

## Fire on the Mountain – 10/27/2013

Only 24 hours after finishing the Fire on the Mountain 50K, I find it hard to remember all of the trail sections, emotions, views, challenges, and soreness that were the world I lived in for five and a half hours. The mind is an amazing thing that filters your emotions and somehow after a grueling race like FOTM leaves you with a runner's high, a sense of accomplishment, and quickly fading memories of the challenges. I guess it is necessary, or I would not sign up for these very rewarding torcher sessions over and over again.

Fire on the Mountain was a great low key event with a friendly race director; good volunteers, well stocked aid stations, and a sponsor that helped keep the whole event at \$40 despite having nice long sleeve shirts, cool finishing medals, fully stocked aid stations, and free lattes and coffee at the finish. If you are looking for marching bands, bouncy houses, fireworks, and a course that does not challenge your footing I recommend that you do any number of the other great races out there. This is a trail race in the truest and I believe the best way. There are many creek crossings (someone said 31). There are trees to climb over (even though the race crew tired their best to cut most of the fallen trees out of the way.) There are hills that destroy your calves on the way up, and punish your quads on the way down. There are sections too technical to run. The views are spectacular, but they are achieved by accomplishing summit after summit of the never ending vertical changes. There are trail sections that have major drop offs, and streams that you can't stay dry while crossing. But this event never pretended to be a flat road marathon where you are going to PR. There are trees and streams and rocks in the woods. This race takes place in the woods... thus expect to find challenges both physically and mentally. This event has the words ULTRA and Mountain right in the title...

I was picked up by Bill and Cliff at my house in Brunswick, MD around 7pm on Saturday night. We had planned to do this event together some time ago and since Bill had a friend with a camp further west we decided to drive out the night before to add a few hours of sleep on the morning of the race. We settled into the camp after an uneventful drive on the highway, but one that became more interesting while trying to find a camp on washed out dirt roads in the dark, driving a Prius. In the end we found the camp with only a few U-turns and with the Prius still in one piece. We ate some last minute snacks, had a final beer and crawled into our sleeping bags for the abbreviated night's sleep.

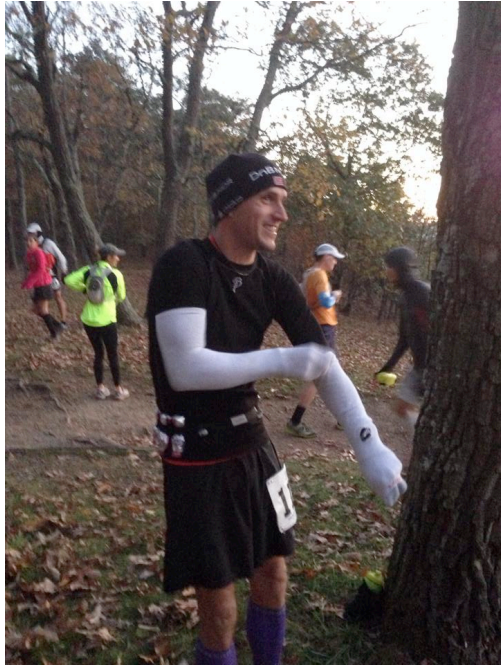


### Good Morning – Starting Line

No matter how often you do these, 4:30 still comes early! The alarms went off after a typical pre-race night of light sleeping. We pulled our race gear on, double checked the camp, and were back into Bill's trusty off roading Prius. We pulled into the race finish area in the dark and checked in. Lucky bib #119 and my shmancy new white race shirt were handed to me. We quickly jumped back into the car to stay warm and kill time until the busses were ready to go. The busses left at 6:30 and if you were ever wondering if a school bus can take a turn on two wheels on a mountain road... the answer is yes.



Three fools, with no idea about how hard this course is!



All Smiles before a day on the Trail!

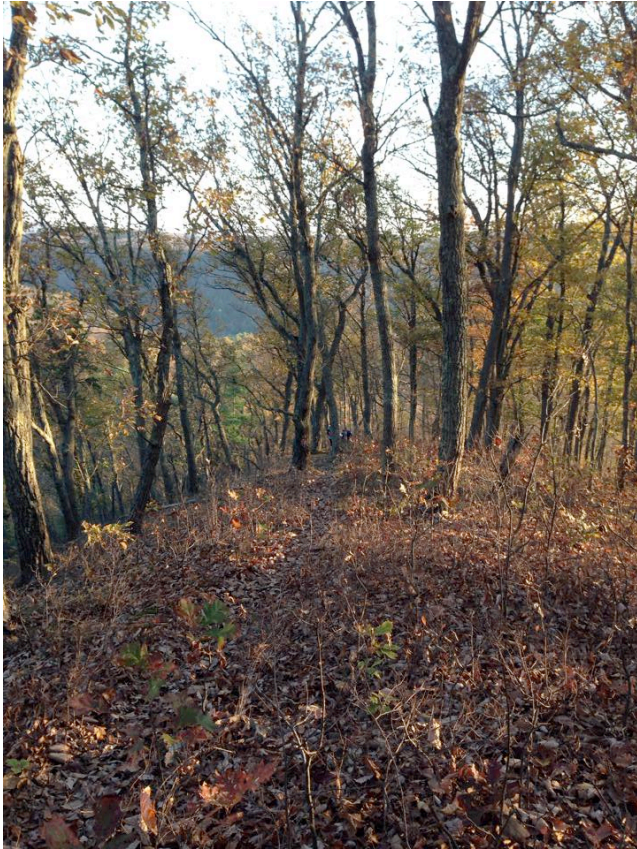
We arrived at the start no-worse-for-the-wear, and exited the busses to a great view over the valleys and mountains of Western Maryland. After a short talk from the director, about 120 folks lined up at the nonexistent starting line (the starting line was “get behind that tree there”.) Cliff, Bill and I didn’t push to the front, knowing that we were not going to be challenging for the win later in the day. We settled in about a third of the way back in the field, gave each other a final pat on the shoulders for good luck, and at the horn we were off. I didn’t see Bill or Cliff again until the finish since we ran at different paces, but I thought of them often on the course hoping their day was going well. This was the first Ultra for both of them I hoped that the experience was a positive one for them.



Cliff and Bill looking fresh and ready for more on the Red Trail

The race field settled into the day on a very short stretch of dirt road, and in no time we were turning into the woods for about 8 miles on the red trail. I had started the race with a short sleeve covered by a thin long sleeve, but had pulled arm warmers on for the start. I tossed the arm warmers to the race director prior to entering the woods since my core temperature was already up. At the entrance to the woods I was sitting somewhere between 20<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>. I could see that an early group of about 5 were off the front and then there was a group between the lead group and me. On the single track there was a pretty good train of us together. I stayed behind a few people on the first few miles of single track on purpose to force myself to stay slow and steady. I had found my Garmin watch to be dead this morning, so I was running based on how my body was feeling. I didn't want to be fooled early only to pay for it 25 miles later.





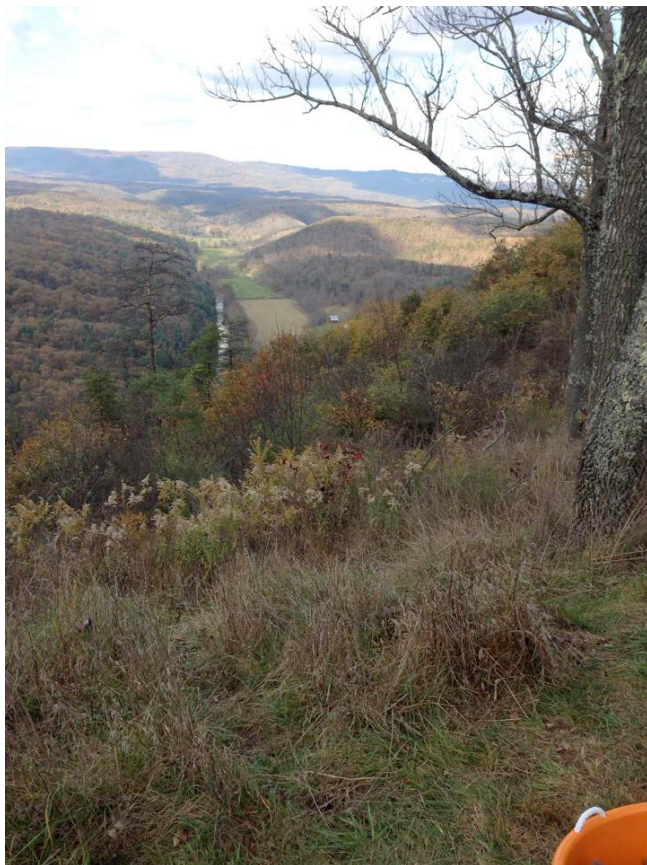
Red Trail... Just cruising through the woods on a beautiful day!

After about 4 miles the fellow in front of me had decided that it was time to move past the leaders of our group and forge out at his own pace. I was feeling pretty good and decided to go along with him. Nate and I ran together for about the next 13 miles, and as is so often during trail ultras, he was a great guy that I was glad to have met and spend some time. We climbed and dropped and skipped our way through the red trail talking and getting to know each other all while keeping a pretty good pace. I let him know that I was coming back from an injury, and that I typically would be running with him at this pace, but that I knew I shouldn't be today. Even after saying it, and knowing it would come back to haunt me later in the race I was feeling good and enjoying the company. There were a lot, and I mean a lot of creek crossings on the red trail. It was pretty dry so my feet only got wet a few times, but the course was still quite technical and letting your mind wander was a recipe for a hard fall, or worse.

Either at the end of the red trail, or the beginning of the green trail Nate and I were cruising along one of the few sections with good footing and went flying by the trail turn. We could have gone a long way up that hill before we realized we were going the wrong way. Luckily, two guys who introduced themselves as Dave and Trent yelled to us, and back we came. The four of us stuck together on the green trail until Trent had a call of nature... not to be seen again until the

finish. He didn't close the gap and catch back up to us, but looking at the results he had a great race and an impressive time. Dave, Nate and I continued on together for the remainder of the green trail. I don't remember the course profile showing it, but it felt like a 4ish mile section that stayed down in the valley and followed (and crossed many times) the creeks. We kept a good pace through here and worked well together. I was starting to realize by this point that these two were going to drop me at some point... it was just a matter of when. To be honest if Nate had not been so encouraging and great to run with, I probably would have faded back sooner.

About 2 miles from the end of the green trail I did exactly what I knew I shouldn't... I let my mental guard down, trying to keep my feet going one in front of the other I was not being careful enough about where they were landing. At one of the many creek crossing in this section I placed my foot at what I thought was the edge of the creek before the water... but I placed it over the edge. Unfortunately, there was a tree root that had grown out of the side of the stream and made a half circle... that is where my leg went down... thus, as I tumbled forward the root was across the shin of my trapped leg. I was lucky to have been behind Dave at this point and had slowed to allow him to cross. I think if I had done that at full speed I would have broken my tibia, but as it was I just banged it; bruised it; and swore at it, the root and myself for allowing the whole thing to happen. At this point I was limping just a bit and feeling generally down so I stopped to use the bathroom and let Dave and Nate pull away. After seeing I was still well hydrated and getting my mind back to a better place I started in pursuit of my two newly found running buddies. It took me about a half mile to catch them since I didn't want to blow myself out closing the gap... and I fell back into rhythm behind Dave knowing that there was a limited time I could stay with them. I yo-yoed off the back of them for the next few miles. On the last big climb going up to mile 16.1 we caught and passed another runner. He informed us that he was somewhere in the top ten. Maybe 7<sup>th</sup> ish. So at that point after passing him it would have made Nate 7<sup>th</sup>, Dave 8<sup>th</sup> and Me 9<sup>th</sup>... We all pulled into the Oasis together. Dave stopped for a full gear and clothes change. Nate and I grabbed food to go, and barely took time to admire the awesome view from the Oasis.



The Oasis – 16.1 down... 16.1 to go!



We headed out of the station and were informed by the race director that it was about another 1.1 miles uphill before a long downhill. We had about 8 miles of logging trails to look forward to, and though I hate running on the road I was glad to turn my brain off and let my legs just roll over on their own for a bit. On the way up Nate slowly pulled away and we both admitted that our time together had come to a close. At about the same time, Dave caught and passed me... I didn't have it in me to stay with him, and knew if I tried I was not going to have anything left when we re-entered the woods. In the end he beat me by 4 minutes... but I think it would have been more if I had pushed right then.

To be honest, though I was making good time, this was about the time that some pretty dark thoughts entered my mind. My two running buddies looked fresh and were pulling away... and all I could think was that it was more likely to fall below 20<sup>th</sup> than to stay in the top 10. The downhill was long, very long. I ran the whole thing alone. I could not find the sweet spot in my stride, too fast pounded away.... slower felt like I was braking the whole time and using energy to slow down. In the end I kept a good pace and though my body was hurting my mind had come out of the funk and was glad to be moving at a good clip again. By this point I had shed my long sleeve and was very comfortable in my sleeveless tech-shirt. I reached the bottom of the hill (mountain) and crossed a wooden bridge to an aid station. I don't know why I noticed the unique creaking sound of the bridge, but I wish I hadn't because as I left the aid station I got to hear that sound again. Despite me moving at a good pace down the hill someone had been closing the gap and was about to catch me. From here the road took a sharp turn to the left and headed uphill, steep! As I was trying not to look up the hill and only think about one step at a time on this uphill escalator to hell, I hear from below me "I'm coming for you!"



The quick look back at the aide station... about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the way up Mnt. For-Everest



Way below me, the guy who had closed the gap on me was at the aid station and could see me ascending ever so slowly up what at that point might as well have been Mnt. Everest. I am a very slow walker, and thus I don't normally walk the hills. I will walk to bring my heart rate down, and then jog/run again. I continued this technique, cresting what I now had dubbed Mnt. For-Everest. It leveled and through a few long straightaways I snuck a few looks back. My pursuer in the green shirt (later identified as a really nice guy named Stefan) was not in sight and my mindset and attitude came roaring back into a positive light. I cruised for the remainder of the logging road and was once again making good time. I turned into the purple trail and felt great. Back in the woods and the footing was pretty good. You couldn't see anything through the 6 inches of leaves everywhere, but doing what felt more like cross country skiing than running I was moving along and was actually starting to wonder if I would see Nate and Dave again. I had been on my own for almost 8 miles now. As I crested another hill and came around another corner I saw a runner in front of me. I had not been caught and was now closing on someone in front of me. Things were looking up. Also I knew I didn't have more than a 10k left and was still sitting somewhere near 9<sup>th</sup>. As we approached the top of a leaf covered hill I pulled up right behind a guy in a white shirt. We started down the other side into a rock garden of epic proportions. The trail was steep downhill and had eroded badly. The leaves covered everything... and from what my feet could find "everything" consisted of nothing but baseball sized round rocks. I slipped, rolled and tripped my way down this mile+ long section. The poor squirrel population on the purple trail was introduced to a few new words as I spewed a blue streak of vulgar language at them. Damn lazy squirrels! I rolled my ankles over and over, and it seemed no matter how fast or slow I went every stride was met with a root or rock... or both! Roll, trip...stumble, and swear... over and over, all the while as the prize I had worked so hard to reel in slowly pulled away from me... somehow immune to the hidden follies under the leaves. I would later learn that the fellow I had caught and planned on passing was Enrique. Looking at the finishing standings not only did he pulled away from me... but caught and passed Dave. I didn't see Enrique again until the finish where I would inquire about what magical shoes he must wear!

I finally finished the rock garden slope from hell, and was back on a trail instead of a washout. I was only a few strides into normal running again when the sound of crunching leaves was right behind me. In my mile of misery I didn't notice that while Enrique was pulling away, someone was closing in on my near standstill stumble of a decent! Sarah, the first place female joined me... and with my footing back in place we ran together for the next few miles. A relaxed and pleasant person, I was glad to share the trails with her for part of the day. She also had the same thought as me at this point... nothing would be better than a good beer in a few miles!



Yup... I was hurting on this section of Purple.

We knew we were getting close, and pulled into an aide station. I inquired about what mile I was at. The volunteer didn't know, but she informed me I was at station 5. FIVE!! Was I losing my mind? Without my Garmin had I completely lost track of things and was actually still a long ways away from the finish. I doubted the intel I had received, but I also was not buoyed in the way I had hoped from good news. Sarah and I continued on, and over the next few hills Sarah walked and I trudged on. I slowly pulled away, but not by a lot. Finally on some of the nicest trails we had been on, I smelled smoke. YES! I could smell the fire that must be burning at the finish line. I increased my pace again in anticipation and before I knew it (but not before I was tricked by a false finish area that turned out to be a different clearing) I popped out of the woods right at the finish line. I was handed a stick of wood and was informed that I needed to complete a quarter mile loop around the field and return to the fire to complete the course. A little cruel... but a fun way to finish the "fire" part of the Fire on the Mountain ultra. I circled the field and

finished the race in good spirits... my anger at every lazy squirrel already fading. I tossed the log on the fire and got my medal for completing the challenging 32 mile course. I later found out that I had indeed finish in 9<sup>th</sup>... a place I held for the whole of the final 16.1 miles.

At the finish I got to talk with Nate, Enrique, Dave, Sarah, and many others. I really love trail runners! What a generally great group of people to spend a day with. I walked up to the Prius, which Bill had left unlocked, and got my warm clothes on. In the 50° sun, a set of wind pants and a long shirt was more than enough to feel great! I walked over to the Sheetz truck and got a pumpkin latte. Now I don't want to over sell it, but I am sure that it was made from the tears of a baby unicorn! Wow, did it taste good!



Cliff pushing through some Purple Delight!



I sat around talking with the other finishers, enjoying my latte and later a Dogfish Head Pumpkin Ale (Also awesome!) In time, Cliff popped out of the woods and though I knew he was hurting he showed a big smile and trotted around the field to finish his first Ultra. It is funny to feel proud of a grown man, but I really did at this point... he had gone much further than ever before and did great!

Cliff finished, and walked up to the car. He needed a few minutes alone, and I gave them to him. He returned in warm clothes and grabbed a fruit smoothie.... I can't speak for him, but it sure seemed that the sugary goodness was just what the doctor ordered!



Bill Rowell making good progress through the Purple Trail.



Bill pulled out of the woods not long after, and in his very cool Zen way, made the final lap look like his first mile... still enjoying a beautiful day out in the woods. I strive to have that kind of attitude in running and in life.



Some of the finishers with our sponsor: Sheetz

After Bill finished we sat around for a bit talking about the day and enjoying each other's company. The race organizers provided some hotdogs and hamburgers, which at this point was just the thing for a body needing some serious caloric intake. We took a few pictures, and like most Ultra's we packed it up and left in a non-ceremonious manner...



Cliff, Bill and I after the finish.

The drive home was again uneventful, with many discussions of the course, views, pain, and emotions that made up our respective days. Bill and Cliff dropped me off, and we hobbled around the Prius to shake hands, give hugs, and say good bye. They drove off further to the east, and I went in to my warm house to see my wife and son.