

DIRTY GIRLS 6 HOUR RACE REPORT

By Marc Pelosse

The Dirty Girls Run is held in Mansfield, Ontario, which is a 5.5 hour drive from Ottawa. My (very) significant other, Andrea, my lovely daughter, Juliette, and I climbed in the packed car and hit the road around 1h30 on Friday. Andrea had planned to run either the 30 km race (which she had done last year) or the 6 hour race, but a pending diagnosis to a leg injury prevented her from any running for the previous few weeks. Not only did she accept to come along to support me, but she also accepted race director Diane Chesla's request to act as official race announcer! Juliette, on her own initiative, offered to volunteer at aid stations or to help out any other way she could! This was going to be a tiring weekend not only for this runner!

The mood in the car was great; listening to loud music, making jokes, and desperately searching for Starbucks. We had perfect driving conditions and were cruising along nicely for the first four hours. And then we got to Toronto... At the sight of the traffic jam in the opposite direction, I reflected that it was a good thing the Universe was expanding. We were fine for a while and I started to think that we would get away with it. Then we started to see red braking lights blinking in front of us, and our pace slowed down. An electronic traffic panel finally confirmed that something was up; it indicated that the two right lanes were closed up ahead, which forced the traffic to squeeze into the two remaining lanes.

Silence was the "mot d'ordre" in the car for a while; the German punk concert was over, nothing in the situation was inspiring anyone to anything resembling a joke, and there was no way out of this jam even if a Starbuck would have been in sight. Everyone to their thoughts. Mine quickly diverged to, of course, the race. Our current situation reminded me of a race start strategy I had thought of a few days before. The Dirty Girls course consists of a 10 km loop. It starts in the middle of an open area and after about 100 meters runners enter the woods on a single track trail. Even though I was going to run for 6 hours, I didn't like the idea of everyone merging into a single lane and being stuck in a traffic jam behind slower runners (the 24 hour race start is simultaneous to the 6 hour race start). So I thought I should probably shoot out fast at the gun to be one of the first to enter the woods. At the current moment, this seemed like a very good idea, and little did I know of the impact it would actually have on my race.

We eventually made it out of the traffic jam that was caused not by construction, as we had suspected, but rather a burnt out Beetle (the car, not the bug)! At first I thought

this was bad omen, but we didn't see any ambulance on site (just the firemen to Andrea's and Juliette's delight), so it seemed everyone had safely made it out of the car.

We stopped at Mansfield around 7h00 for a good prerace dinner and then drove the last kilometer to the race site to set-up our tents. We picked up my race bib and then mingled with the other runners and supporters for a few hours. We were all getting ready for race day in our own way; Andrea was getting acquainted with the sound system and mic and gathering intel on the runners of the various races (namely a 30km, 6 hour, 12 hour and 24 hour) from Diane; Juliette was making sure she was part of the plans at all aid stations; and I was lounging in my chair with my feet up!

It is the fifth year Diane organises the race, which is quite young for a race. But I have to admit she's got it all figured out. The course is very challenging and well-marked. That being said, it is a trail race and one has to pay attention to where he is going. In most trail races, one can go off course. In the Dirty Girls, one can actually go against the current, as I have witnessed during the race. The aid stations are manned by enthusiastic volunteers and stuffed with everything one can expect of an ultra, and then some; they even offered gels and salt tabs, which is not very common.

I hit the sack around 9h30 in a vain attempt to get a good night's sleep. Actually, it took me a few hours to fall asleep, but I slept tight afterwards for at least 7 hours straight, which is quite unusual for me. When I stretched my old limbs out of the tent at 6h30, I felt rested, surprisingly calm and the legs were awesome. The air was cool, at least for now, and I decided this was a day I would go all out.

I got dressed after the ceremonial pre-race breakfast and mingled with the other anxious runners before the 8 o'clock start. When we're asked by Andrea to gather to the start line a few minutes before 8, I found myself surprisingly relaxed and collected. I took a few seconds to visualize the next 6 hours and then struck up a conversation with Élise from Kitchener; she was running her first ultra and was going for the 24 hours! She seemed a bit anxious and asked me for advice! I told her that the longest I ever ran was 90km and that a 24 hour or 100 miler are a different story. Even with the little experience I have with ultra-running, it was still substantially more than what she had been exposed to so far and I really want to help her, at least to calm down a bit. So I offer her the only advice that I know to be universal to all ultra distances; go slower than you think you should go, and eat and drink right from the start.

She seemed happy with that, we wished each other good luck, and then it was the count down. At zero, I stayed true to my start strategy (but not to my advice to Élise) and

dashed off the start line. I was first to enter the woods on the single track trail. No problem. It didn't make a difference whether I entered the woods first, fifth or tenth. I settled into a fast steady pace and decided right there and then that I would run the entire first loop. No walking up the major hills; I wanted to get a good feeling of the level of effort required by all the hills and then decide which ones are worth walking.



Although I was sustaining a relatively fast pace, I expected to be passed by other runners at every turn. During the first few kilometers, the forest allowed one to see runners that are relatively close behind (about 100 meters or so). I saw a few runners on a short 200 meter out and back just before the 2.1 km marker. Then I didn't see anyone for quite a while. I got to the halfway point aid station still in first place, and realised that I may well complete the first loop in the pole position; cool!

In fact, the first runners I encountered are a couple of 24 hour runners coming my way. This was not good since we are all supposed to go in the same direction! They asked if I was sure to be heading in the right direction, and I told them I was. The course followed a figure 8 and the upper and lower loops of the 8 were connected by a dirt road shortly after the 2.1 km marker. This was a tricky section because the dirt road is split in the

middle by flags and yellow tape. When first getting to that section, one had to stay left of the tape, do a 5 km section that ended to the other side of the tape and led one to the last 4 km of the course. I stopped twice in that section to make sure I was going in the correct direction, so I didn't have second thoughts and kept going, hoping that these poor 24 hour runners would realise their mistake and backtrack.

By that point I had loosened up and was running very smoothly. I was in the zone and felt I could run forever, but I knew this was just an illusion and made sure not to accelerate. The second half of the course swirled and turned constantly and one can't really see far ahead...or behind for that matter! I realised there is only one section that allowed one to look over one's shoulder to estimate one's lead. Around 7 km, the course followed a narrow 1 km U shape and, although there were trees between the 2 legs of the U, you could see through the trees. Just when I was about to complete this section, I caught a glimpse of another 6 hour runner. I didn't know exactly how much of a lead I had at that point, but I knew it was substantial and made a mental note to look at my watch when I got to the beginning of that U section in the next loop so I could estimate my lead more precisely...that is if I was still in the lead!

I could now hear Andrea's voice on the microphone and understood I was closing in on the start/finish line...and that my Garmin was underestimating the length of the course by 800 meters. I eventually emerged from the woods into the open field. Spectators at this end of the field were yelling words of encouragement and when I got close enough for Andrea to recognize my form (running form of course), she announced something to the effect that Marc Pelosse from Ottawa was the first runner to be completing a lap.

I passed the finish line and looked at my watch; 53:27! As happy as I was with being the first to complete a lap, I was aware that this was likely too fast. Juliette seemed very excited about the whole situation; she encouraged me while filling my water bottle. Andrea momentarily left the announcer station to confirm my worries. I promised to be wise and slow down, then grabbed my water bottle and headed for the cover of the forest before any other runner could see me and in doing so, discovered a competitive side to me I wasn't aware existed. I may not win this race, but I would make whoever is going to work his ass off.

The plan for the second lap was to slow down the pace somewhat and walk 2 hills; the first one was early on the course at about 1.5 km and the second at 8km in the second part of the U section I referred to earlier. When I got to the first hill, I decided that it was smaller than I remembered and promptly ran it. I got to the halfway aid station, still a

lonely runner and feeling strong. Someone filled my water bottle while I ate a few pretzels and drank Coke, and then I hastily hit the trails; still no one in sight.

A few minutes later I saw a group of 5 or 6 runners up ahead on the trail, going in the same direction as me this time. I yelled my intention to pass them on their left and they quickly moved to their right. As I passed them, a lady asked if I really was in the 6 hour race, probably thinking at first I was a 30 km racer (the 30 km start was 30 minutes after our start). I noticed her 6 hour bib and replied that I was; "you're crazy" were her exact words! I raised an approving thumb to her assessment of my mental state as I feared that I had been crazy to start that fast, but kept going at sustained speed nonetheless.

When I got to the U section, I had the presence of mind to look at my watch. When I reached the start of the hill, I still hadn't seen a 6 hour runner in the U section, so I decided to run the hill because the scientist in me wanted the estimation of the lead to be as accurate as possible (the second place runner would likely run the hill) and the newly discovered competitor in me wanted to make an impression on that second place runner. This proved to be a good decision. Just as I was about to start the last section of the hill, which is perceivably steeper, I saw the same guy I saw in the first loop just starting the U section. I discretely look at my watch; 5 minutes had passed, which represented close to a kilometer at the speed I was running.

I didn't expect to have that kind of a lead and the news literally fuelled the last 2 km of that second lap. I passed some more runners and heard Andrea's familiar enthusiastic voice in the distance again. I emerged from the woods into the open field and heard Andrea call out my name and add something about the fact that I was looking pretty smooth. I passed the start/finish line and the Garmin showed 55:40; slower, but probably still too fast. After the aid station ritual was completed and my number one and two fans had expressed their respective admiration, I got going for lap number 3.

Once in the woods, I started trying to make some sense out of the situation I was in. I was leading by at least five minutes after one third of the race; I could only imagine 2 explanations. The faster runners, like the strong looking second place guy I saw in the U section, were waiting to make their move later in the race. After all, there was still plenty of time left in this race. Or none of them felt confident enough in their abilities to try to catch me at this point and were waiting for me to slow down. I decided that if I was still in the lead after 4 hours, then the later explanation was the correct one. I also decided that if that proved to be the case, I would not let anyone catch me.

This was all new and exciting to me. I have never started a race hoping for a podium, let alone win it! My goal had always been to finish the race in the fastest time possible for me. When I finish a race, I want to feel that I gave it all I had on that day. And that is how I started this race. I thought I could run between 50 and 60 km on that course; that was my objective then, and it was still my objective. The only difference is I was starting to realise that it may well get me on the podium.

This introspective interlude helped me to finally get back in touch with the little wisdom there is in this little brain of mine and I walked the first major hill. I passed runners constantly now, and eventually lapped a first 30 km runner. As I passed her, the poor lady embarrassedly told me she was the last 30 km runner. I told her that anyone who has the courage to show up here and run 30 km on that course should be very proud of themselves. Shortly after, I also passed the two strayed 24 hour runners. I told them that I was glad to see we are running in the same direction and they cheerfully thanked me for having pointed them in the right direction earlier.



Before I knew it I was at the 5 km aid station once again. I stopped only for a few seconds to get my water bottle filled and got going again. It seemed I was passing runners more often than I was passing trees, and I got energized by the enthusiastic encouragement from everyone. The spirit of the ultra community is truly amazing; never have I experienced that kind of brotherhood-like atmosphere in a shorter road race.

Then I found myself at the infamous U section again and glimpsed at my watch. When I got to the second part of the section, I ran it because the hill starts climbing very smoothly, but walked the second steeper half. There were other runners now starting the U section, so I had to pay attention to their bib numbers; numbers in the six hundreds were for 6 hour runners. At just about the same point in the hill as in the previous lap, I saw a 600 bib, but it was not the same guy as before. I worried for a few seconds that I missed the guy from the previous laps and that he was actually just on my heels. But that couldn't be as I had been paying close attention to each runner entering in the U section.

This new second place guy looked very strong and I noticed he was looking at me. I didn't know if he knew I was in the same race as him, so I quickly hid my bib number with my water bottle and tried to look natural doing it. I also realised that he saw me walking and could interpret this as a sign of weakness. I was thinking of running the last very steep section of the hill, but decided that if he was strong enough to run the entire hill at this point in the race, he would likely catch me anyway.

Out in the open field and across the start/finish line again. I was expecting to feel dizzy after a few laps of turning in circles, but the course was anything but a circle. It was a figure 8 shape alright, but it was comprised of continuous twists and turns. And the fun thing about the lap course was that you got the crowd support every hour or so, which included that of Andrea and Juliette, and that made a big difference for me. I even got a kiss from each of them before I departed from the aid station, which I don't usually get when sweaty and sticky and stinking.

This third lap was completed in 59:26; that was more like it. I kept the same pace as in the first two laps, but walked the two major hills. By the end of this fourth lap, I would know exactly where I stood with regard to the "competition" and the alternative explanations I had conceived in the early stages of the third lap. I focused on sustaining the same pace, which was proving harder as the kilometers passed; for the first time in the race, I was starting to feel the signs of fatigue.

I kept passing runners regularly and chit-chatted along the way. Everyone I encountered was super nice. And then I came upon a lady listening to her Ipod. I yelled repeatedly and

louder as I got closer and closer my intention to pass her on her left, but she simply didn't hear me. I eventually got right behind her and had to hit the brakes. I tapped her on the shoulder and she looked back at me, but didn't even move one inch! As I bushwhacked to pass her, I suggested that maybe she should lower the volume of her Ipod to hear other runners; she replied I had to speak up. I told her I could recognize the song that was playing on her Ipod from 20 feet away and remarked that I was not running with a megaphone!

I quickly blocked that unpleasant encounter out of my mind and got back to business. Whoever said there is good in everything may not be so far from the truth after all; the episode with ultra Lady Gaga pumped some adrenaline into me and I realised I didn't feel tired anymore. At the halfway aid station, I grabbed a few appealing peanut butter strawberry jam sandwiches. I tried to force them down my throat while running, but after about 5 minutes I gave up.

I timed my challenger in the U section once more and was happy to see that the status quo prevailed; the gap between the lead and second place runner was the same. He still looked like he was running strong, but since he hadn't cut in on the lead, I thought he was probably putting on a brave face to try to impress me. Not gonna work buddy. At least not today. I knew at this point in the race, it was getting late for anyone to try to cut a five minute lead.

I ran down the open field to complete the fourth lap in 1h05:10; I did walk a few smaller hills during that bad patch, but apparently no damage done. I got more valued words of encouragement from my two favourite ladies, and I sensed in their voices that hope was slowly but surely replacing worry.

Getting into the woods again, I was fully aware that this lap would be decisive; sustaining more or less the same pace should be good enough for a podium, and maybe even first place. No one seemed confident enough to challenge me. I was very focused on the moment and the kilometers flew. I went through the usual stratagem in the U section and was comforted in the fact that nothing had changed.

It was starting to look like this would be a lap without anything to report until I got to the last kilometer; suddenly and without warning, my right calf cramped up. Disaster. I let out a painful yell, cursed every saint I know and then had to invent a few more when I ran out. I slowed down a bit and my ultra runner reflexes kicked in and I swallowed my last salt tab before I could make sense out of what was happening. I quickly realised my mistake. I had been taking a salt tab every hour just like I do in my long training runs. So

why was I getting cramps now? The difference was I was going substantially faster than during the long runs, and that meant I was sweating more and therefore losing electrolytes at a faster rate. I should have adjusted my salt intake accordingly. Lesson learned...the hard way!

I limped for a few minutes and now both my calves were threatening to cramp up. I realised that this happened when I landed on my toes, so I focused on landing on the ball of my feet and was soon able to generate a bit of speed again. Out in the open field one more time; I was sure Andrea would not announce that I was looking smooth this time around...1h07:28 for this fifth lap.

Juliette was ecstatic at the aid station and Andrea told me that if I just kept running like this I would win. I agreed with her and informed her of the condition of my calves. She shoved a few bananas down my throat to get potassium back in me, handed me a few more and sent me on my way.

I knew I had to get at least to the 5 km marker to have a serious chance of winning. I focused on landing my feet properly and walked all the hills. I passed the 2.1 km marker where the first marshals were and didn't even dare look at my watch. Before I reached the halfway point, I started to get signs of cramping in the quads now; this next half hour was going to be painful. My body unexpectedly found a small hidden reserve of adrenaline that got me to the 5 km marker.

I thought of stopping there, but just for a fraction of a second. Not trusting my Garmin and my brain anymore, I asked one of the volunteers how much time was left in the race; 27 minutes he told me. He also told me I should get going right away if I wanted to make it to the 7.5 marker. Having slowed down considerably in the last 7 or 8 kilometers, I didn't know how much of a lead I had anymore. If that second place guy got here in the next few minutes, he would have enough time to make it to the 7.5 km marker and I likely wouldn't be able to keep up with him; I had to go.

The next 2.5 km seemed to go on forever. At one point I thought I may not even make it in time to the 7.5 marker! I eventually got to the start of the infamous U section and discouragement hit me hard; I was thinking that if the 7.5 km marker was at the very top of the big hill, I was going to quit. As I got going through the first part of the U section, I looked up a small hill and noticed two people standing by the trail. I wondered what they were doing there and it took me a few seconds to realise that I had reached the 7.5 km marker! I could now stop running; I had won the race! There were only 10 minutes left

on the clock, so even if the second place guy got there right now, there was no way he could make it to the start/finish line in time.

I waited for him for a few minutes, but didn't want to leave Andrea and Juliette hanging any longer; they had no clue about what happened in that last lap. So I started walking back towards the start/finish line by the dirt road. I emerged in the open field and they started walking towards me. Andrea seemed most impatient about the outcome and let out an inquisitive yell from a distance. Being too tired to yell back at them, I raised my arms in a sign of victory. I got more sweaty sticky stinky kisses, and even hugs, and that alone made every effort worthwhile.

I parked my behind for a while and shook hands and exchanged congratulations with the other runners, including Dean from Toronto, the second place super nice guy. We also exchanged war stories and contact info; making new friend is always an important part of ultras. After a beer (or was it two?), a burger and a chocolate milk, I got my race medal from Juliette and the 1st place certificate from Andrea; the perfect ending to a perfect day!