

Race report – Bandera 100K (Camp Eagle edition)

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That was the hardest thing that I have ever done. Nothing comes close. It was also one of the best things I have ever done. Few things come close to that. I usually do not write race reports, so the fact that I feel compelled to do so right now hopefully makes all of that clear.

The most important part of this report. *A huge thank you to all of the organizers, volunteers, spectators, other runners, and everybody who made the running of this race a possibility.* It is impossible to run this race (for me and most runners) without all of these people and their attitudes and support. It was hard not to smile at the aid stations because of these people. I really meant it when I told them that we have the easy job and they have the hard one.

A special thank you goes to David Plotkin and Theo (I don't know your last name) for the constant support and encouragement at essentially all of the aid stations despite having to run their own runs later.

Going into the race. I signed up for this race not knowing very much about it other than the fact that it is a big one in the trail community and that it was a Western States lottery ticket race. After doing a bit more research (post sign-up), I learned that the trail was fairly rocky. But in my head, that was okay; we could train in either Middlesex Fells or the Blue Hills Reservation and get used to more technical terrain there. As far as the distance is concerned, I had never run 100km before, but 100km did not seem too different than 50 miles, which I have raced four times previously. All in all, I do not think I took the race too seriously in terms of my mentality heading in. I saw it as an opportunity to have a lot of fun and experience a new system of trails. These feelings lasted until the start of the race, at which point they turned in the usual pre-race adrenaline. Even the change of course from the “standard Bandera 100k trails” to the new Camp Eagle trails did not affect my mentality, despite reading about how the latter seem less runnable and more technical. (This last-minute change of race course was due to weather. *Thank you again to all of the organizers and volunteers for finding a last-minute alternative!*)

As for pre-race training, the most we had ever done in this block was a 20 mile, 4 hour run in Blue Hills. We did a couple more that were a bit shorter as well. We also did the 50K at the TARC Fall Classic in September 2024, and we did a R2R in the beginning of October. I felt in control for all of these, so pre-race training was never a concern for me.

The race – first loop. The race comprises of one 50K loop to be done twice. The first loop started off standard, more or less. I went out a little hard (as I like to do, just to see how it feels). There is nothing much to report here until about mile 7, when I really needed to use the bathroom (which I did at the mile 10 aid station). I ran with a small group of cool people until mile 7, and then it was more or less by myself with spurts of running with others. Until the point to be discussed in the next paragraph, I was having a blast. Running all of the up- and down-hills was going smoothly. My legs and lungs felt great. Spirits were high.

The first sign of trouble came at around mile 20, the “Zip Road” aid station. I spent a bit more time in this aid station just to gather fuel and re-fill my pack with water. But I was nauseous, and it was because of my liquid fuel. I was scared of this. I was also surprised because I had practiced with this particular brand of fuel and it always went extremely well. In any case, I knew that I had to dump it out and restart with water. Heading out of the aid station was pretty good – a technical and steep uphill that I was still able to run comfortably. Unfortunately, this soon turned into what I thought of as borderline-un-runnable rocky trails. This bothered me, and it added to the mental load I was carrying already because of the nausea.

Fortunately, things never got that bad, and I made it to the next aid station smoothly. (Throughout the race, I felt substantially better once I had the next aid station in my sight. Doesn't matter if it was at mile 5 or mile 50.) It was good to see Theo and David again at the “Party Barn”. (I learned a little later that people thought I was the “smiley-est” and “happiest” runner at the Party Barn, which stuck with me.) This was pretty smooth – I was willing to take in a shot of Tailwind hydration at the risk of exacerbating my nausea. However, after heading out of Party Barn, I hit my first low point. These trails did not seem too runnable to me, but I kept running, since running the whole race was my goal at the start. The fact that I was able to keep running was a mental win, but it did not feel good, especially because of the nausea. But I did it. I made it to the end of the loop, and the volunteers there were very supportive and encouraging. I ran the whole first loop, and it felt good lungs- and legs-wise.

The race – second loop. Despite how I felt physically at the beginning of this loop, I was still at a mental low point. I had just done this difficult 50K course, and it took a toll on me. How could I do it again? For me, the answer did not matter. I just had to go. So – I took a few extra gels with me because I knew that I could not rely on liquid nutrition anymore, and I kept running. I thought about how the first 5 mile section of the loop was quite runnable and smooth, which picked me up mentally. But during this 5 mile section, the nausea kept getting worse. Maybe I have a lot to gain in mental fortitude¹, but at the end of these 5 miles

¹you can change the word “maybe” to “probably”

that led me to the first aid station of the loop, I decided that enough was enough. Sure – I had the strength to keep running and perhaps run the whole course, but my nausea was only getting worse. I was dreading everything because of it. I did not want to run the race this way. I wanted to enjoy it. So, at about mile 35, I decided to drop my goal of running the whole course and focus on problem-solving my nausea.

As one could probably predict, this decision was not a magic spell. The problem-solving comprised of a lot of work, ideas, and trial-and-error. I had the “brilliant” idea to just keep running until I felt like I had to throw up, and then try to throw up. I am bad at making myself throw up, though, so this essentially resulted in 10 miles of the same nauseous feeling combined with a lot of dry heaving. I reached my lowest point at mile 40, the “Windmill B” aid station. I could not imagine how I was going to be able to go another 20 miles. Just thinking about being 20 miles from the finish line was viscerally painful. I was so close to giving up at the mile 40 mark and calling it quits. I am quite proud of my ability to not think about what is ahead of me and to keep taking one step at a time, but at this point in the race, I couldn’t turn on this switch. My mind was gone. I had *nothing*.

What kept me going were the supporters, the volunteers, and the energy that they brought. They were the ones who reminded me that the only job I had was to keep moving. It doesn’t matter how, but I had to keep moving. *This was the epitome of “trail running is a team sport”*, and it was enough to keep my legs moving forward.

I arrived at the “Mi Casa” aid station 45 miles in. I decided to just stop, rest, and take my time. Despite knowing that sitting down is not the best idea, I sat down on a bench. I needed a mental re-gearing, and I decided that once I left this aid station, I would just power-hike until my nausea cleared up. People passed me, but I did not care. I just power-hiked and moved forward.

About 47 miles in – magic. My nausea was not gone, but I was lucky enough to come across the idea of run-hiking. Run for 31 seconds². Walk until I could run again. Repeat. All of a sudden, 31 seconds turned into 62 seconds, and 62 seconds turned into 93 seconds. *I could run again, as long as I combined it with the power-hiking. The best part – at no point did my lungs or legs wear down. I could run again, and I felt completely fresh.* The only person I can thank for this is Serena, for the advice to actively problem-solve and for the advice that run-walking is a much more accessible alternative to running.

So, at mile 49 and heading into the mile 50 aid station. It was (almost) as if I had started from fresh legs and a fresh aerobic system. I had also figured out my nutrition situation. (High carb fueling is not for me right now.) I left the mile 50 aid station, and I made it to the mile 55 aid station in what seemed like no time at all. I caught up to a runner who had passed me 10 miles earlier and who told me at that point “look who came back from the dead”. We left the aid station at mile 55 almost together (after another slightly long break there and a nice chat with the volunteers). We power-hiked through the woods together, with him pacing me. We found the road leading to the finish, and I had the legs to run to the finish. I thought about how despondent I was at mile 40. I thought about how much I learned about myself and life during this 15 hour process. *I was grateful.* Not for being done, but for everything and everybody who helped me do it.

Post-race. I spent about 10 minutes talking to volunteers at the finish line and hearing their stories. Despite having just been through so much pain on the trails, it was still a lot of fun to hear about their experiences on the trails. They were also nice enough to tell me that these trails I had just raced on are much tougher than the “standard Bandera trails”. (About 120 out of 350 runners dropped, with a lot of them dropping by halfway!) I was lucky enough to then see Sabrina and Serena finish their races, which made it feel like a team-win. My body was fried immediately after the race, but it recovered largely within a day – that’s a win for me.

Post-race reflections. I watch a lot of documentaries about trail running, usually around the 100 miles distance and above. I want the experiences that the subjects have in those films. I did not expect Bandera to give me that, but I certainly got it. Highs, lows, mediums, empty minds, heavy minds, everything. I am lucky to have had a race be a microcosm of life.

People very naturally ask me what goes on through my head when I run for a long time. Usually, I think about nothing. My mind is blank, but in a good way. This was not the case for this race, and I’m grateful for that.

I want to do this again in the future. (Not this insanely rocky technical stuff necessarily.) I want to do 100 miles in the future. Luckily, I finished in 14h 31m, which gives me a Western States 100 lottery ticket for 2026. For now, though, my running mind is completely drained from this race, so I will put this off for now.

Ultra trail running is a team sport. The best part about this sport is that the volunteers do not know who you are, where you come from, or very much about you. But they know what you are going through, and that alone is more than enough reason for them to join your team. It’s largely because of this and their energy that it was hard to not smile all the time at aid stations.

²50K is 31 miles