



Coastal Trail Series: Sussex

I was pretty excited about this race on the Southern coast in Sussex, across the Seven Sisters. Not only did I want to run a March marathon, but I wanted to see this area, and it fit perfectly in my training plan. If I said to my husband, "Hey, let's drive all day on Friday, walk around on Saturday, and drive all day back on Sunday to see some pretty cliffs," he would have looked at me like I was crazy and said, "No way." Fortunately, if I say, "I want to go run a marathon in Sussex," his response is, "Have fun, I'll see you when you get back." So off I went.



It was a lot colder and windier than the weather report had proclaimed, but I was prepared for every contingency. At the race start I was bundled up with multiple layers and looking around at the people with me, some of whom were bare legged and hatless, thinking half the group was nuts, but I wasn't sure yet which half, the over-dressed half or the under dressed half.



We took off and things were going well. I went right into my power walk for the up hills and laughed at all the people that had taken off at a fast trot and were now lined up waiting for a turn to go through a small gate. (English trail races include a multitude of livestock corralling, narrow gates to pass through and fences to climb over, via an assortment of slats and steps.) Everyone stood around waiting their turn and even the walkers with trekking poles caught the runners. From the takeoff though, I realized it was going to be a definitely “back of the pack” day. Oh well, I wasn’t here to prove anything to anyone but me. I watched the line of runners stretch out before me, thinking either they were all very ambitious, or I am a horrible trail racer.



Then the storm hit. I had decided to wear my gloves, ear band, and buff and was very glad I did. We had watched it coming across the ocean, bringing winds that knocked us backwards. Ice pellets and rain hammered us as we slogged up the first set of hills. Up is usually good when you can run down the other side, but running down was very dicey. The grass was slick with rain and ice, and very steep and uneven, so we were picking our way down trying not to fall, rather than galloping down like we wanted. At one point, I lifted my foot to take a step up and a wind gust hit so hard I was suspended in midair, unable to move forward to put my foot down ahead of the other, and desperately trying not to get tipped backward for a tumble back down the hill I just climbed. This seemed like it went on forever. Finally, the rain stopped and the sky began to clear. That is when I realized we had been out there 40 minutes, and had gone 2.5 miles. Not a good sign!



The next few miles were kind of a blur. Cute towns and villages with cute buildings and pretty flowers. I ran for a couple of miles with a young graduate student from Malaysia. It was his first full marathon and he was soaked and freezing in his sweats. He didn't finish. England never ceases to amaze me in its ability to be totally stormy and over cast one minute, and have nearly clear blue skies the next, but that is how it went. Looking back at pictures, it is hard to imagine they were all taken within a few hours.



Back out into farm country I was battling with the mud made of chalk that hangs onto your shoes like super glue and is the consistence of potter's clay. On the up side, the clouds had moved off and it seemed like the weather would finally be decent, and maybe my camera would dry out enough to start working properly again. I rounded a corner and suddenly remembered something they said during the briefing about, "You will run past the _____ so be sure and look up to see it." I had no idea what they had said until the sun broke through the clouds and the Long Man of Wilmington was shining like it was made of mirrors!



The hill figure lifted my spirits and carried me for a while as I slogged through more mud, trying not to lose a shoe or twist an ankle. Surprisingly, I could see runners ahead of and behind me. Usually in a race like this I'm pretty much alone by about 10 miles in, so it was nice, especially since I was worried about missing a turn. The race was extremely well marked, but one can never completely account for "running brain."



Finally, in a steady drizzle, but thankfully sheltered from the wind for a few moments, we dipped down to the half way mark. I had been running, hiking, and slogging for 3 whole hours! My dreams of a 5:00 or even 5:30 finish were long gone and I wasn't even totally sure I would bother finishing at all. I was so tired, cold, and wet that my thoughts kept drifting back to a hot shower and dry clothes. I would think, "Okay, I'll bag it at 20 and call it a training run," but then I would remember the 35 mile ultra just 4 short weeks away, and the need to finish all 26 miles would reassert itself. It was the only thing that kept me going when I passed within 100 yards of my car at around 17 miles, what a terrible tease!



Oddly at this point I started passing people. My power walk was paying off and everyone was done in. The tourists were out and about, which would be a good sign about the weather, except these English folk are tough as nails and go out hiking and sightseeing in crazy weather! Around this time I came upon the steepest hill of all. It looks vertical in my elevation profile, and felt nearly that steep when I was on it. I was just going to walk down, since my time was shot and my legs were buckling, but it was too steep to walk. It was also too steep to run and we ended up just sort of shuffling down in a controlled fall, praying not to LOSE that control and roll down ass over teakettles. This one decent was really hard on my knees. My quads tightened into rocks and I felt the familiar ripping sensation that goes with the injury I have been battling. Tight quads also pull your knee caps off track so the next mile or so was spent stopping to stretch in an attempt to get everything back on track.

With just a couple of miles to go, I felt much better and didn't even care about the wind, I was nearly done and with plenty of time before the cut off. My finish time was 6:02, which I won't hold up in comparison to road races, but I certainly got in a lot of hill training and more important, I made a hard effort for 6 hours which brings me closer to the 7 hour expectation for Two Oceans. I truly only want to finish that one. Anything under 7 hours will be pure frosting on my happy cake!













