

Hardrock 100 (2004)

The Hardrock 100 is a foot race in the San Juan mountains of Colorado/USA over 101.4 miles (163 km) and over 33212 ft (10123 m) of climbs on rugged terrain, mostly on old mining trails. There is one climb to above 14000 ft (4267 m), 5 climbs to above 13000 ft. (3962 m) and 6 to over 12000 ft (3658 m), the lowest point of the course is at 7870 ft (2399 m). Many ultra runners consider the Hardrock 100 as the toughest 100 miler there is. The course record, on a slightly easier course than this year, lies at 26hrs 39 minutes.

Environmental restrictions imposed by the BLM limit the run to 125 starters which are selected first by qualifying standards and secondly in a weighted lotterie.

In February I heard that I was accepted to this year's run. Due to the good skiing this winter I didn't begin any serious running training before April, though. I had already run Hardrock in the counter-clockwise direction in '98 in 32:43, and figured I might do better this year, hoping to maybe beat the 30 hour barrier. With about 750 km of training in my legs I flew to the US in mid June. First I spent a few days in Ithaca with old friends from my time at Cornell, participated in a hilly 20 km race which I finished in 1:19:17, about 30 seconds faster than 9 years ago! So I wasn't in such a bad shape at all. The morning after Earl's 40th birthday party, I went on a trail run on the finger lakes trail which passes near his property, fell in a downhill and hurt my hand: It was badly sprained and the Ithaca hospital thought a chip might have broken off a finger bone, so they put a splint on my arm, all the way up to my elbow.

The next morning I took my flight to Denver where I first stayed in Boulder with Chris and Pam whom I had learned to know while backcountry skiing several years ago, saw a specialist hand doctor who cleared me for running and removed the splint. After sleeping on top of Mt. Evans at 14200 ft. elevation I had so much headaches that I scrapped my original plan to climb the 14ers Mt Bross and Licoln and went directly to Lake City on the East side of the race course. This region I had not explored when I first ran Hardrock in 1998. From Sherman I checked out the HR100 trail between Grouse and near Maggie, climbed all the 14ers of the area and slept above 10 000ft.

The last day at Sherman I met the trail marking group near Cataract lake and was introduced to "Bogey", Alfred Bogenhuber, who had emigrated from Salzburg to the US many years ago. He is a terrific runner at his 60something years and had finished last year's hardrock in 33 hrs and his wife Edith nearly keeps up with him. This year he just wanted to pace someone, so we consented quickly that he would pace me from Grouse Gulch to the finish.

The evening I drove 5 hrs around the montains to Silverton, because I judged it too risky to drive the shortcut jeep road passes with my low clearance 2 wheel drive rental car. Above Silverton, on little Molass lake at 11000ft elevation I pitched my tent and took my base camp there. Thanks to Hans-Dieter for recommending this perfect spot to me! Hans Dieter from Göttingen spent the last 3 summers touring the US with his Camper van and running up to 20 100 milers in a year! The following days I helped with the course marking and also checked out the course on my own. The last two nights I slept on top of stony pass at 12600ft, the night before the race in Silverton Perkins, a friend of Edith and Alfred offered me a bed in his motel room, which I gladly accepted since rooms were pretty much booked out that night.

After preparing and handing in 3 drop bags, for Ouray, Grouse and Sherman and an all you can eat dinner I went to bed at 8pm

The next morning, 7/9/2004, I got up at 4.45, got myself ready, checked in at the start and chatted with people, some of which, like Randy Isler, I remmbered from the '98 run.

At 6am they sent us off to our "pleasure run".

I went out with about 10 persons in front of me. Soon you have to wade the first creek and the first climb begins. I felt good, but tried to hold myself back, keeping my heart rate at around 130 not to overdo it in the beginning. Nevertheless before the end of the first climb I was ahead of the field, except for Karl Meltzer who had set a fantastic course record in 26:39 in 2001 and now even wanted to break it. Once on the first summit Karl was already out of sight, Curtis, Hans and a younger guy from Telluride were followig me closely. The upcoming downhill seccion I had not checked out before the run, so I was extra careful not to miss any course markers and turn offs. Before reaching KT aid station I caught a flie with my eye but at KT I could rinse it out with much water and stop the pain. I managed to run about half of KT and was now clearly ahead of everybody else chasing behind Karl. This time I did not miss the difficult to find turnoff to Island lake (as I did in training before) climbed Bear Swamp with Hans nearly catching me towards the top. I put a rock onto Joel Zucker's memorial and quickly raced downhill the scree slope. Joel was from Cortland , NY a great friendly person whom I had learnt to know during my time in Ithaca. He was an enthusiastic 100 mile runner, without him I

would have never attempted to run one, let alone Hardrock. He died shortly after his 3rd finish of hardrock and a plaque on Grant Swamp Pass reminds us of him. Thanks Joel for all!

After the top slope a bumpy and pretty hard snow field helped me to descend in a few minutes to the shelf onto shepherd's camp. On the descent over the scree my left gaiter had moved up over the back of my shoe so that some stones had found their way into my shoes, but I decided they would move into some non-disturbing places and kept on running without emptying my shoes. Soon after not much was to be felt of them any more. After filling up my water bottles at the second aid station, Chapman at mile 18 I climbed somewhat slower towards Oscars pass. The sun was out it was getting hot and I was getting slower despite moving at the same heart rate. Also I could feel a light unease/pain in my left ankle. My left ankle was sore after some previous ultras, but to feel it so early in the race was unusual and surprising. I just hoped that it wouldn't worsen too soon, and it didn't. Indeed after Ouray I didn't notice it any more at all.

Soon Hans Put went past me, lightfooted with small quick steps. Towards the top I could see about 10 more folks trying to catch up with me. On the subsequent downhill to Telluride I caught up with Hans again, who didn't seem to be so strong on tough downhills with difficult footing. Up Virginus pass at even higher temperatures he got way ahead of me and towards the top 3 more persons were closing in. Here I pushed pretty hard to keep ahead of them.

Leading down from Virginus was a steep snow slope which I skied on my runners for the first two thirds and then shot down on my but the remainder of it. This descent was definitely faster and more difficult than during the course marking session. The following slopes were likewise difficult to negotiate: snow, both hard and soft with holes well beyond the knee and interdispersed rocks meant to be extra alert to move fast without getting hurt. I managed well, though I was out of breath when finally leaving the snow slopes. The final 8 miles into Ouray are on a popular jeep road and this meant that I swallowed a lot of dust running down this in the afternoon traffic. Fortunately it remained overcast so that my biggest enemy, high temperatures, though elevated remained somewhat manageable for me. In Ouray I met my Crew Alfred, Edith and Perkins and went back out with a cup of mashed potatoes in my hand, freshly filled water bottles but without headlamp, which I decided to leave behind for weight reasons.

After finishing the potatoes I wanted to purge my throat with some succeed, but yuk! This was no succeed (energy drink) it was very strong exceed (mineral drink) and this wasn't what my stomach would like at all right now. Leaving Ouray you trace back your incoming steps for a while, so I saw that there were a group of three, later Betsy Kalmeyer and another, older guy 20-25 behind me. Additionally those 3 closing in on me at Virginus should be so close behind me that I wouldn't have seen them. So my calculation was: 2 ahead of me, 3 close behind 5 further behind, makes ten who could easily catch me before the finish pushing me out of the top ten. Not a very pleasurable thought! With a less good feeling I continued up, waded the high flowing Uncompahre river and made my way up those long 5000 ft of climb to Engineers pass. After some more gulps out of my bottle my stomach revolted. I puked out the heavy mineral drink, but kept the lower contents of my stomach (if there was any). Fears of people catching me from behind increased and I found something to blame my present weakness on: the wrong drink. Certainly physically it didn't make a big influence on my performance, but morally it gave me an excuse not to push on hard and to lament instead. However, continuing without any drinking I soon felt better, just I was lacking some water for top performance. Finally after well over an hour a side stream came down with clear enough water to be drinkworthy to me. I filled a bottle and pushed on. I didn't stay long at Engineer aid station, nevertheless Kirk Apt and Kevin Shilling? Overtook me soon after. Kirk caught me in '98 going up Handies Peak only to be never seen again and I expected something similar now. However I kept close behind them until reaching the top. Night was falling now and I only had my tiny little emergency LED-light with me. So I pushed on while the others were putting on a Jacket and sorting out their lights. With a few 100 yards in the lead I ran downhill taking advantage of every last bit of dusk to find my way on the road without using up my battery light. This also meant my light wouldn't show those behind me where to go. Sometimes they stopped at intersections to check for the right trail and I could keep my lead. Further down it was too dark to run without light but my tiny LED light gave enough light to safely run into Grouse Gulch aid station.

I heard some shouts "Gi" before the aid station without realizing that these were Edith, Perkins and Alfred who had prepared my drop bag stuff at their car. So I was now at the aid station without drop bag. I had some of the excellent banana custard and before finishing they had brought all my stuff over to the aid station. Since it seemed not to get too cold I just took my long sleeve shirt into my pack, gloves and my ski poles. Suddenly someone told me: Do you know, if you're leaving now you're in the lead! – What? Karl is hours ahead of me and Hans also!

No – Karl is lying in the tent: he completely fell apart for pushing too hard and Hans hurt himself going down Virginus, he is out, too! This seemed too good to be true: leading hardrock! Nevertheless I didn't

pay too much attention and kept on running my own race. It is only here at Grouse, mile 60, where the run really begins. So much can happen on the remaining 40 miles! Here at Grouse, my pacer, Bogey, joined me and went out a few yards ahead of me, helping me finding my way through the night with a powerful halogen light. To save batteries I just ran on the LED setting of my headlight, sufficient to illuminate the steps right in front of me. Only at difficult spots or on fast downhills I would switch to halogen. Kirk had left the aid station ahead of me, but apparently spent some time with his crew so that I was probably leading the race at this moment. Going up towards American pass we could see several lights following with two of them approaching rapidly. Here they were: Karl, recovered from his weakness, and his pacer were zooming past us at a mind boggling speed. Going down into American basin I felt real pain on my feet for the first time the soles were burning! But the poles helped me over the worst. Before reaching Handies saddle Karl had already reached the summit and a pair of lights was following with apparent route-finding difficulties. Handies was reached about 1 hour after the time for my 30hrs – schedule. But I didn't feel so well any more. I had no will to push on the downhill to maybe keep my 30 hrs dream alive! So, with the help of my poles I followed Bogey, who leisurely danced down the trail. Reaching the jeep road at Burrows Park we didn't find the water bottles promised, but soon after a Creek to take water from. Running this level jeep road was tough now, but I managed.

Bogey went ahead, opened my drop bag and prepared my shoes at Sherman aid station. Here was Karl Meltzer was again lying in the aid station tent completely exhausted. After changing shoes and socks, my feet didn't hurt any less but I continued on, hearing someone entering the aid station just after I had left. Not much later Karl blew past me again, and soon thereafter Paul Sweeny and his pacer overtook me also. Soon Karl would sit on the side of the trail, than overtake again only to be found a little while later coughing up blood. This was the last time I saw him. He had to hike back to Sherman, get an IV at the hospital but was fine again the following day.

The meadows towards Cataract lake I couldn't really run any more, even though they would offer ideal near flat soft tundra ground. Whenever it was near flat Bogey would start a veeeery slow jog and I would run behind him in a shuffling motion that wouldn't stress feet and ankles. Briefly we met Paul again who was checking on the course with us, only to take off again swiftly. After a short stop at Pole creek aid station I continued to fight my way towards Maggies aid station, mile 84. Here I learnt that I was in the lead again, apparently Paul had got lost and the closest follower was 30 minutes behind at Pole creek.

Now I thought you really have to fight: 30 minutes may just not be enough to defend to the finish in my state but in such a situation you've got to try. The climbs to green mountain went smoothly, but the descent to Cunningham, newly added to the Course this year, was a piece from hell: a steep grassy slope, partly dusty and with rolling rocks and recently travelled on by sheep. Somehow I made it down, long behind Bogey and reached the last aid station, Chapman, with hurting feet. Here I dropped my fanny pack to be as light as possible and went out just with two water bottles tugged in the back of my shorts.

Not much after leaving I could hear the cheers for someone already entering the aid station. Too close, I thought but pushed on, you never know. But sure enough, halfway up Little Giant I was passed by Paul Sweeny, the lost guy had caught me again and was clearly going stronger than me. A few minutes after Paul we reached the pass and despite the pain in my feet, I tried to somewhat run-stumble down to the Arrastra road and down this rocky road. I wasn't sure if Paul had be 30 minutes behind at Pole Creek or if there might have been someone else close behind me. After an endless downhill on the road we finally entered the last 3 miles of near flat towards silverton. Now I was confident that I could keep my place. With sore legs I continued kind of running until we finally reached Silverton and I could kiss the hardrock at the finish as 2nd in a time of 31:24!!! Paul had come in an incredible 45 minutes ahead of me, just over those 9 miles to the finish. The following runners would come in at a rate of about one per 30 minutes behind me.

After removing my shoes I just sat for an hour in a camping chair, watching runners come in and enjoying a beer which Jim fisher got me, knowing what a German would like after such a run. Looking back it didn't feel like my best run ever, optimistically speaking with some 100 more miles of preparation in my legs and maybe a slower start I should have been able to run about an hour faster. A sub 30-time as originally envisaged in my hay-flying dreams is probably beyond reach for me. Nevertheless, I did not loose too much time on the second half and fourth quarter and was 1:20 faster than in 1998. So altogether I am pretty happy with my run and to be so fortunate to come in as 2nd with this very good, but by no means outstanding time, makes it even better!

So far I do not have any goals for next year, but I'd love to return to do another Hardrock in a few years time!