

The Superior Sawtooth is a very tough, technical trail with a 38 hour time limit. If you are well trained and don't make beginner mistakes, this is an awesome run. It's a point to point run that features beautiful scenery, all on trails in Northern Minnesota along Lake Superior on the Superior Hiking Trail. Like most beautiful ultras, it's a bit of a challenge getting there. The race starts at Gooseberry State Park (40 miles north of Duluth) and finishes in the ski resort village of Lutsen (93 miles north of Duluth / 130 miles south of Canada). You stay in Lutsen and leave at 0600 to drive south for the 0800 start. With sunrise at 0630, I kept thinking we're burning daylight waiting for the start and I put my flashlight in a drop bag too far...

I had some real challenges at Sawtooth, most were self-inflicted, but not all. I will address some of these just as a reminder not to do stupid things, but I really want to focus on an awesome run. This run really had everything: very well marked, beautiful trees, great smells, many river crossing (bridges), some waterfalls, some flat running on soft ground, hogsback-type hills overlooking lakes and Aspen forests, long distance (8-10 miles) between aid stations, super aid station folks, very technical (but not slippery like HURT), and howling wolves – that's a first for me. The hills are deceptive in the sense you seem to always go the lowest point before you start up and when you think you are at the top, the real summit is way higher to your left or right. Most of these hills are not the classic switchbacks, just straight up like hogsback. The nights were cool and refreshing and allowed for deep contemplation...ok, making that last part up.

The first part of the race was very runnable, but I was obsessing about not getting to my flashlight before dark. I had a small LED with me, but felt compelled to still worry. I think the best way to get to an aid station 43 miles away is to go really fast at the beginning. This always seems to work well for me. Actually, I knew I was putting my race in jeopardy and was upset, but I didn't want to be in a dark forest at night having to rely on someone else. I was moving too fast when I hit the first aid station at 9.4 miles and as a bonus; I rubbed a blister on the back of my ankle. I didn't have any duct tape with me and by the time I got to the aid station it was a mess. To be honest, it hurt throughout the run, but did not really affect my run. But its 7 days after the race and that bad boy still hurts. I will not start too fast and I will fix boo-boos when they happen.

I was dripping with sweat all day. It wasn't terribly hot, but it was really humid. I had one drop bag at the 20 mile point, but all I had was a long sleeve shirt thinking it may be chilly. The 0800 start combined with 88% humidity caught a lot of runners by surprise. 70 runners started and only 36 finished and the first day humidity was the reason. I had slowed down after my fast start (I confirmed this by all the nice people passing me). I always think that I'm further along then I am. I realized that I will not make the aid station before sunset, unless I really ran. I kept telling myself, make it to the aid station and rest of the race will be fine. It's pretty dark in this forest even with the sun. I made the aid station 9 minutes after sunset, a little winded, but a lot relieved. I left that aid station 10 minutes later and it was so dark I couldn't see jack or anyone else, but I had my trusty Gerber hand held, a dry long sleeve shirt, and I was happy.

I started running with Kevin O'Grady and ran most of the night with him. He completed Hardrock 3 times and was there when Richard Senelly finished with a minute to spare. This was his 8th Superior so he was a wealth of information and I was a willing listener. He told me about wolves and moose and some of the 100s he ran. It was good and I could keep up with Kevin by power walking and a little running. Eventually I wanted to move a little faster hoping to catch some wolves and was running by myself for the rest of the race. 5 Hour Energy drink really worked for me, but it's still tough between 4:30-6:00. I was high up during sunrise and I saw an incredible sight. Below the sun was a rectangular sun ray going down to the ground. No one was around, but I really did see it. The folks at the aid station told me that it's a common sight up here and it's caused by the sun's reflection off Lake Superior. Between the wolves howling and the unique sun ray, I was feeling pretty special.

The sun was really neat, but it started to heat up and I still had my long sleeve on. I finally got to the 84 mile aid station and changed to a short sleeve – big relief. My legs were still strong, but I was really tired, too tired for where I was in the race. Stop thinking about being tired and focus on finishing before the sunset. Started up this mountain and I was passed by a runner. Bummer! Then I was passed by another, and another and about 3 more. I started to get discouraged and told myself if another one passes you, go after him. My luck, the him was a her and the chase was on. I really ran hard to keep up with her, too hard. I hit the aid station and started to walk in, but the earth kept moving. I smiled at the 90 mile aid station folks and asked to sit down. I ran too hard and was paying the price. I relayed how a bunch a runners passed me and they really looked strong. The aid station worker (with a wonderful Irish accent) told me they were the 50 milers who started this morning. That would explain it. She told me the next 5.5 miles were pretty flat and that I should use it to recover because the last 7 miles you go over 3 mountains and it was really tough. I wanted to get going because the earth had stopped moving and I didn't have any time to waste. This is when it got a little weird. I was power walking, thought I was moving okay, but I must have zoned out or dozed off. I remember looking around and having no idea where I was at, but still walking. Was I going the right way? Where the heck am I going? Why was I following this path? To be honest, this really spooked me. This was another first, but not a good one. I tried to focus the best I could, and told myself I was in a race in Minnesota and that I needed to follow this path to the next aid station. That made sense, at least at first, and I did a death march to the next aid station which must have been in Canada.

I was greeted by smiling faces, the last aid station of the race, but I was worried. I lost a lot of time and I wasn't sure if I could make it over 3 mountains and be home by dark. My two worse fears in ultra running are getting hurt or having someone rescue me. I have never been hurt, but they had to come and get me at Plain and that is something that I will never forget. So what should I do? Drop at mile 95.5 mile, gave it my best shot? I decided that I would do all I could to get ready, but I wouldn't leave the aid station unless I knew (not thought) that I would finish. I started pounded down the Mountain Dew. MD made Rex a new man at Kettle and I was pulling out the stops. I started eating anything with sugar and kept drinking MD. I started feeling the love again and had the game face on. I asked the nice lady with the Irish accent (same gal from the previous aid

station) what to expect for the next 7.1 miles. You go up and over three mountains: Oberg, Moose, and Mystery Mountain. Oberg is tough, straight up, Moose is the hardest, but Mystery has switchbacks so it's not so bad. Then it's all downhill to the finish. Let's kick this bad boy and go home. I left the aid station knowing I would finish with no drama. I was moving ok with some ups and downs and then a long down. Whenever there's a long down, there is either an aid station or a long up. And since I just left an aid station, time to swing those arms and do my huffing and puffing. I caught a runner at the top of Oberg. Nice guy. He said he has done triathlons and 50 milers and really enjoyed them, but a 100 miler (his first) was not enjoyable at all. I told him that 100 milers caused short term memory loss and by Monday, all you will remember is a great adventure. Don't know if he buying it, but he did finish his first 100 miler. I was really focused and wanted to put Moose behind me. After a bunch of ups and downs, I started do some switchbacks. I think this means I'm climbing Mystery. That's really good news. I guess Moose wasn't so bad after all. I caught up with two runners, Cat and Wouter (from Belgian) at the top of Mystery. The good news is that I made it over the three mountains and I'm heading down. The bad news is the sugar / caffeine / adrenaline rush was over and the wheels started to wobble. My two new friends were in similar shape and we walked it in. I finished in 35:21 about 13 minutes before sunset and Darcy was at the finish line to meet me. I was really happy to see her, but she looked a bit frighten. Usually, no matter how bad I feel, if there's a camera, I'm smiling. But after this run, I was toast. I knew I really pushed myself and needed to sit down and fix some things. Darcy picked up my belt buckle and finisher's jacket while I shook hands with some folks and talked story. Our hotel room was walking distance and we headed off arm and arm. Very romantic. Actually, she was holding me up, but I knew that I had already started to heal.

Lessons Learned – Reminders:

1. 650 miles is too far to drive the day before the race. Arrived at hotel at 9:30.
2. Don't over estimate your abilities, especially when it comes to lighting.
3. In point to point runs, drop bags are critical – over stock to cover contingencies.
4. Fix problems now.
5. I always appreciated my pacers, but even more when I don't have any.
6. Training may have helped.