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Grandfather Mtn Marathon - 2010

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Using generally accepted accounting procedures (GAAP) for unified marathon counting, I completed my 16th marathon Saturday in Boone, NC. GAAP for marathons includes ultra-marathons completed, but discounts any DNF even if the miles completed exceed 26.2. Therefore, my 2009 Boogie 30 was a DNF, while the Boogie 50 which I completed 4 weeks ago counts!

According to MarathonGuide.com, The 43rd running of the Grandfather Mountain Marathon started at 6:30 a.m. Saturday at the Appalachian State University on the track at the Kidd Brewer Stadium in Boone and ended on the track at MacRae Meadows. One of the "country's toughest" footraces took place as part of the Grandfather Mountain Highland Games. The 26.2-mile race has more than 3,000 feet of cumulative climbing, including a nearly all uphill second half. (See attached gmm profile.)

Lovely wife May accompanied me on the two hour drive, and our first visit to Boone. We met Ricky and Sharon Scott from Virginia and rendezvoused for dinner at Joe's Italian Kitchen. Ron Horton had introduced me to Ricky and we have run in a few events in the past 2-3 years, most recently the Boogie 50. Saturday morning at the hotel, I ran into Chuck Van Duzee from Florida, who I had run 13 miles with the previous Sunday, mostly in a drenching rain on Anna Maria Island. (I've probably run with Chuck over 50 times on early Sunday mornings the past 5 years, plus a few events, where he usually beats me. But last Sunday was the first time this year. At 73, Chuck keeps going and going, having recently completed 50 states, and well over 200 marathons.) We took a warm-up walk together, but that was the only time I saw him. May spotted Chuck and the FL gang (Christi, Kari and Bill) starting near the rear of the pack at Kidd Brewer Stadium.

The race itself is a bit of a blur in my mind. The uphill were incessant, while the two or three downhill were welcome respites. After having completed a 12 hour run just 4 weeks ago, I felt recovered and ready. My nasty heels had healed, and on this day I would only develop a couple toe blisters which would not impact me. Some prognosticators have suggested adding 30-45 minutes to your "in-shape, normal" marathon time to project your finish at Grandfather Mountain. With that guide, I decided I would be pleased to finish "on the track" which has a noon cut-off. I also hoped to break 5 hours, since I had not exceeded that time unless I was limping (just once, and by a lot over 5). I also had not been under 4:48 in my previous five marathons, after setting an over-50 PR of 4:14 in Virginia Beach back in 2008. My 4:10 in Myrtle Beach in 2006 may stand forever if I don't make a concerted effort to lower it soon.

I ran nearly two miles with Ricky, but his sub-9 pace would carry him ahead of me until about mile 18. At mile 5 or 6, I made the acquaintance of veteran Grandfather Marathoners – two with 13 and 18

finishes – and with “no excuse” for being out there, since they knew what to expect. Later, I met a fellow running his 3rd GMM, and we talked off and on for at least 10 miles. Sometimes, we leapfrogged, but we covered many miles together at a similar pace, which is somewhat difficult on a changing terrain. He (Charles) had a heart monitor which would start beeping when he hit 155 bpm. He said this was a warning because he knew his lactic-acid threshold was such that 165 bpm would tear him down quickly. So he always began walking whenever he beeped. Once, he started beeping while walking, such was the incline. Charles seemed to know scores of runners and would encourage them, saying “hey, you look better than last year – good going” or he would ask where they were from if he didn’t already remember, and introduce me to anyone from Charlotte. He recommended a book for me to read, and we discussed financial regulations related to the economic crisis (really). Charles is a financial planner, and well-read at that. But he caved in our argument, yielding pretty much on the basis of my CPA. (And, I was right about “mark to market.”)

We caught Ricky and I leapfrogged with him between 18 and 22. I’m not sure where Charles lost me, but he finished a few minutes ahead. I was a few minutes ahead of Ricky at the end, which was surprising, because he had caught and passed me for good at the Boogie, finishing more than 20 minutes ahead. But Ricky did complain of some stomach issues and there’s not much you can do about that when you’re 4 hours into one of these.

The temperatures were pretty good, a fairly constant 70 degrees, as best I could tell. After a misty start, we settled for overcast skies and shaded mountain terrain almost entirely. There were cars to deal with, and winding roads which would reveal an oncoming vehicle with little warning. Most vehicles were carefully making the curves, and sometimes a car would come to a complete stop to allow another to pass without pushing us too far onto the non-existent shoulders, i.e., weeds.

There was very little “crowd support” as this course did not pass through neighborhoods. A few cars were parked at overlooks, and after awhile I realized that it was the same few cars, making multiple stops to meet or support their family members and friends. The water and Gatorade stops were well stocked and I never ran out of fluid. Of course, I carried my own bottle for over 25 miles and refilled it at almost every stop. I was about one Gu short, after finishing my last one (5th) at mile 18. My waist pack was sufficiently bulky, what with my phone (for texting!) and the Gu. Not sure why some folks think it odd that I text. I think Oprah’s pledge is limited to drivers. I like to keep May apprised of my progress, so as usual, I tell her when I reach increments of 5 miles. Then I added 22.5 and others, whenever it looked like I had some “bars.” The reception was spotty, so I wasn’t sure my messages were getting through. Apparently, they were. And May gave encouraging replies.

I had completed the first half in under 2:14. There was no official half-way point, although I did catch most of the mile markers. My GPS did not always have satellite reception, but I wasn’t terribly concerned with accuracy between miles. I had a very easy pace/recovery plan. When I was tired, I would walk. I would try to walk only 20-30 seconds and then I would run. Sometimes that resulted in 30/30 segments. I remember a few miles where I managed to maintain a 40/20 split. Jog 40 seconds, walk 20. While I have never (NEVER!) enjoyed hills, I was happily surprised that I could resume a reasonable pace uphill after taking a brief break, even if it was a fairly steep incline. But I also found that I could “keep up” with runners while doing my modified fast walk. So I decided there really wasn’t much point to giving full exertion on the steepest of climbs. I usually have a 15-20 minute drop-off in the second half of a flat marathon, and the fact that GMM’s second half is tougher than the first led me to expect at least that much.

At about 22 miles, I remember telling Ricky that I had a chance of breaking 4:48, faster than any of my 2009 marathons, which I had completed with nagging hamstringing and/or calf issues, and never fully

trained. Those were Sarasota, Cleveland and NYC. I thought that would be a good achievement on this course, although I would have felt plenty of satisfaction just to break 5 hours.

The final ½ mile went on and on. There were a couple of brief, but steep inclines required to make it onto MacRae Meadows' track. And then the track seemed to be more than the standard quarter mile. I actually stopped to walk three times on the track. Each time, I looked back to see if anyone was gaining. I didn't want to be passed at the end. The track was surrounded by clans of my Scottish kin. (Well, I'm some blend of Scotch-Irish-English.) And on the field, there were groups of dancers and bagpipe players – some being individually judged. The clans were close enough to the track to greet you individually. There had been a cheer as I made it onto the track, and nearing the end always brings a big smile to my face. I think those cheering like to see a reaction like that. As I rounded the 7th or 8th bend (by my count), I finally spotted the finish line, with May standing right there to greet me. It felt really good to finish in 4:47 and change (ok, 4:47:56).