

Fort Clinch 100 – March 30-31 2013 – When Every Minute Counts – Jodi Weiss

“The important thing, is moving.” - Killian Jornet

Pre race

I signed up for Fort Clinch 100 around New Year's Eve, when Caleb, the race director, shared the details in Florida Ultra Runners – it had all the ingredients that appeal to me: trail, beach, road and a fishing pier in a small town setting on Amelia Island/Fernandina Beach, FL. We had to run 10 loops of 10 miles each and had 30 hours to do it. I like monotony in a 100 miler; that way, when the brain shuts down, the body just has to keep doing the same thing. I thought – a fun weekend getaway, a great place to take my dad, a new race for me.

My training was strong going into it – I had completed some ultras in January and February, had no injuries, which is always a wonder, and was in high spirits. Everything was a go, until Wednesday of that week, when illness took over: fever, vomiting, aches and pains. I decided it would pass and kept working, packed up my supplies, and on Thursday, my dad and I made the 6-hour drive out to Amelia Island. The fever persisted Thursday night through Friday, when I struggled to get out of bed after almost 10 hours of sleep. I am one of those people who pride myself on never being sick, but clearly, this was not the case this time around. As the fever proved to be stubborn and steady, all I could do was hope and pray.

Amelia Island

Amelia Island, a quaint little town situated off the coast in Nassau County, Florida, south of Cumberland Island, Georgia, is a mixture of Newport, Rhode Island and East Hampton to me, full of unique gift shops, restaurants, friendly giant pelicans, a waterfront – both the Atlantic and the Intercoastal, and a down to earth, fun-time vibe. Walking around town on Friday, prior to packet pick up, I felt happy and carefree amongst all the spring breakers. At packet pick up, I got to pester a patient Caleb with my typical 20 pre-race questions: would I get lost, trail or road shoes?, how big were the hills, and so on.

The course

In the early morning darkness, the air cool and crisp, roughly 30 runners started out on the road, and quickly entered the leave-strewn trail, where the climbs and falls were gentle at first. Those first few minutes as our eyes acclimated, the darkness lifting, the trail was a runner's paradise with looming oak trees and Spanish moss; as we moved into the trail, we experienced the continuous motion of climbs and falls, working various leg muscles, and glute-induced uphill. Early on, we had a brief road encounter, then reentered the trail, and it was nice to remain hidden and tucked away for a bit longer, before we came out on the road for a quick stretch, down to the unmanned aid station, where we crossed the street, and entered more trail of the same ilk, this time with daylight coming into full view. There were ups and downs that kept us moving and quick on our feet, and endless roots and leaves and knobby tree remains kept us focused. This section seemed to go on and on – up hill, downhill, soft sand patches, roots and leaves and knobs that knew no end, until we stumbled out of the entangled forest

upon Aid station 2, where the Florida Ultra Runners (FUR), decked in purple tie-dyed magical unicorn shirts, offered good cheer and a rotating array of foods and drinks. From there, we entered the .75 mile Alligator Loop trail, and no, I never did see any alligators, although the green muck water and “alligator’s crossing” signs convinced me they were under the surface, lying in wait to eat some runners, before we arrived back to AS2, to the welcoming smiles of the beloved FURbies.

A few yards ahead, and we entered more trail, the terrain full of climbs and falls, until we crossed a street to more trail. This section of the course was quick moving to me, and before we knew it, we came out to a parking lot, which we ran through to get to a path that led to the beach adjacent to the Fort. We jogged on the beach, our feet dipping and sinking in the white sand and took in the expansive ocean and infinite sky—blue and clear—back to a new parking lot, before we rounded a bend and we entered another trail. This trail seemed to go on and on, so that just when you thought it was over, there was more climbing and more descending and more roots and more climbs. Later in the race, this trail would lurk in my mind telling me that it would never end, that it would always twist and turn and keep me from making progress. How could this still be 10 miles was what went through my mind? Until finally, there was an exit to that section of the trail, and we crossed the road, and then went back towards the start/finish area, but instead of running to the start/finish line, we had to keep to the left, and made a trip out to the longest pier in the world (literally), running on and on and on and on, out onto the Atlantic Ocean, saying hi to fishermen and couples and families visiting the pier, darting around solitary fishing poles dangling into the ocean that cut into our path, as we dashed down that far-reaching never ending pier, inhaling the cleanest and clearest ocean aroma, taking in scenic Atlantic Ocean views, and then made your way back, across the longest pier, into the parking lot and down the center aisle of orange cones to the start finish line. One loop!

The best way I can describe this course is to say that at Fort Clinch100, a ten mile loop can actually feel like 25 miles or more. It’s worth mentioning though that the first loop, second, even the third was a runner’s joy – I loved the course! However, this course was transformative, but not in the likely way; it transformed from a thing of joy and beauty, to something to be feared and dreaded after about 60 miles, when the ups and downs, the little I’m- going-to-catch-you-roots and knobs became the enemy.

Strange happenings

We encountered an ominous dead rabbit on the road during the first 100 yards or so of the race – an ode to the Easter Bunny? A foreshadowing of what was to become of us runners—flattened road decay? We all made our way around the poor dead bunny, but its image stayed with me early on, which may have accounted for my mind wandering and the two body-slam falls I took early on in the first loop. Reality check # 1: there were roots on the course, which meant I had to pick up my feet and keep my eyes on the trail, versus taking in all the trees and lush landscape. Late in the race, and likely 100+ heart-attack, almost fall, catch-myself mid-air stumbles or so later, during my 8th loop, Claire, my pacer extraordinaire, actually had to warn me, “Eyes on the ground, focus.”

The first loop, when I arrived at the FUR AS, there was a commotion around the fact that I was letting off steam, or better put, steam was pouring off of me (fever? a sign of my extraterrestrial self?) and the

photographer made me pose for a bit to capture this other-worldly phenomenon. Around the second lap in, perhaps the third, there was the head slam; I was mid conversation with my running buddy Chris, rambling on about something that must have had earth-shattering importance, when suddenly, out of nowhere, a five-foot tall tree stub appeared around the Alligator Loop and darted out at me. I heard the bonk –felt the hit, and slid to the ground. “What did you do?” Chris said, already heading back to me, and since I heard him, I knew I was alive. When he realized that I had hit my head—most likely because I was holding it saying, “I hit my head,” he assured me that there was no blood. No, I wasn’t dizzy, no, I wasn’t nauseas, which meant time to pick myself up and move on. But not without Sandy Melton first giving me her ice bandana to place on it to avoid a lump.

Through the course of the day, and then night, the course was full of wild life: there were the deer, the armadillos, the sing song of the birds, who at times were very loud and in the wee hours of the night/morning, there were the mass of deer eyes, who Wayne exposed by shining his flashlight on: dozens of daddy deer, mommy deer, baby deer, so many deer that before we knew it, we had missed the turn in the road up the drive that would lead us to the never-ending pier and start finish line and we ended up making a foreign right turn. We agreed it didn’t look right – no orange flags in sight – and then realizing it was wrong, we made our way down the drive, down the road, and eventually came upon the right road, from the wrong direction, at which intersection we saw Dave James, the ultimate race winner, who said, “Did you two get lost?”

There was the time in the night that Wayne didn’t recognize his wife, Sheryl, at AS 2 and the time around midnight when I tried to be oh-so-quiet coming into AS 2, but within seconds of my being there my dad resurrected from his sleeping-dead and said, “Is that Jodi?”

One of the most rewarding moments of the late-night race for me was when I mentioned the twinkly-eyed magic spider bugs that were all over the course and Wayne told me that he saw them, too! I had discovered these creatures for the first time a few months back at Wild Sebastian 100, although then, my running buddies had all assured me that I was hallucinating over the twinkly-eyed magic bugs, and that they did not exist. Now, I knew otherwise!

While 100 mile races are largely composed of strange happenings, perhaps the strangest for me during this race was the effect that Stinger Waffles had on me; I’m not generally a fan of them, but desperate for something to eat that seemed appealing after 14 or so hours of running, I ate one during the night hours and within moments, I felt that I could lift into flight, climb the highest mountain, or keep going on the trail, which is what I did, with some spring in my step.

Company and comrades

As I always say, for me ultras are all about the people. There’s the people you run with, the people who care for you at the aid stations, your family if you are lucky enough to have them there, and the race director, who keeps it all together. Caleb and his mom were amazing throughout this race!

I started off with my buddy Chris, who I’ve shared what feels like a million miles with, and was with him for the first 12 hours or so. Running with Chris is tradition to me: we keep a steady pace, pick up speed

when we need to, know one another's stories, and so as soon as we are in a groove, it becomes catch up time – relationships, life, family, his daughter. Each race is a continuation – “oh, tell me what happened with that,” and so on.

Around 7 pm or so, when darkness began to set in, Chris moved on ahead, leaving Wayne and I behind. I knew Wayne from FUR, and since we both live in South Florida, get to see him at local events and races. Wayne and I spent the night speed walking through the trails – at points, we both agreed that we were moving incredibly fast, although in reality it must have been a 16-17 minute pace, if not slower. Wayne was calm and steady and full of good cheer, with each of us taking turns at leading the way through the trails and setting the pace. At some points towards daylight, I would hear him humming melodies and couldn't tell if he was amusing himself or trying to keep himself awake.

Claire, who had many jobs at this race, including medical director, joined team Chris-Jodi-Wayne after she paced superstar Dave James for a lap. I had survived and laughed through some long and grueling ultra nights with Claire at Javelina Jundred 100 and most recently at Wild Sebastian 100, so I was grateful for her company and guidance, and of course the chance to catch up with her on crucial gossip. Just knowing Claire was in our midst, texting away on her phone—a rare quality that she alone holds: the ability to run trail and text—kept us steady. Throughout those last few loops, Claire kept Wayne and I moving forward without saying a word, just staying with us, corresponding with the world outside the race about the race, and being optimistic. Claire didn't bark orders at us, which would not have worked well for me in my fragile, will-this-race-ever-be-over mindset; rather, she would begin to jog in the midst of us and without any commentary, and Wayne and I would follow suit and jog alongside her. Teamwork at its best!

Florida Ultra Runners (FUR) were in attendance both on the course and at AS 2; it is truly an amazing phenomenon to be part of a group that is this supportive, this fun, this giving, and this comfortable. They offered support, good cheer, words of wisdom, and everything from fresh cut papaya to brownies to elaborate veggie shish kabobs and gourmet (or at least it sounded that way) sandwiches come the late-night hours. There was the usual cast of characters on the course – Andrei with his sheer determination and amazing skill and reserves; Bruce, who slowed down a bit to pace superstar Krystle Martinez, who was running her first 100 miler! There was Ed Hansen and Jeff Stevens, who I seem to encounter at all of my races, Tammy, who had moved away from FL, and Lana who I had met at Peanut Island 24 over New Years. As for volunteers, none other than organizer extraordinaire Susan Anger led the force, along with the chef supreme and good-vibes girl Zsophia, and new friend Bambi, Elizabeth Stupi, Wendy Cooper and her family and Craig, amongst others. Mike Melton even showed up at some point and took over the scoring from Caleb! It is amazing to me that people take time out of their lives to help others and get them through their struggles. I am continually astounded at the power of a smile, or kind words of encouragement during these races. It really matters and helps to push runners, like me, through.

My favorite person out on the course, though, is my dad; his looking out for me, and being such a good sport to sit around night and day and then day and night as I traverse the miles, is beyond endearing to

me. I always smile when I see him and think how proud my mother would be of his new found ultra-crew career.

And last but not least, there was the great Gene Mede in his little yellow car – he was everywhere! And sometimes he was even running with us on the course! Gene took the term volunteer to the next level throughout the race!

Will we make it shuffle?

All was great and well, until our night time loops started to get longer and longer. I had started the race with Chris in the two- hour loop zone, falling back to 2:15, then 2:30 at our slowest. For the first half of the race, Chris was determined to keep us under three hours per loop. But as it grew dark, and the roots became our enemy, Wayne and my loops became longer. Three hours. Three and a half hours. At first it didn't seem to matter – we were moving forward. Fun and games. All the time in the world. Life was great. Until we started to do the math: x hours left, for x miles. We made a plan: come daylight, we were running – trail, road, beach, pier—we were running.

For me, desperation set in before daybreak, when we hit mile 80 and had two more loops to complete. Surprisingly, nothing hurt, and yet I just couldn't imagine running another 20 miles, which was the equivalent of 50 miles to me on that course. Twenty miles: two more round trips on that pier; endless roots to bypass; all those uphill. It didn't seem possible. Wayne came to my rescue, though, assuring me that I could do it, that I would do it, and he led the way, calm and steady, pushing us forward at every opportunity.

Caleb, our beloved race director, decided to taunt us till the end: at AS 2, with 15 miles to go, he chimed in: "It will be close. You two may just make it." I wanted to wring his neck. Wasn't a race director supposed to tell us we could do it, that we were in great shape? After the first of the last two loops, which we accomplished in 3:05, leaving us roughly 3:15 for the last loop, Caleb said, "You two are really going to have to move in order to make it." It was then that I realized that the only true vengeance on Caleb was to force him to run his own 100 miler and I told him so, as Wayne and I jogged our way back for the last time in our lives on that ridiculous hateful pier, towards the parking lot, Caleb and Gene in tow, as we darted towards the finish line, where we clocked in at 29:44, team Dead Last Finish – finishers 15 and 16 of the race– with roughly 16 minutes to spare!

The ups and downs of a hundred miler

This race was my hardest mental challenge to date. I would like to say that I had some of my normal spiritual awakenings during these hundred miles, conversations with my departed mother, new thoughts and outlooks about my life, about the universe, but I didn't. This race was about push and focus, great conversations along the way, and no real thoughts, other than that I would not be running this course forever. Somewhere, tucked in the back of my mind, was the knowledge that a tomorrow would come and that I would be doing things other than moving through this course.

For me, this race was about sheer determination, the companionship and commitment to the people I was running with and the people who had come out to support me, and focus and drive. I had to find something deep inside of me that quelled the voice that was saying, quit, stop, this race doesn't matter. I had to shut down the you-don't-have-to-struggle-like-this voice and come back with a voice that said, you are stronger than this self doubt, stronger than any random leg or foot pain and mental chatter; you can do this. You have this in you.

And somehow, in those last twenty miles, I found what I was looking for – the desire to keep going, the knowledge that I would make it – that I would finish, that it was all okay. More than once during those hours of doubt, I took in the beauty of the course: the star-speckled sky, peered out into the majestic waters of the Atlantic. The world was so vast, and I was so small as I made my way on my own little journey. But it was my journey, and one that no one else in the world could make for me. As I frequently say, I am not someone who measures my self worth by the miles I run or the races I complete, and yet I like to finish things that I start – not for anyone else in the world but me. If only so that I know that in a world where so many things are unattainable, there are some things which I can attain if only I stay with it.

My fever came back with a vengeance Sunday night and persisted until I went to the doctor on Tuesday and got medication. It was then, with a clearer, if not anti-biotic filled brain, that the true joy, the realization that I had tackled this race set in. And that happiness, that knowledge of something deeper inside of me pushing me forward has left me smiling all week, in a way that only an ultra can. We all have our battles in this world, but somehow, facing ourselves on dark and sometimes well lit trails and roads, we learn so much about ourselves, about our drive and the amazing people we do life with. We learn that we are so much stronger than we ever dare to believe. And that knowledge stays with us long after our memories of the never ending piers of life, fade.