bag (with the help of an angel of a volunteer who seemed to know exactly what each runner needed even before the runner knew him/herself. I snacked on mild cheddar cheese and baby carrots from my bag, slammed down an Ensure and began to sort out my clothes. As I peel off my sweat-soaked shirt, I realized that I should have shed the Marmot Precip jacket a few miles back. As I sit there shirtless, I get a chill, not completely sure whether from the cool temperatures in the Little Bighorn River Canyon or from the sight of Melanie stumbling into the station with both legs fairly well covered with blood! As the angel worker attends to her needs, I ask what happened. She shrugged and explained curtly, “I saw a bear”. That was it, I don’t actually remember wondering about the correlation of a bear encounter and bleeding profusely until about 20 miles later in the race, when I realize that if Melanie saw a bear in the last ¾ mile, I must have run right by it without noticing it...man, I was really focused on that downhill!



Figure 11 Little Bighorn River just before Footbridge aid station (mile 18)

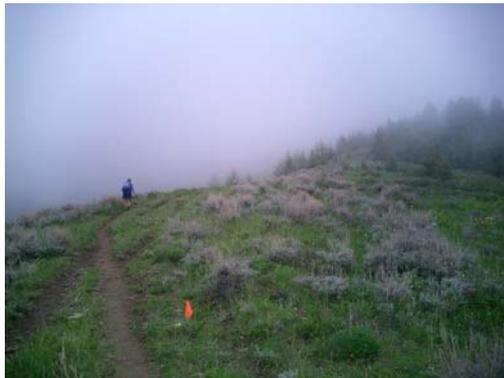


Figure 12 Melanie climbs efficiently out of the Little Bighorn River Canyon

I finish quickly with the aid station and pull out, across the river footbridge and quickly realize the next section of the race is going to be a real test. Even though I knew that we would have 2,500 feet of climb in about three miles, now that I see first hand what a hill looks like. I know my attempts at hill repeats in North Texas were well intentioned, but realize just how much of a shortfall in preparation they were. I am trying to ignore the labored breathing as I chew the “cheese slice in a tortilla roll-up” that I selected from the Footbridge Aid Station buffet. After less than four hours to cover the first 18 miles, I saw a real change of pace that would ultimately result in me burning 1:20 to cover miles 19 through 21. The climb really empties my tank and I drain my handhelds before I reach the Bear Camp aid station at mile 21. I walking way too much, but can’t help myself. I find there is little comfort in stopping to rest, as the grade of the hill is so steep, even standing still is uncomfortable, so I trudge on. I am being passed by a few that are more capable in the hills than I, but I am not unhappy with my progress. I

overtake a 100 mile entrant that is quite erratic in his pace/direction, seeming to weave quite a bit as the hill takes its toll on him. I greet him, but he doesn't acknowledge my presence on the trail, making me think he must drop out at the next aid station. I ask if he is OK, again with no acknowledgement other than an intense focus on the task of step-wobble-breath-repeat.



Figure 14 Cow Camp Aid Station In The Distance (mile 27)

sure I haven't done any real damage other than the usual bruised ego. Soon, I am running comfortably, as the food and the liquids kick in and my disposition is brighter. I begin to overtake some of the runners that passed me during or shortly after the steep climb, and begin now to think about my wife, waiting for me about 10 miles up the trail. I cruise into Cow Camp feeling pretty good, and really get a pick-me-up from a cheerful aid station crew that have hot soup and hot coffee for the taking. WOW! I had already begun to recover from the climb, but this was the boost that I needed to know that I was going to conquer Bighorn. I set out of the aid station with a newly set jaw, Thanks,



Figure 15 Lynn Arriving at Dry Fork Aid Station (mile 34)

I finally hit the top of the major climb (thank God!) and refuel at the Bear Camp Aid Station, another quite remote spot that required volunteers to carry everything in several miles over single track trails...amazing! Out of Bear Camp and into more creation. I am quite spent at this point and am struggling to pick up the pace, as I know I should now that the terrain has grown less severe. When I finally find my pace, I am rewarded with yet another face plant...the kind that really gets your attention. I quickly jump up and do a quick inventory to make



Figure 13 Cheerful Cow Camp Aid Station Team

Cow Camp team. Less than 6 miles to my sweetie and my drop bag, both waiting at the Dry Fork Aid Station at mile 34.

The Dry Fork Aid Station is at the head of Dry Fork Creek, which is visible for two or three miles for the approaching runners. I knew that Ava (wife) would be using her brand new Zeiss binoculars to scope the trail for me, especially knowing that I was about 2 hours later than I told her to begin looking for me! Each time I crested a hill and was in sight of

the aid station, I would wave my arms in the air and blow kisses to her, sure that she would correctly identify my affection and be thrilled to see me, even though I was late. After the long climb back north of 7,000 feet (from a low of 4,500 at Footbridge), I



Figure 16 34 Mile Delirium? Emotions On the Surface!

finally meet Ava about a quarter mile down the trail from the station. As I approach her, I am overcome with emotion and choke back tears as I greet her. I am relieved as it appears she doesn't notice my state of mind and we move quickly into discussion about the race and how I'm feeling. Ava escorts me into the aid station and I re-stock on soup and coffee, changing shirts between sips. As I prepare to depart the comfort of Dry Fork, Shauna of Lethbridge comes in looking strong. We chat briefly and I learn that she hasn't seen Ed and the others since before Cow Camp, more than 5 miles back. I push on, walking up the steep

grade leading out of the station. Again, I am emotional as I think about Ava and her dedication to my crazy hobby! She hadn't seen the kisses and waves before, so I stop and wave my arms and blow her kisses...those in the aid station seemed to put it off to delirium.



Figure 18 One of the many wildflowers offered up by the Bighorns

Just out of the Dry Fork aid station, we climb back into the clouds, with visibility dropping along with the temperature. I can't see more than 100 feet or so. I am now pushing hard, thinking about the "haul" as the race promoters refer to the last substantial climb of the race, just before we are to begin our descent into the Tongue River Canyon. Quickly after leaving

the aid station, I overtake the last of the

runners that passed me during the climb out of footbridge. Shortly, I pass another and turn my thoughts to the perils of the downhill I know is waiting. I pass the time drinking in more of the beauty offered by the Bighorns, although with its abundance, seems to be flowing from a fire hydrant! I was happy to be running alone, save

for my thoughts. The scenery continued to pull me along, as if the center of gravity was near the finish line instead of beneath my feet. As I approach the Upper Sheep Creek aid station, I am alerted by the aid station volunteers' cheers for the unseen runner ahead of me. Shortly I arrive and the feeling here isn't so much that of a runner coming into an aid



Figure 17 Looking down on Sheep Creek, just before "The Haul"

station as it is a traveler being welcomed into a warm, comfortable camp filled with very hospitable people. They attended my needs and I was quickly out, again hearing their cheers, this time for me. Uplifted, I continue in my relentless forward motion.

Just after crossing over Sheep Creek on a narrow log footbridge, I am on the threshold of



Figure 19 Tounge River Canyon head, a welcome site with the finish line 12 miles on the distant plain

“The Haul”. I downshift to climbing pace and attack the hill with a fervor that I hadn’t had back at mile 20 for “The Wall”. Although steep, this climb is relatively short (for Wyoming) and I am quickly up and over, with another runner in my sights. Running through a breathtaking high meadow, a scene that might be found on a canvas in some museum, I see it, the head of the Tongue River Canyon with the finish line 3,000 feet below me, some 12 miles distant.

My pace quickens, a combination of the sensation of smelling the barn and the start of the long downhill into the breathtaking canyon. I overtake the runner who was in and out of the Upper Sheep Creek aid station just ahead of me and we exchange greetings. A 100 miler, he asks if I have recently passed other 100 milers, trying to discern his position relative to the rest of the back of the pack. He is struggling with the downhill, fighting a tightening IT band, but moving pretty well, having traveled 88 miles thus far. I bid him farewell and push on. Although a bit painful, I am beginning to get into a groove of downhill running. I alternate from step, step leap, to pointing my toes outward and “waddling” fast. This seems to work different muscle groups and gives my knees quite a welcome break.

Just before joining the Tongue River, I am looking forward to the Lower Sheep Creek Aid station when I become aware of another runner behind me and I step aside to let them pass. “Oh no”, she exclaims. “I don’t want to pass, you’re such a strong downhill runner”, I hear, noting that one of us must be hallucinating. I resume my “strong” downhill trudge and she drops in behind me. We run together for about 1 ½ mile into the Lower Sheep Creek aid station and I learn she is from Colorado Springs, where she is an avid trail runner. Colorado Springs! Pikes Peak! Garden of the Gods! Now, I know I must have misunderstood her compliment of my downhill style! Maybe she said “strong smelling downhill runner”!



Figure 20 More wildflowers in the Upper Sheep Creek area (approx mile 40)

The conversation is good and we quickly enter the Lower Sheep Creek aid station. It is fortuitous that I select the best tasting Granny Smith apple that has ever been grown anywhere in the world from the table. With apple juice running down both sides of my

chin (a sure sign of level-headedness!), I depart, noting only two more aid stations before the finish. Most of the relentless downhill is done and Colorado Springs and I play tag alongside the powerful and eternal Tongue River. With the river on our right and the



Figure 21 Looking up the Tongue River Canyon (mile 46)

canyon wall on our left, we listen to the rush in stereo, a double treat! It seemed that my tired legs were picking up power from the water and in no time, we were at the trailhead and the next to the last aid station. Purple seedless grapes were the ticket at this friendly stop and we were on a dirt/gravel road for the five miles to the finish.

The new energy transferred from the river to my legs wasn't wasted, as I picked up the pace quite a bit and began to overtake runner after runner on this relatively flat (and boring) part of the course. I can remember thinking before the race that this would be a

tough section, as the scenery wasn't as good and it was on a gravel road instead of the trail. What I found, however, is that the change of terrain was quite welcome and the smell of the barn filled my nostrils. After passing about 8 runners (both 50 milers and 100 milers), I realize that someone is behind me again. It's Shauna from Lethbridge! She chugged right by me as I remembered Ed saying something about Shauna being the best road-runner in the "Ed-Bill and the Canadians" group.

Watermelon from the last aid station and I'm back on the road for the final 2 ½ miles to the finish. I am losing steam now, the newness of the road wearing quite thin, and I see Ava, who once again has come out to meet me on the course. We walk/jog in to the park and she runs ahead to take pictures as I cross the line, welcomed by some incredible volunteers, race organizers and tired runners that finished ahead of me. I cross the line in a few seconds over 13:09 and find myself overwhelmed this time with a sense of accomplishment, not emotion. My mind is full of the experience, the challenge, the preparation, the new friendships, the physical exhaustion and the peace that comes with completing such an endeavor.



Figure 22 This felt really good! FINISH! (52 miles)

I hobble over to the river and soak my weary legs in the 60 degree water...ahhhh! Better than an ice bath! After soaking for a few minutes and cleaning the mud off my legs, I

hobble to the table to get the sports massage offered by the technicians there. Wow! I have never had a massage at the end of a race, but that felt really good!

Ed has finished now and we wait for Celeste, who was battling the cutoff at the Head of Dry Fork aid station. Shortly, she makes it in well ahead of cutoff and we all give her a hero's welcome. I think we are done and Ava and I begin to make our way to the car when I notice some excitement near the entrance of the park. Cut-off for all races is just minutes away and it seems there is someone from the 100 miler rounding the turn into the park. I cannot believe my eyes, but it is the 100 miler that I passed at mile 20 on the climb from Footbridge. He is not alone, but it seems has caught up with his wife (another 100 mile entrant) and they are finishing together, hand in hand. What a great way to end a great day!

Sunday morning comes early and we are off to the awards banquet. It is more like a family reunion, particularly with the Canadians, Celeste and I. The runners are rowdy and cheer heartily as names are called for awards. We sit in the warmth of the Wyoming sun, resting our aching muscles and tendons. I cannot explain the comfort of sitting with a bunch of folks that I hardly know that have just completed a very challenging 50 or 100 mile race, but there is no place I would rather be.



Figure 23 Bighorn Mountain Wild & Scenic 50 Mile Finisher!