

The Trans-Ohio Run

Plan as you will, fate will have its way with you.

BY STEVE ZEIDNER

The tradition of the Cleveland-Cincinnati run dates to 1988 when Phil Freeland put together a trans-Ohio race to support homeless shelters across the state. A small group of runners including accomplished ultrarunners such as Marshall Ulrich, Regis Shivers, and Art Moore raced a continuous 258-mile route along the 3-C Highway. The race was held as an annual winter event for several years until interest eventually died out.

In December 2010, Sandi and Rachel Nypaver ran their “I Believe” run from Cincinnati to Cleveland. The 22-year-old twins ran most of the 250 miles in five days before iliotibial band injuries prevented them from finishing within less than a marathon distance to go. I was able to run a few miles with them as they came through Columbus and got a small taste of the adventure that someday I hoped to experience myself.

That opportunity came earlier last year when my good friend Nicholas Hanson approached me about doing a three-man run from Cleveland to Cincinnati. Nick was rapidly approaching graduation from the exercise-science doctoral program at The Ohio State University. To celebrate, he and fellow graduate Cory Schedler wanted to run across Ohio in four days to raise awareness and support for cystic fibrosis research.

Nick and I met a few years ago on a group run where he was training for his first 50-mile race. He quickly became a competitive ultrarunner with wins at the Oil Creek 100K and Hocking Hills Indian Run and top finishes at Burning River 100 and Mohican 100. Cory is a speedy marathoner. He ran his first marathon, the Flying Pig in Cincinnati, in 2 hours, 34 minutes. Soon after that, he went on to run a personal best of 2:28:29 at the Cleveland Marathon in 2011. His farthest racing distance had never exceeded 26.2 miles, though. Then there was me. I have run a few sub-2:50 marathons and several 100-milers, including Western States, Mohican, and Burning River. However, I tend struggle with nausea and vomiting in any longer distance, so I typically end up walking a lot during a 100-mile race. My biggest fear about the Ohio run was that my stomach would give out on me.

► Several families with kids that suffer from cystic fibrosis discovered the run online and came out to say hi and cheer us along.



Courtesy of Steve Zeidner

It's all about logistics

In the months leading up to the run, we trained and we planned. We ran high-mileage weeks and a few consecutive 20-mile days. We also had planning meetings to discuss the route, who was going to crew us along the way, how many calories we would eat each day, and who might be willing to sponsor the run. We decided to run 250 miles along US Route 42 starting at the Browns' stadium in Cleveland and finishing at the Paul Brown Stadium on the Cincinnati riverfront (the same route Connie Gardner ran in her "Run Across Ohio" in November 2012). We planned to run together the entire four days, adjusting the pace as necessary. With our wives crewing for us, we figured that we could cover about 62 miles a day in 12 hours, giving us plenty of time to get a good meal and some sleep to prepare for the next day. George and Robin Roulette, the owners of Front Runner, a running store, in Columbus, also offered to provide running gear and nutritional products and to help us in any other way that was needed. George mentioned that it would be a difficult journey for any individual to complete the run and that it would be a miracle if all three of us made it.

Three weeks before our July 4 start date, Nick and I ran the Mohican 50-mile race as a final training run. We stayed together for the first 18 miles, and when my stomach started to give out, I fell behind a bit. The nausea and vomiting only got worse, even when I slowed my pace. After spending several hours lying around at an aid station 12 miles from the finish, I walked it in to the finish. After all, it was just a training run. I was disappointed that I couldn't hold things together for even 20 miles, but I figured things were likely to go better at an easier pace during our Ohio run. I didn't see Nick at the finish line, so I had no idea how his race had played out until we talked a couple of days later. He finished in a great time, coming in fourth place, but had suffered some shin pain in the last couple of miles and now had a very swollen leg. Later that week, Nick called me to



◀ Approaching a crew stop along scenic Route 42.

deliver the news that it was unlikely he would be able to run on his shin in time for the Ohio run.

As we entered the final week before the run, it became apparent that the tendonitis in Nick's shin would indeed prevent him from running. While Nick was hoping to move the date of the run, Cory and I felt that if we didn't continue as planned, there would be too much risk of it not happening in the future. I felt uneasy about the fact that Nick wasn't going to take part in the run, as it was his idea from the start, but Cory and I were committed at this point. So we made the drive up to Cleveland on July 3.

We woke up before sunrise on the fourth to begin our journey. After taking a few photos outside of the Cleveland Browns' Stadium, we headed south on US 42. Cory and I had decided that a 9- to 10-minute-per-mile pace should be reasonable to keep up all day. We ran through the empty streets of downtown Cleveland as the sun started to come up. It was smooth sailing, and we got into a rhythm of meeting up with the crew van every five miles or so to refuel.

As the tall buildings of downtown faded, miles of strip malls replaced them and people began to emerge from their houses. Just as we counted the eighth martial arts studio we had passed by, I began to feel a little queasy. Figuring that I just needed more calories, I decided to try eating some Ramen noodles made on our portable camp stove. Unfortunately, more food was not what I needed, and so my slow decline into misery started before we had reached the 20-mile mark. It was Mohican all over again.

Off to a very bad start

I tried taking a few naps and walking to see if I could settle my stomach, but nothing seemed to work. It was not supposed to go like this. At the right pace, by keeping my heart rate down, I should have been OK. I finally told Cory that I didn't want to hold him up all day and that I was going to sit out the second half

of the day. Thirty-two miles into the run, and I had to call it quits. I was frustrated and disheartened to know that I would miss a portion of the run and leave Cory to run on his own. Considering that he was already six miles past his distance PR, he was not incredibly thrilled at the prospect of running more than another marathon that day by himself. However, I knew that if I didn't get things turned around by that evening, the next three days were not going to happen. Cory had a strong finish to the day, ending in Ashland, the home of Grandpa's Cheesebarn, while my dad kept him company on his bicycle.

The 4:00 A.M. alarm signaled our tired bodies that it was the start of day two. We picked up an additional runner and crew member, Mike Taylor, who works with George and Robin at Front Runner. Mike's friend Kip also came up to support us and crew for Mike as he ran. Kip had a double-lung transplant several years ago as part of his lifelong battle against cystic fibrosis. It was great having a third runner, and we kept the pace nice and slow to begin with, more like 11 to 12 minutes per mile this time. I changed my nutrition strategy by going with more of a liquid diet and taking a few Tums throughout the day to keep the stomach acid at bay. Once we got through the town of Mansfield, the scenery turned to beautiful rolling country roads. We counted the number of dead animals (mostly possums) and eventually lost track as there were so many. Our spirits were high

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◀ Cory, stretching and rolling his IT band to manage the pain.

and the conversation was flowing. Mike ran 40 miles, a distance PR for him, and George drove up to run the last 25 miles of the day with us.

About halfway through the day, Cory's knee began to bother him. It seemed like it could be a tight IT band, so he spent some time stretching and rolling it out on the side of the road. Once it was stretched out, it didn't seem to hinder his running much, so we figured it was nothing to worry about until it came back for the last 10 or 15 miles. The sun was setting as George, Cory, and I approached the Delaware County sheriff's station, our designated end point for the day. Cory was happy to see the finish for the day, and I was simply ecstatic that I had been able to run an entire day with no stomach problems. Since we were close enough to our homes in Columbus, we decided to catch a few hours of sleep in our own beds and regroup in the morning.

We had not slept much over the past couple of nights as our daily schedule went something like: get up around 4:00-4:30 A.M., start running by 5:30, finish running for the day by 8:30-9:00 P.M., grab some dinner and a shower, and be in bed before midnight. Rinse and repeat.

More complications

Because we were driving a little farther to stay at home Friday night and were switching vehicles and crew for Saturday, we didn't get started until 6:30 Saturday morning. Cory was still feeling pretty sore and suggested we walk for a mile or so. We walked through historic downtown Delaware and then tried to ease back into running. Cory's knee was in enough pain that he could not run more than a few steps at a time, so we figured that we would just walk until things loosened up. Unfortunately, they only got worse. Rain clouds began to roll in as we walked south toward Plain City. Cory tried a few different braces and a lot of Bengay, hoping that if something in his knee was moving around, a little support would give him the ability to keep running. This solution provided temporary relief, but after 10 miles of misery, Cory decided he would spend some time in the van stretch-

► Running with Nick, Erica, Chad, and other friends made the miles fly by.

ing and icing and later join me where he was able. We were both disappointed. Cory had reached a point where he knew he was not going to be able to finish much of the run, and I felt bad for him that he wouldn't be able to complete his goal. I was also looking at two days of mostly running alone and hoping my stomach would be kind to me.

There was no reason to worry. About 20 miles into the day, we made it to the Der Dutchman Restaurant in Plain

City, where we were welcomed by many friends and family who had come out to run with us and cheer us on. Nick and his wife, Erica, were at the restaurant as well, and we exchanged some hurried hellos. I asked if they were up for running a bit, and they both said they were if I was interested in the company. Of course! It was a good chance to talk about how the run had played out and how it was nowhere close to how we had planned it. Nick's shin was healing but still was not in a condition to run any kind of long distance on it. The miles together helped to heal any misunderstandings we had going into the run.

As evening approached, my brother finished running an eight-mile section with me, and my dad joined me on his bike for the last 20 of the day. I picked up the pace as much as I could to reach Cedarville soon after dark. Cory was disappointed with how the day had ended but resolved that he would finish the run by crewing and jumping in to run any distance that he was able. I slept well that night, knowing that there were less than 65 miles to cover before reaching the finish line in downtown Cincinnati.

Growing fatigue versus the miles left

Starting off a few miles with Cory in the morning, I could feel the fatigue in my legs and feet, and with every step the pain grew worse. I knew it was only temporary suffering, and I was thankful just to be moving forward. Unfortunately,



Courtesy of Steve Zeidner



Courtesy of Steve Zeldner

▲ Steve and Cory cross the “finish line” in downtown Cincinnati.

Cory’s knee had not improved overnight, so he would not be running much more along the rest of the journey. Nick, Erica, and my wife drove down to meet us that morning, and I was grateful to again have some people to run with as I tried to forget about the pain and focus on the goal ahead.

Much of Sunday went by in a blur. Run with Nick. Meet up with Cory and the crew. Run again with Erica. Run. As we neared Cincinnati, the crew began to discuss the approach to the finish line. Cory had spent the day stretching out his knee so we could finish the last three miles together. Robin and George drove down from Columbus to see the finish, and Robin ran a few miles with me through the hills at the north end of Cincinnati. Finally, we were three miles from the finish. I was practically in tears when Cory jumped out of the van to run with me. We ran the streets of Cincinnati toward Paul Brown Stadium, stopping every couple of minutes to wait for a crossing light to change. As we rounded the final corner, we were surprised by several dozen of our friends and family holding a finish line and a news crew ready to film our final steps of the journey. I was exhausted and in pain, but that all faded as the realization that I had finished swept over me.

I later reflected on George’s words: “The hardest part of this run is that three of you are doing it. It will be a difficult journey for any one of you to finish, but it will be a miracle if all three of you make it.” Nick plans to make the journey from Cleveland to Cincinnati later this year now that his injury has healed, and Cory and I will join him to cover the sections that we each were unable to run. The best part about miracles is that they typically happen outside of what we expect or imagine. Perhaps we will witness a miracle after all.

