

The Empire Runner

How I Became a Top 20 Olympian, or How to Host Your Own Sufferfest

By Nathan Koch



The call out went something like this:

<http://www.monolake.org/visit/tiogapassrun>

You know you want to do it.

So don't be a Girly Man... be a Burly Man!!

Only one hill!

Sledge

From there, it was a mass of emails of people coming up with excuses not to run it and of a few who said they would think about it (procrastinators who were just delaying their excuses), and 3 of us who actually showed up for the action.

The Tioga Pass Run happens to be the day after the Golden Gate Open which is a popular event for those running cross country. I'm the loyal sort, and so I felt compelled to come and support the Men's Open team at the Golden Gate Open before hopping in my rig and high-tailing it to meet Doc

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and Sledge over near Mono Lake.

We were set to have 6 runners at Golden Gate and so my plan was to let the other 5 guys be our point scorers and I would do an easy trot on the 4 mile course. My plans fell apart when Alex Wolf-Root had to bail on us, leaving us with only 5. Our fearless leader, Captain Eric “Danger” Downing, quickly let it be known that I was not to save anything for Sunday.

I didn't. I managed to take 51 seconds off of my personal record. After the race, I head back to the Empire Runners team tarp and overhear LT talking with Tori Meredith about the Tioga Pass shenanigans and my planned double. She says something about me being “young and stupid”. I don't know what she's talking about. I did a quick cool down with the guys, hopped in my 4Runner and set off on my 6 hour.

I met the boys a little before sundown and Sledge cooked up some delicious spaghetti for dinner and then we hit the sack; camped out under the stars. The following morning we packed up and headed into Lee Vining. As I'm getting my gear together, Olympic marathoner Ryan Hall runs by. My first thought is, “Well, I'm certainly not going to be winning this race.” Not that I thought I had much chance anyways.

After checking in and making final preparations, we lined up on the starting line on the main drag through Lee Vining at 6800 feet. The race starts and off we go. Ryan Hall quickly opens up a gap and disappears into the distance.

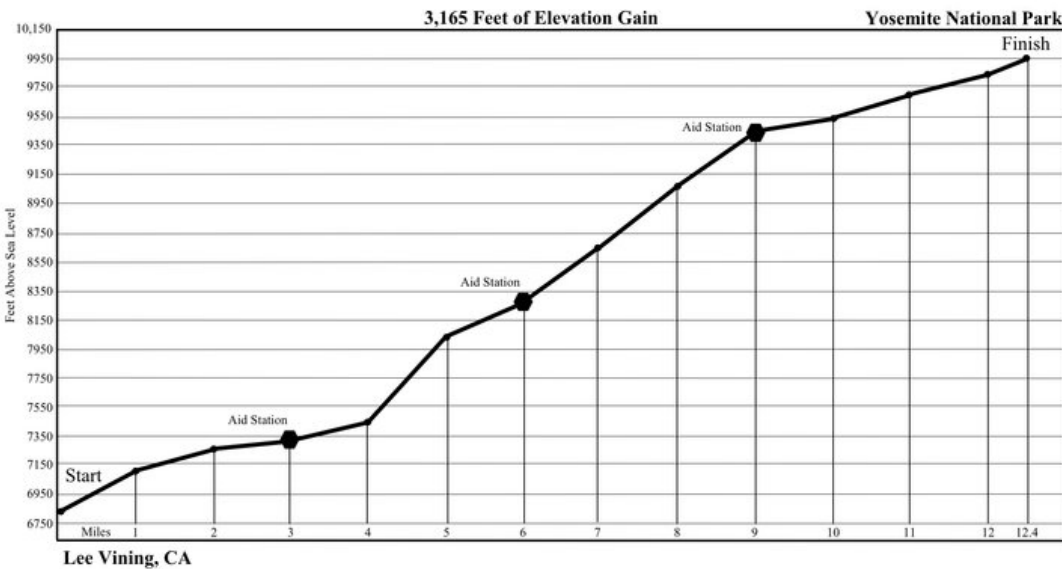
I, on the other hand, start off slow and settle into a relaxed pace. The first 1/2 mile isn't too bad, but then we turn onto a utility road and the ascent begins in earnest. I rattle off a pedestrian 8:11 mile. We turn onto Hwy 120 where we'll remain until the top of the pass. Miles 2 and 3 level out to a measly 2-3% grade and I pick up my pace to the mid 7:30s through mile 4.

I knew I wasn't in the best shape for anything real long or with major hills. I've been working on bringing down my mile time all summer, so I've had lots of speed work and not many runs longer than 8 miles. So the 12.4 miles was going to be tough all by itself, never mind the hill (there's only one!) and the elevation. The middle miles certainly accented my lack of training. Miles 5-9 showed my pace to drop into a 9:44, 10:30, 10:40, 11:35, and then 10:49. Ouch. I originally had no plans on starting my watch, but I figured it might be interesting to check out my splits later, just for laughs. I certainly got a good chuckle flipping through them afterwards.

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Runner



It was about Mile 9 when Doc showed his amazing hill strength and caught up to me. I commented on how Ryan Hall was probably finishing up about now. I received no response. Maybe Doc's feeling as good as I am.

Just as I'm thinking about making a very hard left off a cliff, the grade changes from the 9 and 10% grade to

an easy 3-4%. I'm able to open up my stride once again and set off at a clip in the mid 8 minute range. As I climb ever nearer to the 9,945 foot mark a cool breeze begins blowing up the canyon and makes for near perfect running weather. We run by a couple of scenic lakes and eventually pass the 12 mile marker. Only .4 miles to go. I make an attempt at a kick, but can only muster a slight pickup in my pace as I zero in on the eastern gate to Yosemite.

I'm congratulated by volunteers and those finished before me (including Ryan). I finished 10th with a time of 1:54, a mere 34 minutes after the winner. I walk down the road a little ways to cheer on Doc as he finishes in 13th place. And then we head on down to cheer Sledge to his 58th place finish.

Afterwards we catch a shuttle back into town, drive over to get our free lunch, and sit through the awards. From there, the three of us parted ways - me back home since I had to teach the next day, and they head off for another night in the wilderness. Somehow I manage to make it home without my legs cramping up in the 4runner. Talk about the ultimate Toyota accelerator problem.

Despite those sluggish middle miles, I'm still stoked with the race as a whole. I had a great time and would certainly do it again. After updating my Facebook status, Alex Wolf-Root commented that I was 10 in a race with Ryan Hall, and Ryan Hall was 10th at the Olympics, so that makes me a top 20 Olympian. I don't know if his logic holds up, but I'll take it. Anyone for Sufferfest 2011?