

Lester's 100 miles of Mystery, Misery, Mayhem and Magic

The kindness of friends makes great adventures imaginable and possible. Last fall, Lester Farmer agreed to join me for the SC 46 County Challenge which involved traveling all weekend in his truck, stopping in all 46 counties in SC and running at least one mile. It was the most fun I think I have ever had during a running event. After that it was his turn to come up with a new adventure and he revised his idea for one of the toughest and most beautiful 100 milers, a route from Jones Gap State Park to Oconee State Park with rugged technical trails and over 25,000 feet of climbing. It had been attempted about 8 years prior, but not completed and he wanted to try it again. I had not seen the first 35 miles of this route, so we spent several Saturdays exploring these trails sometimes with snow and ice on the ground in places. Some of these 'trails' are definitely not runnable and a challenge to even hike, involving pulling yourself up onto rocks and using roots as ropes. We never got to the last 10 miles of that section due to heavy cold rain on our final outing, but I figured with Lester along, there was nothing to fear.

We were so lucky to have Eddie Posey, Charles and Psyche Raffensperger, and our spouses agree to come out at various places to form the crew dream team. Things never go quite as planned and our spouses never did get to join us. The days leading up to the event were like most of the rest of this winter, cold heavy rain. However, the day arrived with only light rain at the start and predicted rain after midnight on Sunday. After spending the night at a friend's lake house, we were shuttled to the start by Jim 'Taz' Simpson, shuttle driver for the Foothills Conservancy. He dropped us off at the gate of Jones Gap State park and we started off at 7 am Saturday. A 2.4 mile warm up on the road led to the first trail, Falls Creek Falls, and the first climb of many. SC is not known for high mountains, but it has its share of steep technical rocky root covered trails and this was the first of many for us. On one of our training runs we crossed dangerously slick ice-covered rocks in the middle of the waterfall on the way up that first trail, but on this day, they were just wet. In fact, there were pretty much constant wet puddle filled muddy trails that led to soaking wet feet almost continuously for the first day. We went down the other side on the Hospital Rock Trail, past the Hospital Rock and into Jones Gap park. 9 plus miles were done. We stopped for a quick snack at a picnic table and then headed out on the Pinnacle Pass Trail. This trail also climbs a lot and has a lot of false summits where you think you have made it but have not. It also has some big sections of rocks to climb and one section with a chain to pull yourself up. There were lots of low-lying clouds on this day, so when we got to the top, we were in sunshine and it would warm up. However, when we descended, we were in a cool damp fog. Many of the downhills on this adventure are rocky, root covered and steep. Lester is much more nimble (or danger seeking?) than I am on downhills. Despite his 68 years, he looks more like a deer and I look like an old lady going down a steep hill. Happily, we popped out at Oil Camp Creek unharmed at about mile 16. We stopped and had another snack. I think this was the point that Lester first really expressed thoughts that he was not having a good day and was struggling. I picked up on this earlier, but though it was just taking him a while to get into a rhythm. I tried to think this was a low spot and he would feel differently later on, but could feel his confidence slipping and sadness started creeping into me. Lester is my favorite trail running friend. We often run together for several hours quietly, together but each enjoying the woods in our own way. I wanted this to be an adventure where we shared every step and wanted to see him finish his amazing course he had dreamed up. When he started to doubt he could do it, I started to doubt that I could either.

As you leave this area, the course took us along a forest road that winds up and up for about 2 miles. Lester had made a comment on having trouble keeping his heart rate down and that he was working harder than he wanted, so I felt we needed a distraction and forced him to play the favorites game. By the end of this game we had shared interesting trivia with each other such as our favorite trips, hymns, vegetables and female singers to name a few. Unfortunately,

after several miles we hit the Naturaland Trust Trail and had to climb to Cathedral Rock and all the talking ceased as we tackled the steep technical all hands and feet climb. This section was very slippery, muddy and nerve wracking, but we made it to Cathedral Rock and then to the bridge over Raven Cliffs Falls and down the other side without incident. We hit the Gum Gap Trail and rolled into Watson Preserve and saw our first friendly face, Eddie Posey. Eddie greeted us with the biggest smile and the warmest welcome imaginable as well as a great aid station with hamburgers, watermelon and ice cold sprite. He even ran back and filtered water for us as we warmed up in his vehicle. While he was gone filtering the water, Lester and I talked. Lester did not feel any better and did not see how he could finish this. After a brief discussion, he decided to ride out from there with Eddie to Sassafras and I would go out on the next 10 mile section alone and meet him at Sassafras Mountain. I was filled with sadness as this whole course was Lesters design and if anyone was to finish it, it should be him. At the same time, I could tell he had made his mind up and this wasn't just a bad patch in a long race. I felt good and knew I could continue at that point, but part of me did not want to without him. After pondering it a bit, I remembered him telling me how much he really wanted one of us to finish it, so I decided if he couldn't, I would.

On leaving Watson Preserve, I was going out on the only section I had never seen. Eddie told me there were few blazes and to be prepared to go a long way in between them and to watch for short sections of trail on and off the road. I only missed one blaze to get off the road and went about 3/4 a mile out of the way before I got to the final trail section. There you leave the forest road and enter the woods on a little used trail that could be an animal trail. It was not well maintained and there were plenty of blowdowns to step over. It was dark and I was having to negotiate by headlamp. After going around a blowdown, there were times I had trouble telling if I was still on the trail. There were no blazes to help much of the time, so I would back track over and over to the last blaze and then move forward again until I finally found another blaze. At one point the trail seems to switchback 180 degrees on itself and I was headed back the way I had come. I was sure I must be on the same trail I had come in on and that I was headed backwards and stuck in some never-ending circle. Alone in the dark, the woods were more and more spooky and I was not sure I would ever get out. It was then that I decided that I was in the middle of the Blair Witch Project and this was all a trap. I was sure I would never escape the woods near Sassafras Mountain. Finally, I saw some stairs and was sure I had not seen them prior to that. After about 10 more minutes of terror, I heard a yell and saw car lights and made it to the Sassafras parking area. Charles, Psyche and Lester were all there and made me some delicious ramen noodles. After stocking up, it was time to head out. There is a 4 mile downhill section from there to the Laurel Valley parking area and I know it well. However, after my time in the Blair Witch woods, I was overjoyed when Psyche agreed to accompany me on this part. Those were 4 of the most enjoyable miles of the whole trail as we talked our way to Laurel Valley.

The next section is 34 miles with no crew access or help, so you need to be self-sufficient. I have done it several times alone, but was excited and also comforted when Charles agrees to come along the whole way! We made sure to have lots of food, a bivy sack, extra headlamps and a water filter and started up the stairs from the parking lot and into Laurel Valley. I later learned that Charles and Psyche had their first kiss there. It must have been midnight when we started that section. My biggest problem in any ultra is always severe relentless nausea that seems to come on me and never leave once it is there. I have gone 50 miles on a few sips of water and nothing to eat due to this in the past and usually end up lying down on a pile of dead leaves along the trail in misery. I was so far managing to avoid this, but was starting to feel the first twinges. We listed to the Virginia Hawkins Falls roars by in the dark and criss crossed over all the bridges in this section until we got to Laurel Fork Falls. Somewhere around there I started to really feel sick. Usually once I am sick, I am sick until I stop, and spend the rest of the journey feeling miserable and wishing I would just die. This time worked hard to deal and manage it without giving into it. The things I did helped some, but the biggest help was having

Charles along. I can never tell him how much his presence meant to me that night. We talked at times and played a few games, but just having him there kept me from falling into a pit of despair. Also, having him lead, so I could just follow him without having to look for blazes was a great help. I did listen to an iPod I had on which I had no idea what music would come up. I managed a few dance moves as I moved behind Charles which I don't think he realized. About 4 am, we took a short break and I dozed in the bivy sack on some wet leaves for about 15 minutes. Other than that brief stop, we keep moving all night. Once the sun rose, I started to feel better and nibbled on some crackers. I made Charles play a game that involved coming up with musical artist and songs that start with every letter of the alphabet, but he could barely think of a single song. He needs to work on that for next time. I guess sleep deprivation was setting in. This 34 mile long run was the longest one he had done in a while and he started to struggle as I started to feel stronger. The long climbs up and down to the rivers were taking their toll so I gave him a Pay Day bar for energy and we hiked on. About 13 miles out from Whitewater Falls, we stopped and Charles said he needed to get some food from his pack. To my amazement he pulled out a Taco Bell burrito that he had been carrying for the last 10 hours or more! The great thing was that it looked good to me and I was sad that there was no Taco Bell nearby at that point. When we were about 5 miles out from the Whitewater Falls, Charles told me that he was fine and to go on. I was feeling good, except my feet had become badly blistered from being soaked for over 30 hours, so I picked up the pace and moved ahead. About 2-3 miles from Whitewater Falls, I saw the best sight imaginable, Lester running down the trail to me. After a big hug, I went on to the parking area where his truck was sitting and he ran back to find Charles. At the truck, I changed shoes and socks and tried to bandage up my feet, but they were in bad shape with large blisters on both heels and the entire balls of both feet destroyed. Every step from then on was painful. The worst was when I would step on a root, of which there are approximately 1,987,601 between there and Oconee. My stomach was now good though and to me that was the biggest victory. I drank an Ensure and headed out.

There had been a controlled burn on the section out of Whitewater Falls heading to Sloan Bridge and as Psyche said, it looked apocalyptic. I was moving slowly due to my feet. Every time I stepped on a root the wrong way, I would shudder, so I could not run. Shortly before Sloan Bridge, Lester ran out to meet me and we discussed food. It was decided that he would go to Walhalla and get me a MdD hamburger and fries and meet me back at Burrells Ford, about 9 miles away. I was wishing they had a Taco Bell there, but you take what you can get. It was dark and I pulled out my headlamp again and found the miles were taking me 25-30 minutes and I felt like I was moving along so slowly. It was here that I was hitting a sleep deprivation and calorie deficit wall. I found myself struggling to keep my eyes open, stumbling on every rock and root there was and fighting to keep moving forward. Every mile felt like about 5 miles and seemed to take an hour. I kept imagining I was seeing headlamps and buildings. Finally I did see a headlamp and as always, there was my rescue squad and hero, my strengthener and constant positive influence, Lester. After a couple miles we arrived at his truck where I ate a hamburger and some fries. I dozed for about 10 minutes and then got up to start the section along the Chattooga River. I like this section in the day. I do not like it in the dark, in the middle of the night, when it has been so wet and everything is a slippery mess, and when I am barely able to keep my eyes open. There are lots of non runnable climbing up and down rocks, roots, etc and I was just trying to not fall in the river and drown all alone in the night never to be seen again. I was moving like an arthritic granny. Stepping up and down on the roots was killing my feet. I refused to look at my watch for the time or to see how far I had gone as I knew it would be too depressing and just concentrated on moving forward step by step. After an eternity, I turned from the river for the last time. Suddenly, here it came again, the heavenly headlamp of Lester. He told me his truck was nearby. Unfortunately his idea of nearby was not mine. By this point I was again stumbling and struggling to keep my eyes open. I wanted to ask him to hold my trekking poles so that I could physically hold my eyelids open with my hands, but did not. I kept thinking I saw a building or his truck only to look again and see a tree branch. The pine cones on the ground keep looking like they were the ringed

tales of some animal. When we finally did make it to his truck, I ate the last cold hamburger (best hamburger I have ever tasted) and grabbed a coke and drank half of it, hoping it would be enough, and set off on the last section from Cheohee to Oconee.

I started out making good time. I got to Jumping Branch Road without incident and knew I only had a little over 4 miles to go. I noted the trail getting narrower and then noted I seemed to be on a narrow trail with a steep drop off. I do not like heights and was still struggling to keep my eyes open and stumbling a bit. I remembered a short section like this, but it seemed longer, higher and narrower. I shined my headlamp up and it looked to be 50-100yards to where it went around a turn. I was afraid and just looked down at the trail and not to the right where the abyss seemed to lie. I told myself to just keep putting one foot in front of the other and get to that turn. I did and then there was more narrow ledge and drops offs, but eventually it seemed to level out and I came to a small bridge and crossed. Then I came to more narrow ledges , then more level ground, then another bridge. I started to really look for blazes and was confused. I went forward and found myself back at what I was sure was the first bridge. I was sure I had gone in a circle and no longer sure which way I had come from and which way I was going. I felt confused and disoriented. I was afraid to back track as I did not want to face what I thought were cliffs again in the dark. It was 5:14am and I decided I would have to just sit down at what was clearly a blaze and wait until either Lester came and found me or daylight came and I could figure my way out. Daylight was over an hour away. Then it started to rain. First it was a light rain, then a torrential downpour. This lasted about 45 minutes. I was cold, shivering, and hungry. There was nothing to do but pray for direction and a clear mind. I was afraid to go either way because I did not know which way the 'cliffs of terror' were and sure I would fall to my death. I yelled multiple time for Lester, but he was too far away and the rain was too hard for him to hear. Around 6:30, it started to get light and I decided to walk in one direction looking for blazes and trying to avoid cliffs. Suddenly I heard the most beautiful noise. It was Lester calling my name. We yelled back and forth a bit until we found each other and then I hugged him to death. I was a mess, but being the gentleman that he is, he didn't say a word about what the heck I had been doing lost 3 miles from the end and just led me to Oconee. We hiked through big puddles and mud until we made it to the sign the marked the trailhead for the FHT. I had made it. Over 48 hours, 102 plus miles, 25000feet of climbing and about the same descending, I had finished the course alive and pretty much unharmed.

What an amazing trip that was. It was the type of journey that runs through all the emotions possible. I am so blessed to have been able to get to do this and to have had the help I did to get through and to come out of it in good shape. It is such a joy to spend 2 days in the woods traveling with friends and alone and just soaking it all in like that. I enjoyed this more and found this more satisfying than any race. This is what ultra running is all about.