

Brazos Bend Gator Trail Run  
Brazos Bend State Park  
Sunday October 23, 2011

By David Jones  
Gator Half-Marathon  
(As in, "You'll need to watch out for the alligators.")

I had my last 20 miler of this cycle scheduled. The weather was reasonably good Tuesday, so I decided to knock it out. By mile 7, I was knocked out. Having done the Harbor Half Marathon just two days earlier, I hadn't physically recovered enough to do a 20 miler. More saliently, I wasn't mentally ready either.

It's been a long cycle, and by Wednesday I was 90% committed to skipping my 20 mile training run. But being only three weeks out from the San Antonio Marathon, I was worried that skipping it might kill my confidence in a PR attempt.

Thursday I began hastily scouring the Web for a race to motivate me. The only last minute one I could fit into my tight schedule was a half marathon trail run Sunday morning. Brazos State Park is located halfway between Victoria and Houston, and has 30 miles of trails looping around four large lakes. As the race was two laps, I figured I could just do a third to get in my 20.

Saturday morning I woke at 6:00 am to run a 5k race with my daughter. I followed this up with back-to-back birthday parties, each for eight year olds. For a moment I figured that the parties would suffice; enduring a birthday party for 20 wild screaming 2nd-graders is physically and mentally equivalent to enduring a 20 mile run, barefoot through a thorn patch.

I didn't get on the road until 6:00 pm, and arrived at my hotel at 9:00. As I headed to my room the desk-clerk noted, "Oh, we also have a full hot breakfast from 6:00-10:00: eggs, pancakes, sausages." I sighed and lugubriously replied, "Can't, I have to check-out at 5:30 am."

After a ten minute gear check, I hit the bed and was dead to the world. In what seemed a minute, my 5:00 am alarm went off. I strained to open one eye halfway, "Screw it." I resolved to get three more hours sleep and then hit the buffet for a dozen pancakes. I'm not sure who put them there, but I found both my feet on the floor. "Well, crap. I'm committed now."

I drove for 30 minutes down pitch black country roads and arrived at the park just after 6:30. At a small pavilion, about 90 runners were assembled. For a small event, it was very well organized. At 7:00, the announcer called us into the chute. Then the announcer looked directly at me and then the two guys standing a foot to my left. From the neck down we looked like identical triplets. "You three might want to get in front," the announcer directed.

I stood at the start line with my two reunited siblings. We were then joined by a fourth runner, a little girl no more than three-and-half feet tall, with bright blond hair braided in two pig-tails that wrapped around her head in a kind-of Princess Leia hairdo.

"Oh honey, you're doing the relay," the announcer rhetorically asked her. "OK, you might not want to stand in front." The girl didn't even reply with a glance in acknowledgement. The horn sounded and we were off.

After just 50 yards my two siblings were in fact leading 1st and 2nd. I was running 4th as Princess Leia was out like a sprinter. I said to myself, "How incredibly fearless for this little girl to try and run a relay-leg of a half marathon." I simultaneously thought, "How incredibly stupid that someone threw a little girl in this with no coaching; she'll be walking by mile two."

The trail was generally good and alternated among stretches of gravel and dirt. The gravel was moderately compact, with occasional golf-ball sized stones here and there. The dirt pack was soft, and had the occasional tree-root or broken branch sticking out. As a result, you had to stare at your feet the entire run.

I didn't catch the little girl until mile three, and she was still pushing with good-form at a 8:00 min/mile pace. "Wow, amazing. Go get it girl!" I encouraged as I finally past. I was now third overall, and could see the two leaders about 100 yards off. I settled into my 20 mile pace, but decided to peek-up now and then to look for any signs of weakness in the leaders.

Finishing the first lap, I had no idea of my pace since I left my watch turned off, intentionally. But my leg turn-over felt fast and I estimated I'd complete the first lap in 47 minutes or so. Crossing the timing-mats I looked up at the clock, 50 minutes. "What!?"

I couldn't believe my actual pace was 30 seconds/mile slower than my "felt" pace. Giving it some more thought while cruising my second lap, it was logical. It was a little warm and humid at the start, I was wearing my heavy trainers and not race shoes, and the soft-give in the trail reduced my striding power somewhat.

I finished the bend around "Horseshoe Lake" and converged on the main trail again. That's when I saw the women's race leader headed to the lake, the little girl!!!! She wasn't doing the relay; she was doing the full half marathon. It then dawned on me, she wasn't a little girl. She was what is now called, "A little person," or what George Carlin used to euphemistically refer to as, "A person who is vertically challenged." Nevertheless, it was odd to see such a small frame pushing along at that pace.

Halfway through the second lap, I was passed by another runner which temporarily moved me to 4th place overall. But just a mile later, I caught one of my siblings and moved back into 3rd. With a mile remaining, I began hearing sliding gravel behind me as another runner had moved within 10 feet. I had a decision to make.

To hold him off, I would have to run full-bore the last mile, but that might jeopardize my ability to make my full 20. I tested him and increased my pace a nick for 50 yards. He held-on, clearly willing to fight for it. I acknowledged to myself that the purpose of this trip was to make my 20; I dropped my pace and encouraged him as he past to cross the finish placing 3rd overall, with me 30 yards behind in 4th at 1:43.

I just ran through the finish and started a third lap. My race was over and now I could afford a few glances up to see the park. The lakes were large and swamp-like, but completely placid. I ran past a dozen or so "birders" taking pictures; how nice it would be to just stroll the trails.

I finished my third lap which took me to 19.6 miles, which should have been good enough. But having come so far, I ran another quarter mile of a 4th lap, and then jogged back to the pavilion to make a full 20. The post-race event was great.

Two Bar-B-Qs were full of hamburgers and hot dogs, and right next to half-a-dozen ice-chests stocked with a variety of cold drinks. I grabbed a burger and sat at one of the picnic tables. When I looked up, the women's overall winner was two feet from me. She was a young girl!!

She sat pressed against her proud father. "That was incredibly amazing. How old are you?" I could see that she was in-deed quite young as she didn't answer and shyly hid behind her Dad's back, just peeking one eye above his shoulder. Her father began to speak. He too was quite accomplished, well in the conversational arts for he didn't stop to take a breath for 15 minutes.

He explained that she was nine years-old, and this was her 3rd half-marathon. She just PRed in 1:53. Phenomenal! The father looked like a runner also, and I figured he must be some-kind-of

university track coach to have a pre-teen daughter at this caliber. I inquired, but his jaw had built-up so much momentum, it couldn't slow enough to turn toward a reply.

I caught it when he said, "My girls [plural] have a strong running base." To slow him down a little, I stood up and pointed one foot in the direction of the hot-dog table. Before leaving, I was able to squeeze in, "Girls?"

He continued, "Her older sister runs also; she did a full marathon yesterday." I asked how old she was. Without a wink, smile, or even grin, he dry and plainly answered, "Eleven."



1st in my Division / 4th