

RUNNER'S RACE REPORT
Angeles Crest 100 Mile Endurance Run
Angeles National Forest
Sept. 13-14, 2008

“Got a light?” was my headliner phrase as I captured my 3rd career 100 mile buckle at AC100 Mile Endurance Run. Injuries and dehydration top the list of dropping out in an ultramarathon. But, for a flashlight?

The grueling footrace started at the City of Wrightwood 5 a.m. Saturday. Runners must reach the finish line at Loma Alta Park, Altadena on Sunday before 2 p.m. 139 extreme adventure athletes started. Only 98 succeeded their goal. This race ranks very high among the most difficult races in the country because of the steep and rugged mountain terrain.

My strategy was to run my own race, start slow, pick up the pace midway and make sure to have something left at the final 25 mile stretch. It's easy to say. The question is how to execute this plan. This year, my training has been hampered by cold virus and lower back spasm. I hiked and ran Mt. Wilson once or twice a week. Wildlife became a common sighting. I've seen mountain lion, bear, snakes, deers and hunters at close range. I didn't have to watch Animal Planet on television.

The back breaking climbs of the first 27 miles at Inspiration Point, Mt. Baden-Powell and Mt. Williamson took its toll on my back. I checked my pace chart and noticed slower time than previous year. No panic, I can make it up once we hit downhill. The result wasn't positive as I had trouble keeping my balance. Deb Clem who volunteered at Eagle's Roost Aid Station (Mile 29.98) massaged my back. She's a nurse, physical therapist, ultra runner and more.

The pounding at the 2 mile paved section leading to Cloudburst (AS M37.54) made it difficult on my back again. Thus, I switched to power walk. This kept me within cutoff time but not enough cushion for the crucial stage at the end. I passed runners with this new plan. “So be it, I'll know when I get to Chantry Flats”, I said to myself.

At Mt. Hillyer (AS M49.08), I picked up my flashlights and extra shirt. I planned my equipment change during daylight. Last year, I panicked when I couldn't locate my drop bag at Chilao Flats (M52.80) at dusk.

Around 8 pm at Chilao, I was greeted by 9 time AC100 finisher, George Velasco. He already dropped out from the race. I told him my ordeal.

George advised me to walk as long as I was within cutoff. Another runner, Yen Darcy echoed the same thing. I was in and out quickly.

The next segment leading to Shortcut Saddle (M59.80) produced the highlight of this race. I dropped my handheld flashlight while fixing my backpack. When I turned it on, it wouldn't light. I continued walking while adjusting the knob. I stopped and reloaded the battery. Still, it wouldn't work. I tried it again over and over with futile result. My headlamp was fading too. I couldn't read the trails. I stumbled, hit ground hard at grade changes and almost overrun a switchback. I developed blisters on both heels. Thus, I contemplated to drop out.

Upon reaching Shortcut Saddle, I told aid station chief, Bill Ramsey that I may have to drop out. "There's no reason for you to drop out because of a flashlight. You're still an hour ahead of cutoff", Bill said. Manny Garcia who dropped out earlier and waiting for Dina Aman, let me use his flashlight. Yen also replaced my headlamp battery. Now that I have the tools, no one is stopping me to finish.

I tried to run the downhill portion going to Newcomb Pass but the blisters bothered me. I walked again. I could have gained more time but didn't feel bad. I'll use the saved energy on the upcoming climb. Additional energy was boosted when I saw two runners with their pacers at the aid station. I was much in better shape. They blew by me when I was in trouble.

Two monitors were set up at Newcomb Pass (M67.95). I was told that Foothill Flyer and Hasher, Tom O'Hara wanted to talk to me. He was on the next aid station, Chantry Flats (M74.55). He checked if I have stomach issues like last year. Not this time, Tom. Fellow Hashers also cheered me. OnOn... #78 checking out.

It was 4 am at Chantry Flats when I weighed for the last medical check. About four other runners were being attended carefully. Our young crew members, Anibal and Janet tended to my needs. I asked for solid foods (potato, bite of PBJ sandwich), noodle soup, coke, salt pills, water plus my beef jerky. I stuck to what my stomach can digest. I also met my pacer, Thom Cassidy. Anibal advised me to take a good rest at this station. It was a crucial moment but I said I'm not staying long. Tom O'Hara checked the times of the runners ahead of me. He said that, I'd get to the next station Idlehour (M83.75) with enough cushion. OnOn...

Last year's climb to Mt. Wilson was an epic climb. My pacer kept me in high spirit all the time. Thom reminded me to keep sipping water and take short

steps. He became my coach, cheerleader, and good friend. Thom and I never met before. Dina hooked us up a week before the race. The camaraderie among ultra runners was very strong. Everybody helped each other by all means. Slowly and calmly, I reached the toll road without stopping. Whoa! "Let's try to stretch it out running the downhill to Idlehour", I told Thom. I gained more time on my splits. One more climb to Sam Merrill (M89.25) and I'll be home. It was another long climb but thrilled to get there.

I reached Sam Merrill at 10 am and a little bit warm. Hikers were also on the trail. All of a sudden, I noticed my work buddy, Eugene. He was surprised when I told him that I was in this race. "And, you're working tomorrow?" he said. Thereafter, I took off.

The downhill section at the rocky Echo Mountain didn't agree with my blisters. On normal condition, this rugged trail was fun to run. On race day, it was a spoiler. I thought about having it treated earlier but afraid I can't put my shoes back. Just deal with it.

I reached the last aid station, Millard Camp (M95.83) at 12:00 pm. Thom reminded me that we were close to cutoff. Mountain bikers slowed us at Sunset Ridge. They cheered but trail can't be used simultaneously. One biker crashed right next to me. I was disappointed not to keep up with Thom. I always love to run El Prieto Trail even in the dark. Nearing the end of the trail, I noticed Matt Dickie, Tom Wilson and Dave Campbell. I asked. "Are you done and on the way back?" Matt signaled Dave's condition. He assured that Dave will finish.

Goosebumps started once I hit JPL Trail. It's about a mile left. I walked the last uphill leading to the pavement and ran again. Thom was still in a cheer leading mode, high spirited pacer as well as my friends Andy and Carmela. I was very proud to hook up with him. I told Thom, he deserved to cross the finish line with me.

Once again, AC100 taught me a lesson. Things may not work out as you planned. If you're patient enough and never give up, you will succeed.

Cheers,
Ben Gaetos
Ultramarathon runner