

New Year's One Day Run – December 31, 2011

By Mitch Lewis

I wasn't having any fun. Seven hours into the race and I had already run about 35 miles, but there was over five hours to go and I was cramping. My legs were dead, it was getting cold, my stomach wanted to heave, and I was wondering what the hell I was doing running when the rest of the world were going to be enjoying champagne and good food in the warmth of their homes. Things wouldn't change for around three hours, but when they did, and we got to midnight – champagne was served, a new record was set and we got to see fireworks over the city of San Francisco.

The day was as beautiful as no day should be on December 31st. With the views awe-inspiring and including the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz, the bay and the city, who couldn't have fun running. But it was difficult.

I had signed up for the 12 hour portion of the Coastal Trail Runs New Years One Day run about a month ago, not knowing that I would have run two marathons in the previous three weeks. They also had a 24 hour version (crazy) and a 6 hour option. Around 75 runners were signed up in each portion and it was sold out several weeks before the start.

The run would be my first time-trial and covered a 1.061 mile loop around Crissy Field and a lagoon. People had set up tents and it was super-convenient to both park, and to have all my gear alongside the chute that ran just past the finish line on the way to the drinks and snacks stand. By the time we started at noon, the 24 hour runners had done three hours and looked a bit weary already. We would look the same shortly.

The first lap seemed to take forever – as it does – and I just tried to set a slow and steady pace somewhere between 9:30/10:00 miles as there was no advantage to start out fast or to take advantage of any terrain uphill or downhill. The first seven miles went by in around 1:10, which would normally be slow, but I didn't care.

What I cared about was the massive blister complex that had formed under my left foot toe which was an aftermath to the China Dhanzou marathon I had done two weeks before. I had brought extra socks and blister pads and I stopped to make the changes though it took some time. I could feel the pad moving around under my sock and the pain of each step, and I could only hope that it would not get worse or knock me out of the race.

At first I was on a two mile stop plan – every two laps I would veer toward the drink and food stand where they had a beautiful collection of everything from pretzels, candy, boiled potatoes, bananas, oranges, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and drinks ranges from Cokes to Sprites to Gatorade and water. By the half-marathon mark I was sick. My stomach felt like crap and I wanted to throw up and I was thinking that I was not even a quarter of the way done yet. I kept myself amused with math and mile times and thought that if I could finish the first marathon distance in around 4:45, I'd have a chance to get to the other goals of 50K and 50 miles and maybe, just maybe, to 55+ miles.

For me, it was a big milestone to get to 50K (31.1 miles) in fewer than six hours, and then I started to get pretty down-hearted. The music in my ears was boring, the cold and wind had come in from the bay, and it was still six hours to go. I had lots of time to observe the other runners and they seemed to come in three groups – those that were running hard (elites), medium folks who would run & walk (like me), and those that were committed to walking the entire way and go as far as they could.

Every so often, someone would say “good job” but it was a mostly quiet group. Unlike every other race that I have done, I could never get a feel on how I was doing relative to my fellow competitors. In a point to point race, you pass some, get passed by others and can kind of keep track along the way. Here, with various groups on the course, it was impossible to know how you were doing – except for the leader board at the lap end.

Some people were dressed up in capes (“Endorphin Dude” with the Marathon Maniacs) others with sparkly shoes, one guy in devil lights, and more people than I have ever seen wearing knee or leg-high compression socks. I guess I might have to get some of those.

Hours seven through ten were just endless. No real mile-stones to click off though getting to mile 39 at around 8:00 p.m. was important as it gave me a shot to get to mile 47 before I was hoping Leonora would show up at 10:00 p.m. and run some laps with me and have a small chance of getting to 55, but at least getting to 52.4, which would equal a double marathon and a new record for me.

In April 2009, when I had done the American River 50 in about 10:58, I was in much better shape having run a 50K some months before and other marathons in the run-up. My legs, butt, back and feet reminded me of that all the time on this New Year's Eve.

I thought about quitting, but knew that would not be a good option and I would regret it later. So I amused myself in thinking about what I would eat at each turn. I've never loved Sprite this much – the coldness, the bubbles and sweetness seemed to resonate on my tongue. I took Advil as needed and electrolyte and salt tablets to combat the increasing cramp in my right calf, and this could not have helped the stomach.

They started serving lentil soup and I had two cups on a couple of laps, and though it sounds disgusting, I think the body really appreciated it. Then, the best was yet to come.

At about mile 45 for me, they brought in pizzas. I hungrily grabbed a slice of thick, cheesy, hot meat-lovers pizza and walked with it around the first part of the course. Man, it tasted so good; it might be the best piece of pizza I have ever had!

At around 9:45 p.m., I thought I saw Leonora's van in the parking lot across the street where I was running, and thought that would be great if she was here already. Just around 10:05 p.m., I veered in to make a pit-stop in one of the port-a-potties, and when I crossed the lap-line, I saw her standing there. In my mind, I had thought that my vocal chords would not be working, and I'd be too exhausted to say much of anything, but I turned into a little chatter-box as she started running with me. And pushing me.

She had run a little over two miles already, and we started off down the long-straightway alongside Mason. I had developed a routine for walking at certain sections according to glow-lights that had been set out, and running in the others, but she got me to power through sections that I had been too tired to do in the last hours.

Suddenly, the mile beeps and vibrations on my Garmin seemed to be kicking in quicker and we got to mile 51 by around 11:00 p.m. Now, the game was on. I and we got to lap 50 (or 54.6 miles on my GPS) at 11:42 and just needed to run the final lap in under 18 minutes to have it count. We ran all out and did it in around 13 minutes and got to see my lap count on the PC go to 51 and when we crossed the finish line, my watch said 55.89 miles or 89.98K (54.1 according to their computations) and it was just five minutes to midnight!

They had large amounts of champagne poured into glasses and we each grabbed one as the final runners came in and we put on some warmer clothing. The organizers started counting down 10-9-8 ... 3-2-1 ... and then fireworks started going off in the city above us. After some New Year's kisses, we started the (what seemed long but wasn't) walk back to our cars. I was just so happy and satisfied to break my record and ended up doing two marathons and a double in three weeks, two states and two countries.

Leonora ended up running more than 11 miles and she could have (and wanted to) run a couple more to reach the half-marathon stage. But it was time to go. I was so appreciative that she came down and ran with me and got me to the finish line, it so helped!

As we were walking back, we ran in to the cape guy and his running friend. We thought they were also heading back to their cars but it turns out they still had nine more hours in their 24 hour commitment. And to put things in perspective, it turns out he had run 52 marathons in 2011 (!) and this was his second 24 hour race of the weekend in separate states – so it just puts things in perspective. Tony ended up doing 49 laps or 52 miles. I finished in a tie for 10th place out of 57 finishers and 75 that were signed up.

Though walking like Frankenstein and with lovely blisters that will heal, I had time to reflect on 2011. A year that included summiting Everest, a new distance record and looking forward to what 2012 might bring!