

RACE REPORT - 48th Annual Equinox Marathon

September 18th, 2010

FAIRBANKS, ALASKA - The 48th Annual Equinox Marathon was held on September 18th, 2010. I had decided early in 2010 that this was going to be the year that I returned to run the Equinox Marathon. The last time I was in Fairbanks for the race, things didn't go very well. I decided to go back to Fairbanks for my 9th Equinox Marathon and try to redeem myself for what had happened in 2007.

In case you're not familiar with the story, in 2007 I started the Equinox in the best shape of my life. Unfortunately when I got to Alaska in 2007, I ended up getting sick. I started that race with a 101 degree fever. Things went downhill quickly. When I got to the top of Ester Dome I was pulled from the course with hypothermia at mile 12.7. A DNF. :(

When I got home from the 2007 Equinox, I told myself I wasn't going to dwell on that. Fat chance of that. For 3 years after the race, what happened on Ester Dome in 2007 had been with me. I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that I had come up short in 2007. I had the best running year of my life in 2007 with 2623 miles run, personal bests at 10 miles, half marathon, marathon, miles in a week, miles in a month, miles in a year. But it was the Equinox and the disaster on Ester Dome that stuck with me.

Three years later, I found myself 40 pounds heavier than I was in 2007. Injuries had limited me to just 1300 miles going into the Equinox. I followed the Pfitzinger 18 week, up to 55 miles per week program with a few modifications leading up to the marathon. The modifications were on the 20 mile long runs, to push that mileage higher. One of the 20 milers was 21.5, the second was 26.75 miles, and the third was 23.2 miles. I had been able to do all of the runs that Pfitz called for. I went into the race feeling confident in my chances of running the 2010 Equinox in 5:00:00.

The trip to Alaska went smoothly. This time I did not get sick. As I was driving into Fairbanks at about Mile 340 of the Parks Highway I caught my first glimpse of my nemesis, Ester Dome. Corny as I sounds, I looked over at the mountain and said "I'm coming for you, and I'm going to kick your ass for what you did to me in 2007." As soon as I got checked into my hotel, I immediately changed into my running clothes and drove over to Ester Dome. I drove to the top and then ran down the mountain and back up the mountain. On the way back up the mountain, I heard a rustling over in the woods to my left. It was a MOOSE! She watched me run by as if to

say "Are you crazy? You're running UP the mountain!" Anyway, the run went smoothly, but it was tougher than I thought it would be.

The next day I went over of Ester Dome and did the challenging, hilly, out-and-back portion of the Equinox course. Again, it was harder than I had remembered, but it went okay.

I went to the spaghetti feed on the 17th, and presented race director Steve Bainbridge with a coffee mug from my running club, the Merrimack Valley Striders. Over the past 15 years, Steve has been directing the race and doing a remarkable job. Steve is stepping down as race director, and I presented him with the mug as a thank you for all the hard work he put in over the years on the race. After the pasta feed I went home and checked the weather. It looked like it was going to be perfect.

Race day had finally arrived. I woke up and had my bowl of Lucky Charms cereal. The weather did not disappoint. It was 31 degrees with clear skies and no wind. I opted for my shorts, a tank top and my MVS Singlet over it. I knew I would probably be a bit chilly at the start, but I knew it was going up to 60 degrees during the day and it was going to be sunny. Add to that, the 4 mile long climb up Ester Dome would probably heat me up, so I figured I would be okay. The tough decision of the day was shoes. I had my trail shoes with me in Alaska, and I had a pair of pavement shoes with me too. During the training runs earlier in the week, I had noticed that the trail shoes were bothering my left ankle. On the harder packed sections of the course, and the pavement sections of the course, the trail shoes did not offer enough cushioning. The grip of the trail shoes would have been better, but in the end I opted for the pavement shoes.

I did a quick warm up before the race. I felt pretty good, and went in for the pre-race instructions.

As I was milling around before the race I heard someone yell "Kevin!" I looked over and saw my friend Jodi. This was the first time I met Jodi in person, but we had talked for years on MySpace and Facebook. We both share a love for the Equinox Marathon. It was great to finally meet Jodi in person.



Getting ready for the start.

Just before the start, my thoughts went to my friend Joe Truini. Joe and I talked running for years on coolrunning.com and kickrunners.com. Sadly, Joe was taken from us far before his time, in his late 30s. Joe always loved trail running, and had told me he wanted to one day do the

Equinox Marathon. He never got the chance to run the race. I looked skyward and asked him to join me for the run today.

Finally, the cannon sounded and we were off. We charged up the sledding hill at the University of Alaska - Fairbanks. I started chatting with a young guy who was running the Equinox Ultramarathon, a 50K run that follows most of the marathon course with just a little side trip. Honestly, I don't know how he did it, I had enough trouble with the marathon. As I expected, during the first mile I warmed up fine, and the cool 31 degree air wasn't bothering me a bit. The field gets kind of crowded on the sledding hill as there are some twisting fenced in areas that we have to go through.

Mile 1 - 11:24.1. Heart Rate (HR): 152 Average Heart Rate (AHR): 147

During mile 2, I continued to try to tell myself stay calm. Stay within yourself. Keep the heart rate down. The course was out along the trails until we hit a small lake at about mile 1.3. We then turned to go onto a short section of pavement to go avoid going through the lake, then jumped back on the trail up to the mile 2 marker. The trail itself I was surprised to find wasn't completely covered with leaves. I still had to be careful with the tree roots and rocks, but it was in good shape in this section. I didn't like that my heart rate was already in the 150s. I didn't want to be that high just yet.

Mile 2 - 10:37.2. HR: 155 AHR: 151

During mile 3, we continued in the woods for a while until we had to go back onto the sidewalk. This was where we got our first water stop. I grabbed some powerade and kept on running. Before long, we were back in the woods and heading for the mile 3 marker. I was still feeling pretty good. My hands were a little bit cold, but other than that, I was fine.

Mile 3 - 11:45.6. HR: 149 AHR: 155

During mile 4, we had a climb that I had forgotten about. It was not a steep climb, but it was a long climb, and I didn't like what it did to my heart rate. All of a sudden, the heart rate was up

near 170 on this climb. That was not what I wanted to see, knowing that I had a 4 mile climb ahead of me at mile 9. During the 4th mile I also talked to a very pretty young lady from Fairbanks who had hoped to do the Bay State Marathon this year, but unfortunately the race filled before she could register. Since I have run 6 Bay State Marathons, I told her about the course and told her if she wanted to do it next year, register early and go for a PR. It's the perfect course for it.

Mile 4 - 12:09.9. HR: 169 AHR: 161

Mile 5 generally is a flat to slightly downhill mile. I tried to slow down this mile and let a lot of people pass me on the single track trail. I was trying like heck to get the heart rate to come down. At about mile 4.5 I had something happen to me that has never happened to me in a race before, I got stung by a yellow jacket. It got me in the right calf. It bothered me a bit, but I just kept on keeping on. As I neared the mile 5 marker, we came to the University of Alaska Large Animal Research Station where some caribou and musk oxen were out in the field. What other marathon can you name where you'll see caribou and musk oxen?

Mile 5 - 10:53.3. HR: 159 AHR 156

After passing the Large Animal Research Station we were back on the trails. It was a cross country ski trail maintained by the University. It was in fairly good shape. There were tree roots and rocks to avoid, but there weren't a lot of leaves on the trail. The heart rate continued to be higher than I wanted it to be. As I neared the mile 5.7 water stop, I grabbed my first Gu and Succeed S!Cap. Just before the mile 6 marker I was passed by a fellow running with a Army field pack on his back. I had to ask so I said "What's with the pack?" He said "I'm living the dream. A few months ago, I was pinned down in a firefight in Afghanistan, and I said if I got out of there I would run a marathon. The pack is for all the guys still over there fighting." I thanked him for his service. Amazingly, he was running faster than me with the back pack on.

Mile 6 - 11:56.6. HR: 166 AHR: 161

After hitting the mile 6 marker we went up a small hill then downhill on a dirt road before rejoining a trail. This section of trail was different. I suspect the ground might have been permafrost or something, but it was very slippery trail. I had to take each step easy to make sure

I didn't slip and fall. I continued to worry about the heart rate, it was still far too high. As I neared the mile 7 marker, there was a family out cheering us on. One of them said "You're doing great!" I said "You're lying to me, but thanks!". :) The yellow jacket sting was bothering me a bit, but I wasn't about to stop.

Mile 7 - 10:51.6. HR: 158 AHR: 161

Mile 8 started out on dirt roads. I met a guy here who was an Air Force flight surgeon. I enjoyed talking with him for a few minutes, and thanked him for serving our country. I was still showing a heart rate that was much too high, so I tried to slow down and let the heart rate drop. It wouldn't cooperate. At about mile 7.5, we turned right onto an unpaved bicycle path. About a 1/4 of a mile down the path I noticed again that my hands were cold. The rest of me was fine, but the hands were cold. At about mile 7.75, I snapped this picture:



This is just about mile 7.75.

We got back on pavement just before mile 8. We crossed over a set of railroad tracks and there was the marker.

Mile 8 - 11:25.0 HR: 165 AHR: 156

Mile 9 is an all pavement mile in the Equinox Marathon. This mile takes you to the base of Ester Dome. I was not happy that the heart rate was in the 160s coming to the base of the long climb. I had a feeling the the climb of Ester Dome wasn't going to be pretty, and I had a feeling that the 5:00:00 goal was out the window at this point. I decided at this point the goal was going to be to just finish and get my redemption for 2007.

I did snap this picture of Ester Dome just before I started the climb:



Just after Mile 8. Yup, that's Ester Dome.

Mile 9 - 10:59.4 HR: 163 AHR: 164

Finally. I had reached the base of Ester Dome. I knew from the training run earlier this week I had to be smart here. This climb was going to be tough with my heart rate where it was. I started out running up the mountain, but as soon as my HR hit 170, I slowed to a power walk. The first mile of the climb of Ester Dome is the steepest, and I was feeling it. We left the road at about mile 9.3 and were back on trails. I saw Steve Bainbridge go by me and cheered him on. He was running the 2nd leg of the relay, so he had fresh legs, and I wasn't even going to think about trying to stay with him. I also saw a guy fall twice in this mile. He would later fall again during mile 11, but he just kept picking himself up and kept going. Anyway, I hit the mile 10 marker running, as I did every marker on the course.

Mile 10 - 15:32.7 HR: 173 AHR: 170

As I continued the climb during mile 11, I mixed running with mainly walking. Whenever the gradient would drop I would run, but the steepest grades were just beyond my ability at that point. I kept reminding myself, that just before the 11 mile marker there was a stretch of about a 1/2 mile where the course was flat. Keep it real until then. Late in mile 11, Jodi passed me. She was having a very good day, and looked strong. Finally, I got to the flat stretch, and not a moment too soon. My legs were screaming at me. I jogged very lightly during the flat stretch to try to get the muscles feeling good again. I hit the mile 11 marker during the flat part.

Mile 11 - 16:30.3 HR: 158 AHR: 171

WARNING: CORNBALL ALERT!!! Okay. Back in 2007, when I reached the mile 11 marker, I had to stop and double over trying to get some air. As I passed the mile 11 marker this year, I looked over, and I could see myself standing there doubled over trying to breathe. I literally could see me standing there doubled over. I went over to where I was doubled over and said "Come on buddy, I'm not leaving you here. We're going to the finish together." As soon as I said that, the vision was gone, and I kept going, knowing that I was getting my redemption this year.

I knew there was a water stop at mile 11.2, so I took my second Gu and S!Cap just before I got to that water stop. After the water stop, the course started back uphill. I made the decision at this point that I was going to save my energy for the out and back. I did hit the mile 12 marker running, but only for about 50 yards before it.

Mile 12 - 16:33.3 HR: 166 AHR: 167

I was coming up to the water stop near the top of Ester Dome. I knew I had to run this part. I had to top Ester Dome. It's what my friend Joe would want. Another group that's been pulling for me, a group I call the "Misfits" (they know who they are) would want me to summit the Dome running. So I ran over the top of the Dome.



Coming into the water stop near the summit of Ester Dome.

Now it was on to the Out-And-Back. This part of the course is a lot harder than it looks. It was a lot of descending and climbing. This year, that section of the trail was in very rough shape and I knew it thanks to the training run I had done during the week. We were back in the woods shortly after the summit water stop but only briefly, as we passed under the first set of antennas on Ester Dome. Soon we turned back to climb up to the antennas. Shortly after that, we hit the 13 marker.

Mile 13 - 17:50.9 HR: 169 AHR: 164

Before long, I hit the half marathon marker. I snapped this as I did that:



Passing the half-marathon sign atop Ester Dome.

Now I was getting into the part of the out-and-back that worried me. When I did this in the training run, it was eroded with a lot of loose rocks. As I started into the out-and-back, I knew 2 things: 1.) I was going to have to be careful, and 2.) I didn't have any climbing left in my legs. I

was going to have to walk the remaining hills. I ran cautiously down the hills of the out-and-back. Before heading down the first hill, I snapped this:



This is the view we had just after the second set of antennas atop Ester Dome during the out and back portion.

As I was running in the out-and-back, the faster runners were coming back as I was going out. I tried to cheer on as many as I could, and tried to give them the right of way whenever I could.

Mile 14 - 14:34.0 HR: 160 AHR: 159

Mile 15 saw more of the same. During mile 15, there were a couple of steep descents and some vicious climbs. As I was doing one of the climbs, Jodi passed me coming back and said "Kevin! They have cookies at the turnaround!" There are some things that really matter during a marathon, right??? :) Just before I hit the turnaround, I also saw Steve Bainbridge again as he was coming back. He looked strong, and I gave him a big "Go Steve!" as he passed by me. As I made my way to the turnaround, I took it really easy as this part of the course was had a lot of really loose rocks. When I got there, even though there was a water stop, I found the bottle of Gatorade that I had stashed for myself. In years past they weren't able to get a truck to the water

stop, so I stashed a bottle just in case. I got the bottle and a cookie and started back. I tried to open the bottle to wash down the cookie, but it couldn't. The cap was frozen on!! Argh. It took me until the 15 marker before I could heat the cap enough in my hand that it would turn.

Mile 15 - 17:47.3 HR: 159 AHR: 160

I started to notice something here that was unexpected. My heart rate was lower, even on the climbs. However, I couldn't seem to get enough wind to run. Even when the heart rate was in the mid-150s I was breathing far too hard to run very far. I have never had that happen before, and I'm not sure what to make of it, whether it was a bonk or what. During mile 16, I continued to run the downhills and flats and walk the uphill. Just before the 16 marker I grabbed my 3rd Gu and S!Cap. Fortunately, I had my own Gatorade with me to wash that down with.

Mile 16 - 16:49.1 HR: 163 AHR: 159

Coming out of the mile 16 marker, was a steep climb up to the 2nd set of antennas on Ester Dome. My legs were not happy with me at that point with all the climbing. As I got up that hill, I kept thinking to myself "I wish I had dropped those 40 pounds before this race." I kept moving and was soon coming back to the first set of antennas on Ester Dome. Just before I got there, I snapped this picture:



I snapped this as I was coming back to the first set of antennas (the summit) after the out and back.

I went down the hill, and followed the path under the antennas on Ester Dome, and eventually got back to the road, and hit the mile 17 marker.

Mile 17 - 16:43.5 HR: 152 AHR 152

Once I got to the water stop at mile 17.1, I knew the worst was behind me. Now, it was time to get down off of Ester Dome. The descent off of Ester Dome goes down a different way than we come up. This is called "The Chute" Some of you have seen my YouTube video of me walking down The Chute in 2007. If you haven't it's here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRhnehwPCAA>

This year, "The Chute" was in very bad shape. It was very eroded and there were a lot of loose rocks. I couldn't imagine trying to run down this part of the course with it in that shape. I had to keep picking my spots on the sides of The Chute to avoid the loose rocks. As I made my way down I passed a young lady who kept saying "Ow"! So I asked if she was okay and she said "I think I screwed up my knee." I told her "It's this gradient. It's just nasty. You'll probably be okay at the base of it." I told her if I saw any medical help I'd let them know that she might need them. Sure enough as I got to the base of The Chute, there was a paramedic. He said "Is there someone up there hurt?" I said "Yeah, there's a woman up there with a hurt knee."

I was SOOOOO glad to get to the bottom of "The Chute". I took this picture of the bottom of "The Chute" many years ago. It was MUCH WORSE this year:



That picture doesn't show the entire Chute, just the bottom of it.

After we got off The Chute, we went into a trail that was fairly flat. At this point, I was struggling to run fast. I couldn't get enough air. My heart rate was great, but the breathing sucked.

Mile 18 - 16:39.2 HR: 152 AHR: 149

Right after the 18 marker, I started running for a short while with an Air Force retiree and a pretty young woman running the Ultra. We got to talking for a while, and I told them both I was in town from Boston for the race. She asked me about the Vermont 50s as a possible Ultra. I told her Vermont was beautiful, but I had never done the races. I told her she should think about that for the future. She said "It's about the same time as the Equinox, so I doubt that will ever happen. I love this race." Why is it that everyone who runs this race loves it???? :)

There's a bit of a climb in the middle of 19, and I tried to run it, but my body would have none of it. Again, it wasn't the heart rate, it was the breathing. I walked part of the climb with a first time marathoner, and he told me "Never again." I said "Don't say that. I said it after my first. That was 14 marathons ago." :)

Anyway, I eventually got to the 19 marker.

Mile 19 - 13:50.5 HR: 155 AHR: 152

Shortly after the 19 marker we emerged from the woods onto a dirt road. There were a few spectators cheering us on. We came out on a downhill, and I ran down the hill. At the base of the hill I looked over to my right and saw the stone where I sat down and gave up in my 1994 Equinox Marathon attempt. For many years I could see myself sitting on that rock. This year, I didn't see it. If this was a race for redemption, it looks like I had already earned it for that one.

I got up the hill slowly. It was a struggle, but once I did, I was able to jog again. I finally hit the 20 mile marker sign.

Mile 20 - 12:28.1 HR: 150 AHR: 151

After passing mile 20, we went down a short hill. There was a water stop at mile 20.2. I considered taking my 4th Gu and S!Cap here, but I felt that 6 miles out was too far, so I held off. About 1/2 a mile down the road a family had set up their own water stop. I said "This is perfect." I grabbed the 4th Gu and S!Cap and washed it down with some ice cold water. Earlier in the mile there was a slight hill that I had to walk up, but once I got to the crest of that hill, I said "I will not walk again until I hit the 21 marker." Most of the rest of this mile was downhill, and I was able to do just that.

Mile 21 - 12:41.2 HR: 155 AHR: 148

At this point of the race, I was really struggling. I thought about my friends, "The Misfits". At this point, I felt each and every one of them with me. They were all there telling me "Come on, suck it up. You can do this!" I ran for part of 22, but once it went uphill I knew that wasn't going to be able to run that. I passed a course worker just before 22 and I said to him "Boy this thing is a bear of a course." We turned off the road at that point and went to a mile long stretch of trail under some high tension power lines. Shortly after getting to that stretch, I hit the 22 mile marker.

Mile 22 - 12:35.9 HR: 151 AHR: 154

The stretch under the power lines was a real struggle for me. It has some small hills but I couldn't run any of them. In fact, at times I couldn't run the downhills. I was really not doing well at this point. I said to a guy who I ran with for a few seconds "This course never gets any easier." He said to me "No, it doesn't. It's not supposed to." I passed the water stop at mile 22.9 and grabbed a cup of Powerade. I started up the hill to mile 23, but no, it wasn't happening. I had to walk to the 23 sign.

Mile 23 - 14:56.2 HR: 148 AHR: 146

As bad as I felt at this point, I looked at my watch and said "I still have a shot to keep this under 6 hours. I'm going to have to push to get it, but I can do it, if I can turn in some decent times on the pavement." This stretch was mainly downhill for the next mile and a half, so I knew I might be able to do some decent times. I did have to walk one short stint in mile 23, but "The Misfits" were in my ear saying "You won't get that 6 hours if you keep walking! Move!" I kept pushing, and before long, I hit the 24 marker.

Mile 24 - 11:36.4 HR: 149 AHR: 149

The first 3/4 of mile 25 was also on pavement, and was fairly flat, so I wanted to make as much time as I could to try to save that 6 hours, because I knew shortly before 25 and shortly after 25 were climbs. I pushed as much as I could. At 24.7, we rejoined the trail and I had a climb up to

the 25 mile marker. There were a couple people sitting at the 25 marker and I said "I am close, right?" They said "Very." I said "Thank God."

Mile 25 - 12:08.1 HR: 155 AHR: 153

I continued on the trail at this point. It was fairly flat here, but shortly after the 25 marker there is a climb up the West Ridge of the University Campus. It's not a brutal climb, maybe about 100 vertical feet, but, after 25 miles it's just poorly placed. I got to the top of that climb and looked at the Garmin and said "I still have a shot at 6." At the top of the hill we turned right and went down a path to another path where we turned left. That led to a climb up to the pavement. Once on the pavement we had a half mile downhill. At the base of the hill was the 26 marker.

Mile 26 - 13:26.4 HR: 158 AHR: 155

There was a course change this year coming to the finish due to a drainage project going on where the finish line usually is. Normally, we come in, turn right, then turn left, go across the flat athletic field to the finish line. Because of the construction, this year, we had to run halfway up the sledding hill before coming back down to the finish line. Here's hoping the finish line is back where it belongs the next time I run it! :)

Mile 26.2 - 2:32.7 HR: 167 AHR: 165

Official Time: 5:57:16 (5:57:18 by my watch)

180th among the guys.

20th of 23 in my age group.

After finishing, Jodi came up to me and offered her congrats. I passed mine on to her as well. She snapped this for me a couple minutes after I finished:



My friend Jodi snapped this a couple minutes after I finished. My time was 5:57:16.

She was also gracious enough to get a picture of the two of us together:



My friend Jodi and I after both of us finished the 2010 Equinox Marathon.

There are many people to thank for this. First, everyone who has been supporting me through the training, including all of you. Second, my MVS friends and coaches who have been positively awesome. Coach Deanna, Coach Brian, Coach Scott and Coach Kristina, thank you SO much for all the advice. I know we came up short on the 5:00:00, but that's not important right now. Third, "The Misfits" who are without a doubt the best. You guys rock! Fourth, Running Club North, Steve Bainbridge, and all the volunteers who make this race happen.

So, I have my redemption. Ester Dome threw everything at me, including the kitchen sink, but I prevailed. She no longer owns me. She's a worthy opponent, but at this point Ester Dome is mine. :)

I really can't wait until my next Equinox, which is currently scheduled for the 50th Equinox Marathon in 2012.

Thanks for reading. Sorry it's so long.