

Lake Chabot 17.1 Mile Trail Run (Nov. 6, 2010)
Race Report by Trail Running Newbie: Joe Lee

Success!!!

I finished my first trail run race! 17.1 miles, 1840 feet of climbing.

Not only did I finish the race, I went sub 3 hours with an official time of 2:51:32 (10:02/mile)! Needless to say, I am both surprised and very happy with my performance yesterday. Thanks to everyone that sent me the good vibes and wishes. They worked!

The results are already out!

http://www.coastaltrailruns.com/lc_results_10.htm

Wow, I came in 9th out of 24!

I have attached a picture of my finish, to prove I actually did it!

I am tired today, as expected...

--- -

Now for the long version of the story...

As I mentioned to many of you, I was quite nervous about this event.

The longest footrace I had done before this event was 13 miles. That is 13 road miles, not trail miles.

Trail running is a different beast. Similar to the difference between road cycling and mountain biking.

The training runs I did for this event were rough. The knee strain injury I received while in the Cinque Terra was causing me pain. Climbing was difficult, descending was even harder. My pace was between 12 and 13 minutes per mile. So I figured I would set 3 hours 15 minutes as my goal for the 17 mile trail run. The weather forecasts for the race varied, so I prepared myself mentally for the possibility of running the event in the rain.

07:00, Saturday November 6.

I pull into the parking lot of the Lake Chabot marina. It is still quite dark but more importantly, it is dry!

The people at the tent are using flashlights to check people in. As the sky brightens up, a relatively small group of people gather near the starting line. There are four different distances being offered at the event, 5, 9, 17 and 26 (marathon) mile races. There are 24 people in the 17 mile race I am competing in.

The clock strikes 08:00, the gun sounds and we are off.

It is overcast and in the mid 50's. Perfect running weather.

I tuck myself behind someone running a bit slower than I want. This is strategic as I tend to start races too fast. Today it is especially important to pace myself as this will be the longest run of my life!

At the 2 mile mark we hit longest and steepest hill of the race. I set a pace for the hill and clean it while passing a few people in the process. The first aide station was just after the hill @ 3.1 miles. I top off the two water bottles I am carrying and continue on. This is the time to really settle into the run.

During this stretch I encounter first set of short descents. These descents are what I am the most

concerned about because of my knee. When I train I usually do what I call the "knee preservation stride" when I'm going downhill. The idea is to minimize the impact on my knees by taking short, very controlled strides while keeping my speed low.. Unfortunately this technique is slow and may possibly be contributing to my knee/IT band pain. So I did something that one should not do.... try something new on race day.

Just after starting my "knee preservation stride" I could already feel the twitching in my knee. So I decided to change my downhill stride significantly. I started taking longer strides and making a conscious effort to pull my toes up before each step which ensured my heel would take all the initial ground impact. The normal "road" running shoes I use have quite a bit of heel cushioning (more than trail running shoes). This worked in my favor as the "heel strike" descending I started doing was being well absorbed by the shoes. It was not hurting my knees! And an added benefit, I could really bomb down the hills!! I had to be careful about foot placement so as long as I could stay focussed, I'd be ok.

Content with my new downhill stride technique I was really able to get into the zone. Trail running can be very peaceful. There were times that I could see no one else around me. In and out of the trees, sun peeking out from between the fingers of fog now and then. In the distance another runner appears. I increase my pace a bit to start closing the gap. Small grassroots running events like these are great!

The 2nd aide station is at the 8 mile mark. I refill my bottles and set off. The aide station volunteer tells me to make sure to take a right around the outhouse. Unfortunately, he didn't mention that I had to take an immediate left just after passing the outhouse! So I headed off in the wrong direction, doh! Totally my fault. Even worse, two of the marathon runners (Jeff & John) followed me. After a short while we started questioning if we were going in the correct direction. A trail marker showed we were on the right trail but what about the direction? I had a map with me so the three of us checked out the map and decided to go back. When it was all said and done, John's gps said that we had gone two miles out of our way. I felt bad and apologized to the marathoners for leading them astray. They both were very cool about it. As one of the marathoners told me, "trail runners are pretty chill".

Long distance running is all about managing one's body and one's mind. After the "detour" I found myself a bit disappointed because my hope for finishing in sub 3:15 was probably dashed. My mind then switched to my friend Charlie who died of cystic fibrosis a few years ago (the orange shirt I wear during races is my "Team Charlie" shirt). I thought to myself, hey, Charlie was kind of a joker. Charlie, was that you that tricked me into the extra 2 miles? With a laugh and a burst of newfound energy I started up my favorite part of the trail, single track! Parts of the single track section were steep. I actually had to slow to a walk for a couple of the really steep sections. I was greeted by some fog at the top of the ridge. Some fog, some clouds, some sun... still, perfect running weather.

Around the 12.5 mile aide station (14.5 miles for me!) I caught up with several other 17 mile runners. This inspired me to push even harder for the last five miles. I wanted to at least finish in the middle of the pack. Soon I was flying down the hills. I had no idea how far I had gone or how far I had to go (runner's brain). I just kept pushing. Then I rounded a corner and saw the flags from the marina in the distance. I can see the finish, I've been out for ~2:45. I can make sub 3 hours! I tried to push even harder but the body started really pushing back. I was very tired. Keep pushing Joe, you can do it. My running form was falling apart but I kept going. I round the last bend and see the finishing chute. The most beautiful sight ever. I muster up the last bit of energy I have and attempt the best sprint I could across the line.

2 hours, 51 minutes, 32 seconds.

I did it. Sub 3 hours! (10:02 / mile)

Ah but wait, I actually did an extra 2 miles and some extra climbing.
So unofficially that is 19 miles in 171.5 minutes: 9:01 / mile pace!
Probably around 2000 feet of climbing total.
Yes - Success!!

The sun broke through soon after I crossed the finish. I hung out at the finish, eating soup, and cheering on runners as they came in. Another advantage of the nice weather is that more people hung out after the race. I got a chance to talk to experienced trail runners and the race organizers. The consensus was that my new "heel strike" downhill technique was not a good one. They described a good downhill running technique to be kind of like snowboarding. I'll have to look more into this.

I hung around long enough to cheer on the two marathoners that I had "led astray" as they crossed the finish line. Fortunately Jeff and John were too tired to punch me out!
What an awesome experience. I will be competing in more trail runs. I may be hooked.
Thanks Wendell, Phyllis, the volunteers & Coastal Trail Runs!

Today, Sunday November 7, it is raining hard.
Had the race been today it would have been a very different experience, especially because I would not have been able to bomb down the hills like I did. I also would not have hung out at the finish which for me was another fun part of the event.

I'm still tired, though I'm still smiling. I'll be recovering from this event for a while.

Cheers,
-Joe