

Tarheel Ultra 2014 - Henry Lupton

You're going to do what? I'm going to run across the state of NC from the Virginia border to the SC border following the coast. 367 miles. Boy, you have lost your mind. An absolute universal response when I told people what I was planning. If everyone's in agreement, who am I to argue. I started planning on this adventure 2 years ago when I first heard about it at the Kinston 48. Sounded like a great idea and yes someone should do it, why not me. But I didn't do it in 2013 because I just didn't think I was ready. I spent most of 2014 trying to prepare for this challenge, and I'm sure it did some good but in the end I just don't know how one goes about training for a 367 mile run. So I decide life is fleeting and now is as good a time as any. Oh and I decide that if I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it solo, uncrewed or screwed as the term goes. I'll be on my own, no help other than what can be found along the way.

On Friday, the day before the event runners who need a ride to the start line all meet in Little River, SC and are transported up to the VA state line. On Friday evening all the runners gather for a debuggers dinner and talk about things we have each done and what we plan to accomplish during the challenge and other chit chat. We are hosted by Brandon & Heather Wilson who keeps everything in check and makes sure the logistics work. As always, this isn't something we can do without them. This isn't an event, it's just a challenge so everyone is on their own. Everybody knows this and accepts this.

Saturday morning we're taken the short distance to the VA state line on the beach (using 4 wheel drive vehicles is the only way, other than on foot). Photos are taken, everyone is prepared and without much ado at 8:00 a.m. the challenge begins. Five of us begin our adventure to make it to the SC border with a time limit of 8 and a half days to get there. We run together at first and soon John Price has dropped behind the rest of us and Paul Houtz and I seem to pair up as do Bo Millwood and Jason LeDoyen. Paul and I are uncrewed, Bo and Jason are crewed so this seems to make sense. After about 11 miles of running on the beach we reach Hwy 12 and continue south. All goes well on the first day, we stop at about the 50 mile mark. Paul and I get hotel rooms and agree to start at 5:30 a.m..

Day 2 starts out ok but by the time we reach Bonner bridge, Paul is starting to fall back a little. This is already farther than he's ever run before so it doesn't take long to start showing. I admire his courage for attempting this challenge, he's doing it as a fund raiser so he's full of determination. I really don't want to leave him but before long he tells me to go ahead not to wait for him so I continue on alone. That's the true nature of this thing, most of the time I'll be by myself. As the day goes on I begin to have some pain in my lower left leg and by the time I get to Avon it's become quite painful. I push ahead to Buxton, decide to call it a day, get a room and sleep.

I get an early start on Monday morning. I have two ferries to catch today. The first isn't too big a deal, it runs regularly and the ride takes about an hour. The problem is the second ferry, the Ocracoke to Cedar Island ferry. This time of year it only runs three times a day 7:30, 1:00, 4:00. That's it. Miss the ferry and it can screw up the entire day. It's a two and half hour ride on the ferry. Even though I still have pain in my lower left leg I'm able to make the 1:00 ferry to Cedar Island. But the leg is getting worse. Much worse.

It's late in the afternoon when I arrive on Cedar Island and I head out as quickly as possible. This is a long stretch of nothing. A wildlife refuge. I'm quickly reminded of this as an alligator jumps in the water as I pass by. It had crossed my mind I could encounter gators in the southern part of the state but I really didn't think I would see one this far north, but there it was. I had picked up an extra chicken sandwich from a restaurant on Ocracoke before getting on the ferry and as it began to get dark I started to think that I should stop and eat before I start attracting attention from other local wildlife. As I head south I encounter a road angel, (a term coined for strangers who are not associated with the challenge that come to the aid of runners.) Kevin Gaskill. Brandon Wilson had put the word out to the local running club that we would be passing through an perhaps they could watch out for us. At first, with it being dark and in a strange area, I was a little leary of Kevin but once he explained who he was, I was immediately pleased. We talked for a few minutes and he asked if there was anything I needed. I said I could use a balm for my leg. He said he didn't have any balms but he did have some Bio-freeze at home. I didn't want him to go through any trouble for it but he insisted it wasn't a problem, he would just go and get it. After about 30 minutes he came back by and as it so happened I was in front of his church, the Lighthouse Community Church. So we go inside the church where several other members had gathered to put up Christmas decorations. Everyone was friendly and inviting and naturally curious about me and

what I was doing. Kevin had brought me a whole bag of goodies, including the Bio-freeze but also some water, soda, sports beans and some food stuff. Wow, that was really cool of him to do that for me. I stay a little while, put some of the Bio-freeze on my leg and say my goodbyes. It was very heartwarming to have Kevin and his church welcome me the way they did and just made me feel right at home. It really lifted my spirits. Thanks to all of you!

I make it a little past Davis and make arrangements to stay at the Otway bed and breakfast. Early the next morning I get going and this is a really tough stretch to get through. Lots of traffic, no good shoulders, marshy areas and a painful left leg. Think about it, every time I have to get off the road, I have to step off with my left leg. By the time I get into Beaufort I'm getting sharp pain moving from my left ankle up the inside of my leg. All I can do at this point is an easy walk. I make it to Front street and decide to rest a little, I get some lunch and begin moving toward Atlantic Beach. I make it to Pine Knolls Shore and the pain has just become intolerable. I call Brandon and tell him I'm done. I've been experiencing pain with every left step for two days now and it's taking a toll mentally and physically. Brandon talks to me a little while about the situation and suggest that I wait til the next morning before deciding. So I agree to wait.

When I wake up early the next morning I tell Brandon I'm going back on the course. He asked about the leg and I told him it felt better but there was no way it was ever going to be 100% after just a few hours rest. I had just come too far just to give up on this. I had to try. At Emerald Isle I run into Susan Scott who took some great photos of me and gave me some snacks. Thanks Susan, you made my morning! I made it 36 miles to the Western Blvd checkpoint in Jacksonville. Just as I made it there my leg went out. It was swollen from the ankle to just below the knee. Sharp pains with every step. I had hope to make it a little further than this today but I couldn't go any further. As luck (I say luck but perhaps fate is the more appropriate word) would have it, just across the road is a motel called the Liberty Inn. I hobble across the road, check in, get some ice, and make it to the room.

The Liberty Inn

I start this next section just like a new story because in many ways it is. I call Brandon, tell him what's going on with my leg. He said he'd stop by. After an hour or so he knocks on the door and after a great struggle I manage to get to the door and let him in. On Tuesday when I wanted to quit I was mad and angry with myself about my situation. Today I'm not angry at all, I'm resigned. I don't know what else I can do. Brandon and I talk. He says he's going to be heading to Wilmington on Thursday as Bo and Jason are moving fast. I tell him he may have to pick me up on the way. Brandon is always good about not making decisions for the runner but this time I can see in his eyes and the look on his face. Yes, he was probably going to be picking me up. I had Brandon bring me some Epsom salt and baking powder. After he leaves I take a salt bath for 40 minutes. Ice the leg again and fall asleep. (I would like to apologize to the Liberty Inn, I left the room a total mess with a wet bed from melted ice and just in general disarray.) It is at this point that I have many questions and few answers. That evening I awoke and most of the swelling is gone, as I get up and start to move around, there isn't any real pain. What? I don't know what's happened. The salt bath, the ice, self hypnosis or something else. I wish I had a scientific answer but I don't. All I know is when I went to sleep my leg was swollen and useless. When I woke up, it was healed (not completely) by my oh my, what a difference. I start out easy and after a little while I encounter Jeremy Smith who runs with me for a few miles. I enjoy his company but soon he heads back. I continue on through the night, through North Topsail, Surf City and Hampstead.

I want to pause here. My thoughts on Southern hospitality and the Hardee's in Surf City. Everywhere I go on this course I'm made to feel welcome and I find that southern hospitality is alive and well, with one exception. The Hardee's in Surf City. I pass through early in the morning and being off season most restaurants are closed so when I come upon the Hardee's I head in for a quick breakfast. Immediately, I feel a room full of contemptuous eyes cast upon me. Apparently this is where all the local contractors and business men meet to determine who is the local Alpha male. They are loud and act like they own the place, and perhaps that's mostly true but they just rub me wrong. I order my biscuit gravy platter and make myself comfortable a couple of tables down from them. I'm not going to say my behavior was any better than theirs but in my mind, they started it. I had been running for about 10 hours at this point and my feet needed a break. I take off my shoes and rest my legs and feet on the chair across the table from me. That should get a reaction. I take my time eating. As a couple of more men enter I hear one say it smells like feet and I heard another tell him about me taking my shoes off. I act

like I don't hear them. No one approached me about it. Hmmm, they're not so stupid after all. Maybe southern tact isn't completely lost on them. No fight to be had here. Just as I thought, not a cock in the house, just a bunch of cackling hens. I put on my shoes and move on.

It's early afternoon as I come into Wilmington on Market Street. This is not a road for pedestrians (at least not yet, you can see where everything is outlined for a sidewalk but for now it sucks) a solid wall of cars makes for slow going. This is one of those sections where you learn that not all miles are created equal. I think I age two years in two hours. Finally, I make it to Military Cutoff Road. At this point, I'm exhausted. I find a hotel, shower, get some food and quickly fall asleep. I had made it almost 60 miles. A very good day!

81 miles to go. I wake up a little after midnight. I'm no longer running on a standard day- night clock, it just hasn't worked out that way. I know I'm about 35 miles from Oak Island which is the last place to find lodging til about 20 miles from the finish line. So it's stop in Oak Island and rest, rest in the open when I get tired, or push through to the end. I just don't see stopping when I'm only 20 miles out. I set out a little after 1:00 a.m. I make the 7:45 ferry at Fort Fisher and head into Southport. I'm feeling really good at this point. I make the check point at Oak Island, I call in and Brandon asked what I'm going to do. I said I was completely wired up so there wouldn't be a point in stopping in Oak Island as I wouldn't be able to sleep anyhow. So the choice is made - a push to the finish. Most people would love to complete an 80 mile run on fresh legs, I'm attempting it after almost 300 miles, on day 6 of the run. But I feel good, given everything that's happened, I'd say I felt great. Will Lemieux, a runner from the previous year had given me some advice at the start of the run. He said a run like this was like eating an elephant, you just can't do it all at once, you just have to keep taking little bites til it's all gone. That's what I'm thinking about at this point. I'm not running 80 miles. I'm running one mile. Then I'm running one mile more. So on and so on, the whole day I never look at the big picture, just where I'm at, the mile I'm on. That's it.

Hwy 17 gets tough as the sun goes down and I'm encountering Friday evening traffic. Once again, all I can do is just take it easy and get through it. After that, things get blurry. My spatial awareness is gone. I can no longer keep track of distance with any certainty. Luckily, Brandon has me checking in at every major crossroads and tells me where to go from there, so I really don't need a lot of awareness. Just stay out of traffic and keep moving forward (Brandon was out keeping a close eye on me and said there were times I was moving sideways more than I was moving forward). Brandon pulls up to me once and says, "Hey, I heard this was a race, why aren't you running?" Smartass. Jason is in the vehicle with him. Brandon told me afterwards that Jason was like, don't mess with him man, just leave him alone. Thanks, Jason, I really appreciate the thought but anyone who knows Brandon knows that's NOT going to happen. Brandon told me I needed to be done before midnight or he was going to buy me a box of tampons. Hahaha, not funny (actually it was). I really didn't think finishing by midnight was plausible with the way I was moving but then just as suddenly as it started it was all over. The SC border. I felt very blessed to have made it. It's 27 seconds after midnight, I tell Brandon what he can do with the tampons. I also feel blessed to see Brandon, Karen Jackson, Bo Millwood, Jason and Suzanne LeDoyen all cheering me on to the finish line. Brandon, Karen, Bo, Jason and Suzanne have all become like brothers and sisters to me over the last couple of years. We see each other at so many events, and on Facebook that they really are like family to me. There is a very unique bond created between us. Yes, we compete with each other but we also help and support each other. I love it when they do well. I'm happy they are here.

I wanted to wait for Paul Houtz to finish. At the beginning of the event I was sure he wouldn't make it past day 2 but he's still in it. Having only completed a couple of 50k runs and no training for this event, I'm truly impressed. He is a Marine. He just won't quit. He has many struggles along the way but is never deterred. After running with him at the beginning of the challenge, I learned to like him quickly. I get the feeling we'll be seeing more from him in the future. I certainly hope so. He does finish Sunday afternoon. His mission complete. I'm happy for him and glad I was wrong.

No, the leg isn't completely healed. As I wait around the hotel on Saturday with Brandon I have trouble walking, there is a little swelling, a little pain. I try to stay off it and keep it elevated. It will heal. By Sunday morning, I'm walking almost normally again. I'm glad I didn't quit. I'm glad I kept pushing. I ended up with a run time of 6 days, 16 hours, 27 seconds. Beating last year's time by over 21 hours. (Sorry John, not really :-)). Records are made to be broken. Last year Karen Jackson, John Dailey and Will Lemieux proved that the challenge was doable. They were and always will be the pioneers of this

challenge, the first. Bo, Jason and I all just raised the bar - significantly. This year 5 runners started, 5 runners finished. Amazing, I've been to 5k events with DNF's. I think next year's challenge will prove very entertaining and very competitive. I can't wait. I was concerned that doing a run like this might cause me to lose my joy of running (and I'm sure there are those that wished it would) but it's been exactly the opposite. The Liberty Inn will stand out in my memory as a moment in time when something inside me changed. One week later, this morning, I went out for an easy run, it felt good. I've been asked what's next. The truth is I don't know. For now I'm just going to keep running and see which way the wind blows next.

What are some things I've learned from this event:

I'm sorry to report the Bio-freeze didn't seem to help at all, but I really, really appreciate the kindness. There isn't much in the way of stores and first-aid supplies on the Northern part of the course. Once I get to Beaufort supplies are more abundant.

I wore compression sleeves on my calves. Everything I read said they would help on a run of this magnitude. I can't be sure but I'm sure they contributed to the tendonitis in my leg. I threw them away after the second day, and I'll never wear them again. What works for one runner won't necessarily work for another.

I knew pain was inevitable, I just didn't know it would start so soon or last so long. I learned I can endure more than I ever knew possible.

I've been asked a lot about running in the dark. I personally don't have a problem with it. But I did use caution. I ran with a very sharp open bladed knife (held in such a way as to be useful if necessary but safely in case I tripped or fell, I didn't want to stab myself). My mindset is simple. I'm the thing in the dark that the wild things are afraid of. I'm not stupid, I understand the food chain, it's just that nothing will smell fear on me, I have none.

Restaurants of note:

Pizzazz Pizza in Currituck has the best pizza I've ever tasted. Just awesome.

South Beach Grille In Nags Head had amazing seafood dinners.

Gaffers Sports Pub in Ocracoke seemed to be the go to place this time of year. Great food, atmosphere.

El Zarape Mexican in Atlantic Beach has them all beat. Authentic Mexican, amazing flavor and taste with serving sizes large enough to feed a family of four. No kidding, I was like, I'm supposed to eat all this by myself?

I used the Tarheel Ultra website to follow course info and turn sheets. One time I lost the page and started an internet search. I typed "tarheel" and it came back with top hit "Tarheel Ultra". And it occurred to me, I live in UNC Tarheel country and suddenly we're outshining them on internet searches. This may only be an amateur event but apparently a lot of people are following this. Wow, even more reason not to just quit. There are a lot of people watching. "Reality internet" and suddenly I'm in the spotlight.

Food for thought for runners reading this and wondering about if they should go crewed or uncrewed. Uncrewed takes the game to a whole new level. How well do you deal with being alone - you will be most of the time. While the course is 367 miles, if you're uncrewed, every time you leave the course adds to the distance you'll travel. According to my Garmin I added 15 +/- miles to the course. Crewed runners may add a little but nothing like uncrewed runners who have to do everything for themselves.

It can be the little things that trip you up. For instance, if you're crewed and you get a blister you have someone who can help with it. If you're uncrewed and you get a blister on the ball of your foot and you can't turn your leg to get to the blister (because you've run 150 miles and your legs just won't work that way anymore) what are you going to do? Good luck finding someone who is going to be willing to touch your nasty feet. As Karen wrote in her report crewing for Bo, she said "you do the running, I'll do

the thinking". If you're uncrewed you have to remain aware at all times and think about what your needs are and how you're going to meet those needs. There are plenty of areas on the course where there is nothing. You have to plan accordingly. Food, water, shelter there won't be many luxuries.

Pack weight. I was meticulous about my pack. I went with the new UD Fastpack 20 and loved it. It was very comfortable and for the most part I didn't even know it was there. This challenge is on the Carolina coast in December. The considerations of what to bring should be thought through carefully. I remember Karen posting a picture of Bo and Jason wearing nice big coats. Uncrewed runners don't have such luxuries. Think carefully about what to bring. Weight x 367 miles. It adds up and takes away from what you might normally be able to do.

I've posted my garmin results. Numbers can tell a story but only part of it. Splits don't mean the same thing on this type of event. It's not a one day all out effort. There are good miles and there are tough miles, each make the journey a memorable life experience.

This is no fool's errand. The course is always here, always will be. Crewed or uncrewed, it's not for the course to respect the runner, the runner must respect the course. Ignore this advice at your own peril.

There isn't much running I've done in the last two years that hasn't involved Brandon and Heather Wilson (founders and operators of RacENC). It has been their goal to bring ultra distance running to North Carolina and it has been their vision that I've built my running skills on. With work, it would be difficult for me to participate in events further away. There is no way for me to ever say "THANK YOU" enough to the Wilson Family. Your visions help me complete my dreams. We are all truly blessed to have you in our lives.

We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.

Marcel Proust