

Miwok 2012

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times... No, scratch that. It is a good opening line for someone, but it is all wrong for describing my run at Miwok this year. This race, more simply, was the worst of times.

OK, to be totally honest, it was the worst of times only if you throw out my 100-milers which always seem to have a "worst of times" feel at some point. Miwok 2012 is special though because I have never run a race where I felt awful from the very first step. Things really unraveled fast from there and this is how it went:

It is race morning and I have more than an inkling that my timing is imperfect for this particular race – wrong time of the month and all that – but I am still thrown by how spectacularly off my game I feel. I am as puffed up as a *gavage* goose, but I try to put a positive spin on things thinking that retaining this much water might actually be a good thing for a 62 mile jaunt on what is forecast to be a very hot day. Perhaps in theory this will work to my advantage, but starting the day feeling like the Titanic with several compartments already flooded, is not exactly making me feel like über-athlete. (The Titanic reference is sadly prophetic however).

The race begins and we climb the huge hill out of Stinson Beach, I struggle but choose to assume that I will feel good once we crest the top and hit Coastal Trail. It doesn't work that way though. Once I am up and finally have room to run on one of the prettiest trails in California on the most gorgeous day of the year at one of the best races in the entire country, I find that I can barely lift my feet. I wonder if I ever could run. I follow this train of thought straight to the bottom and figure I must have a terminal disease and this is just the first time I have noticed.

I struggle along and think about dropping at the first aid station since it is obviously not my day. I should have found an easy stride at some pace by now, but I most certainly have not. Heading out to the Randall aid station turn-around, I see the leaders on their way back, making it all look so terribly easy. My friend Jim Vernon produced a short video of the leaders that you can see at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKDJ2sM8XG0&feature=youtu.be>. I believe it's fair to say that I looked substantially less gazelle-like than the runners documented therein.

I run on to Randall turn-around and still want to drop, but the Rocket is there so that isn't happening. I hang my head and begin working my way back to the Stinson Beach aid station, the perfect place to quit since the house we are sharing with Tia is just a block from there. I convince myself that the only thing to do *is* quit since not only is my body not contributing in any positive way to this effort, it is fighting me every step of the way. Sixty-two very hard miles is too far to far to go on will alone.



John took this photo of me on Coastal Trail at mile 20, with the ocean nearly 2000 feet below.

Of course John is also at Stinson so there is no talk of quitting. It is only mile 26 and I am supposed to be using this race as practice for my 100-mile race at Western States next month and trying times are the best sort of practice for that. Perhaps it is lucky that today's times are so trying then. I try to wrap my head around this concept and I leave Stinson with a sense of resignation as deep as the shining Pacific below me.

As I climb up the Moors, I consider all of the huge hurdles still ahead of me on this day: my current climb out of Stinson, the climb out of Muir Beach aid station, the climb up Marincello out of Tennessee Valley, the climb up out of Rodeo Beach and over Wolf Ridge, Coastal Trail climb out of Tennessee Valley on the way back, the Pirates Cove climb, and finally the Deer Park to Cardiac climb. I have studied this year's course changes with ruthless efficiency and that is coming back to haunt me now. While it probably wouldn't exactly bring me bliss, a little ignorance right now would do me good.

I keep trying to run, but it is straight-up ugly. As the afternoon wears on I pass the time by calculating my pace, factoring in my inability to move faster than a crawl, and at some point realize that I did not pack a jacket or a flashlight in my drop bag at Tennessee Valley (mile 50 on the return trip). This sounds like a rookie mistake, but truthfully it is more like hubris crossed with stubbornness. I mean who can't finish a 100K before it gets cold and dark and these items are needed? I am about to find out.

The day unfolds and the time slides by like a slow-motion train wreck. I run with several wonderful people that are happy with their pace, time and place. I find myself wishing I could shed some of my ailments and be happy too. I need to be more Zen-like and rise above my suffering and enjoy what has clearly turned out to be the prettiest race day ever in the Marin Headlands. I am not that evolved however and, no matter how many little mind games I play with myself, I cannot shake the vice-like focus I have on my stomach, my blisters, my waddle-like running and my deepening dehydration. I am spending a fair amount of my time now fantasizing about oases in the desert. I have chosen to carry only a single water bottle and my sluggish pace, combined with the much longer stretches between aid this year, make this my worst mistake of the day. All of the interstitial water I am doomed to carry on this day does me no good in the hydration department either. It is just along for the ride. How cruel and ironic is that?

The climb out of Rodeo Beach and over Wolf Ridge at mile 46 is arguably the hardest climb of the day. Surprisingly however, it does not kill me and soon after I find myself back in Tennessee Valley getting a quick pep talk from Stan. I exit the TV aid station and head up to Pirate's Cove. It is all I can do to keep my feet under me on all the little stairs that head down into the dip, but I manage to do it without breaking my neck and for this I am grateful. As I make my into the Muir Beach aid station at mile 54.5 my brain is like a beaten and tortured sieve. Even though there was some mention by Tia earlier about a box of "loaner" flashlights at Muir Beach I most certainly do not think anything about this as I guzzle a gallon or two of water before the trek back to Stinson Beach. It is now late in the day and I have 7.7 long miles and one huge climb standing between me and the finish line. It seems unreal to me that I have made it this far but my grip on the whole endeavor is hanging by a loose thread now. I am on autopilot though and just head out like one of those zombies from *Night Of The Living Dead*. George Romero's cast has nothing on me. I am shuffling like I was born to the part and as the sun begins to set, the title, well, it fits.



Doing my best to run up the hill at mile 54 – notice the ominous length of the shadows. (photo by Glenn Tachiyama)

I make it up the final climb but the *Perils Of Pauline* are not over yet. The sun is gone and I find myself on the downside of the Dipsea trail with no flashlight. It is absolutely pitch in the switchbacks of the forest and even though I can hardly run anyway, I still find it in my heart to curse a blue streak now that I am forced to walk by outside circumstances. I see a couple of runners up ahead and realize that I have to reach them and use their light if I am ever going to make it down the precarious stairs into Steep Ravine. I cannot even see my feet, but I run well for perhaps the first time all day as fear is a super-fine motivator. When I reach the two runners I see that it is Leslie and her pacer Tom. Tom cannot believe that I do not have a flashlight and he offers me his headlamp. He says that he & Leslie can get by with one light between them. I can barely believe that this kind of selfless generosity even exists in the world and I hope I appear grateful as I snatch the headlamp from his outstretched hands and clutch it to me like the life preserver it is. I feel like an animal, but I am an animal with focus and I can almost smell the finish line from here. We make our way down the stairs through Steep Ravine together and then up the last steep pitch of Insult. Leslie pauses to vomit but I keep on. The headlamp is weak so I move cautiously down thru the Moors. I am slow, but I am running. Everything hurts so much now I distract myself by counting my steps. I can feel my right big toe nail dancing around somewhere in my shoe in a zip code that is far from where it began the day. I count one to one hundred. I do it again, and again and again. By 700 or so, I hear the voices down on the road. I am dizzy with the thought that I am actually going to finish this race. It seemed so utterly unlikely earlier in the day.

I cross Panoramic and hit the last short stretch of trail that parallels the road before crossing Highway 1, a single block from the finish. It is pitch dark, but I can hear one of the volunteers say, "John, I see Lisa". I

see John in the street and I feel very close to tears. He takes my hand; I am freezing and his hand feels hot and I feel a relief so pure I can taste it.

I cross the finish line in 15:56. It is the most time I have ever spent on my feet outside of an actual 100-mile race and I feel every step of it across and through every inch of my body. My head feels like it is twisted on backwards from the outlandish amount of effort that went into getting this done today, but inevitably, what I feel is a deep and incredible pleasure as I listen to the black ocean breaking just a few feet from where I now stand in the spot that I have been dreaming about all day.