

2009 Gore-Tex TransRockies Run Race Report

Getting ready to start the 6th, and final, stage of the 2009 Gore-Tex TransRockies Run, I was standing in line at the medical tent feeling fairly confident that the line in front of me was moving fast enough to have everyone treated before the starting time, and feeling less confident that I could finish the race without addressing the painful shin splints that had developed after a 9.5 mile steep downhill on stage 5 the day before. The pain in the front of both ankles where the foot connects to the shin was overwhelming, notwithstanding massage, ice and more ibuprofen than anyone should take in a 24-hour period. I was not the only one who had suffered on the descent the day before into the town of Vail, Colorado, on a stage that featured over 23 miles of running, much of it above 10,000 feet of elevation.

The medical staff was working diligently on one runner, wrapping her feet, ankles and shins in a manner that made the rest of us envious. It was clear, though, that they would only have time for a handful of others. At that moment, I saw my partner go into the medical tent and secure a roll of tape. She told me to sit down and proceeded to tape me up in three minutes or less. I stood up and noticed an immediate improvement. It wasn't the first time that week she had helped pull me through this week. That's the beauty of the TransRockies: you are facing an amazing physical challenge, but you aren't facing it alone – the race is comprised of teams of two, and I was lucky enough to have my wife, Mary Kowenhoven, as my partner.

The TransRockies is a 115-mile running race divided across six days. It includes over 20,000 feet of climbing and much of it takes place above 10,000 feet. Although we had come in a few days early and stayed in Crested Butte at 9,000 feet, the altitude was a factor all week, not surprising since we live at sea level near Los Angeles. We were one of 130 teams of runners, and while the race included accomplished and well-known trail runners such as Dean Karnazes, Anita Ortiz and Nikki Kimball, it also included mere mortals like ourselves who came to the Rockies to see if we were up to the challenge of completing this difficult course.

While Stage 5 had beaten us up the most, it was actually the first two stages we found most difficult. Not because they were the longest (the first stage was 21 miles, but there were three other stages that were as long or longer) or included the most altitude gain (the fifth and sixth stages would gain an average of 4,500 feet per day, compared to an average of 2,900 feet of gain for the first two days). What made the first two stages most difficult is that we were running defensively – holding back in fear of not making it to the finish line on day 6.

The first afternoon, after crossing the finish line, we started a pattern that would repeat itself over each of the next five days. We located our duffel bags, which were marked with large white numbers for ease of transport, and picked a tent to sleep in for the night. The logistics associated with this race were incredible. The operations team took down and set up a tent city every day like clockwork. At some locations, the tents were set up so close to each other that we could hear every

word being spoken in the tents around us! After choosing a tent, we would take a shower in the mobile shower truck (which is actually much better than it sounds), get a 20-30 minute massage from the team of therapists on site, and then get ready for dinner. The dinners featured an abundance of good food, and were followed by an awards ceremony, photo slide show and video show from the day's stage. Then, the race director would give a preview of the course and any perils that lay ahead the next day. We would then have hot chocolate or S'Mores at the campfire, brush our teeth and go to bed. Most nights we were asleep by 9 p.m.

The second stage was very tough. While it was the shortest day, it featured a steep climb over Hope Pass, which tops out at 12,600 feet. It was difficult to breathe due to the altitude on the way up, but it was the view from the top that left us breathless as we stopped to take many photographs before heading down the other side.

That evening when we looked for the first time at our relative ranking following stage 2, we were disappointed to see that we had finished in 39th place on day 1 (out of 52 "mixed" teams consisting of one man and one woman) and in 43rd place on day 2. While our only goal had been to finish, without saying a word we both decided in that moment to treat it like the race it was.

The next morning, we attacked stage 3 right from the start. The race started at 10,000 feet in the town of Leadville, where we had slept the night before. We started with a strong pace and eliminated any activity that did not get us to the finish line in as short a time as possible. Where previously we would stop for an unmeasured 5-10 minutes (or more?) at each rest stop, we now limited our stops to a timed 3 minute limit. If we were feeling good and had what we needed, we barely stopped at all. That is not to say we did not enjoy ourselves and take in the whole experience – we did, we just have fewer photographs to prove it.

Stage 3 was over 24 miles – the longest mileage day and one that we had worried about when we stared at it in the months of training leading up to the race. But on that day, we did not fear it. Instead we ran through it. And while few others paid any notice, we knew when we finished after 5 and ½ hours of running that we had given it everything we had, and it felt great. Our ranking that evening was posted as 29th, although for some unknown reason it was later adjusted to 33rd. Regardless, we were now clearly on a new trajectory and feeling strong and determined. In fact, if you saw us crossing the finish line, you would have thought we had won the stage.

The next day, we ran the shorter 15 mile stage 4 in just over 3 and ½ hours and finished in 31st. Our confidence was growing and our pace was increasing. Stage 5 was expected to be the longest and most difficult day, featuring 23 miles of running coupled with 4,400 feet of climbing. The stage also included the grueling descent that would leave me limping around with shin splints and blood blisters under my toenails the evening before the final stage. I did not care, though, since it also turned out to be our strongest day – we cracked the top 30 on a gloriously beautiful day in the mountains!

The next morning I would care, however, as the my legs and feet had gotten worse and it was hard just to get out of our tent much less think about running. But the last stage was no easy day – it

was 21 miles and over 4,600 feet of climbing – the most climbing of any of the stages. Hence the trip to the medical tent that morning.

Fortunately, Mary's taping job did the trick and the first few miles we ran on pavement to get out of Vail were tolerable. Once we got on trail and headed uphill, I felt even better. The knowledge that each step got us closer to the ultimate finish line, coupled with the fact that we knew we did not have to run a single mile the next day, combined to keep us moving steadily over the next 5+ hours. I took a hard tumble on the trail at about the halfway point, we somehow got off course and wound up running an extra $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile or so later in the day, and there were black bears hanging out on the last mile of the course into Beaver Creek. None of these obstacles, however, were even close to keeping us from completing a goal that had been nine months in the making – and after just under 30 hours of running over six days, we had completed the 2009 Gore-Tex TransRockies Run!