

## Third Time's a Charm! The Miracle in Maryland or Chris and Ted's Excellent Adventure

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I'm not old! I was worried for a while. I just turned 43 and missed my qualifying time for Boston by two and a half minutes at my target race. Sure there were horrible winds and we could all justify it, but I used to run those 7:30's by accident, without even trying. Was that it? Were my days at Boston to be snuffed at 8 tries?

Not today. Today WE kicked butt at the North Central Trail Marathon. Not today. Today I was a stand-up guy.

Ted calls with a brilliant idea. Let's drive to Maryland and run this trail marathon. Of course, I'm in with both feet. Driving 7 hours to run a marathon in the woods might seem like an unlikely thing to do, but it made perfect sense to me.

It was a nippy 27 degrees Friday night and we were stressing over what to wear. We were checking the weather every 10 minutes. It was supposed to be 33 at race time. Fuzzy hat? Sweater? What to wear? Before I left the house I had dug deep into my lucky stuff pile and un-retired one of my old Ronzoni hats. There's magic in those hats. I hoped I would get to wear it.

On the way down we talked strategy.

"Whatever happens, I'm not leaving anything out there."

"Me neither, I'd like to break 3 hours and run negative splits."

"You're nuts. You've only been training for 5 weeks."

"So? This is your 3rd marathon in 6 weeks. Who's nuts?"

"Doesn't matter. I'm not giving up tomorrow. If I have to hop in on one good leg dragging a bloody stump..."

The day dawned crispy and 30ish. We made our way over to the start early to get a good stretch in. This is where being veterans helped. We found a quiet alcove in the school and prepped. Ted procured some trash bags to wear for the start. I went with the Ronzoni hat. I figured frostbite for good karma was a decent trade. It turned out to be a good choice. We were plenty warm once we got racing.

Around 9:30 we were off. Let me stop right here and say this was a great course and a great race. If I could have found the race director I would have kissed him and every member of the Baltimore Running Club, on the lips. Awesome course. The whole thing, except for a couple miles at the start and the finish, is along a rail trail. It runs alongside a beautiful river with waterfalls through mostly oak woods. The surface is crushed rock, but it's well beaten down. It's more like a very firm dirt road. Soft enough for saving the legs, but firm enough to get a good grip and no ruts, potholes or puddles. Just perfect.

The rail grade is imperceptibly uphill going out. It is just enough to keep you from going too fast, but not enough to notice. When you make the turn at the half (there's a cone in the trail), it turns into a wonderful 1% down grade. This works out great. Just when you are hitting the wall and at that delicate point where the race hangs in the balance, it's all easy downhill on a soft trail. Instead of worrying you can just lean back, stretch it out and ride through the difficult bits. In comparison, imagine having a nice soft downhill instead of Heartbreak Hill. You get the picture.

The course starts at an elementary school and is supposed to run 1.8 miles out on some rolling downhill roads to the trail. At the finish it is supposed to take a slightly different 1.5 mile rolling uphill route back to the school. We weren't too worried about this because: a) a little uphill after 25 miles of flat-as-a-pancake would probably be a welcome

change, and b) you can deal with anything if you can smell the finish line. It was a great way to start with that first mile downhill.

On the way out we could hear hunters shooting in the woods. There was a group of bird watchers around 5 miles out. That looks like a fun sport. Let's spend Saturday standing around staring into the woods with a telephoto lens. I asked them if they were having any luck and apologized for scaring off the yellow-bellied sap suckers.

There was a sign that said "5 Miles Left" and I wanted to believe it. I just focused on moving forward.

When I hit the road my right foot started to go numb, I thought, "Keep moving." There were some sharp up hills on the road, it had bad camber and I struggled. Then there was a nice steep downhill and it shook everything loose. The last three little hills weren't too bad, but I was red lining and making funny faces, I crashed across the finish and had to be held up by the volunteers. Once I caught my breath I was looking for a race director to kiss.

What a race! What a day! That's why we do it my friends, for days like today. Today we owned that race! Today we ruled the roads and the trails. Today I'm not finished and I'm not old!

And we kicked some ass! Ted finished 5th with a 2:54. It was his best marathon in a decade. I finished 41st and I qualified with 3 minutes to spare.

Let's review: Drive 7 hours to run in the woods...

Chris -- Ronzoni hat -- Qualified!

Ted -- 2:54 -- 5th place -- negative splits -- hand carved choo-choo train trophy...

That about sums it up...See you in Hopkinton!