

This was the most relaxed/nonchalant I've felt about an A race maybe ever. I prepped gear the night before but had zero nerves. Didn't need an alarm due to the late 9am start and even lazed in bed until I figured I should get moving (around 6:30am) - still zero nerves. Likely this was because my training camp didn't go as I would typically execute or how I would have preferred, combined with getting COVID round 2 conveniently 3 weeks prior to race day so I missed my last 2 apex cycle rides. But, as you always seem to do, the last pre-race call you had support, belief, encouragement and words of advice that were 100% tailored to this event and my physical and mental space. I listened, we made a plan, and I was intent on adhering to all of it. I ended up not using my top frame snack pouch and was able to fit all fuel, houdini windbreaker and phone in my jersey pockets (they seemed small but wow did they stuff a lot!). I drove into town less than an hour before start (this is a VERY low key event) to grab my bib and get sorted. Did my mobility routine and next thing I knew there was 10 min before start so I scrambled to slap on chamois butter in the car and last bathroom stop. Around the corner was the start and there were a few friends gathered. We snapped some pics with less than 2 min until the start (clearly we were all low key about this race which was the vibe I needed). My race plan indicated mid-pack start, but due to my "late" arrival I found myself at the end and honestly I was ok with that (new to me scenario #1).

Race starts on a rail trail so was glad i wasn't up front so I didn't get swooped up in the mad exit. The plan was to 'soft peddle' until AS1 as a warmup and assess how my body was going to feel this day. Well, after a brief 1.5 mile spin, time to slam it into low gear and begin the long (what turned out to be 10 mile) climb. I ended up on the wheel of a guy who was slow but steady at a good pace for me, but also felt like i wanted to pass around him. New to me scenario #2 - PATIENCE! With 50 miles to go, no need to pass someone now. Just be patient. Sit here. You are feeling good. You will reap the rewards at mile 50 (that was the goal anyway). There were a few times I started to move out, but pulled myself back {insert proud lesson/growth moment}. And low and behold we were catching and even passed a few people! Arrive at AS1 about Mile 13 feeling good, warmed up, wondering if the entire 50 miles is uphill (LOL), refilled my bottle and off I went. As I was about to head out the volunteer informed me I'm the first women to come through. While I was aware there were only a handful of us doing the 55, I didn't know if any of them were ahead of me. Not that I went into this race to win it, but talk about a little motivator – I was like just keep this up, don't gas yourself/screw up, and you can win this (new to me scenario #3 I'm never in the lead of anything!). Now the plan was I could push a little more if I felt good through that first AS. The course "flattened out" FINALLY a bit which was great so knowing I was in the lead, and feeling good, I was able to stretch my legs so to say and ride it out a bit without just grinding uphill.

Another new to me scenario – I wasn't completely alone in this race. The majority of the time I was riding with or had sight of one of my friends Gary and a couple of other guys we ended up with most of the race. This made me feel great. I was keeping up with these men, yet not

pushing myself too hard. I was riding completely within my means and the race plan, oh and having fun! The course is amazingly well-maintained gravel roads through beautiful parks and forest. I kept my eye out for elk, but alas no sightings. I was doing my best to enjoy this day, be grateful I'm healthy and able to be out here. I knew that the middle miles (and longest distance of the entire year for me) would be mentally challenging, so I was prepping myself. Soon after AS1 there was this super long fun 5 mile descent. I flew and had so much fun and honestly was wondering when it would end! I was actually getting borderline too cold, but didn't want to stop and waited it out knowing...the next flat or climb I should warm up. And before I knew it I arrived at AS2 and just over halfway! I filled bottles (one with another Skratch hydration – turns out I subsequently left my saddle bag unzipped and lost my 3 other Skratch sticks which I didn't realize until I finished and got off my bike – whoops!), ate one of my oatmeal pumpkin choco chip cookies for getting halfway, and left the AS before Gary and the other guys.

The next section was flat and through this valley of the Sinnemahoning SP. There was a bit of paved one way road and I felt spoiled having both flat and paved and was able to pick up the pace a bit more again, then turned onto a gravel path until we popped out onto the main road. I looked back to see if the guys were there and sure enough, they were pulling into my draft. Gary popped out and took the lead and I was able to draft these 2 guys for a couple miles and was so grateful (new to me scenario #4 – I'm never in a situation where I am able to keep up with a draft)! Another little energy saver for me and pulled me to the next gravel section woo hoo! Then – oh shocker another climb! Up we all went grinding away for the next 4 miles to AS3. I was so happy to get to AS3 (same one as AS1) as I made it to about mile 40 – the volunteers are so friendly and helpful. They were so encouraging and supportive that I was doing the long distance it was quite a positive boost. Grabbed a half banana and didn't need more water so didn't linger long and off we went, into another long decent. And...drizzle, drip...here comes the rain. I was right in that these middle miles would be challenging. The sit bones are well...tired of sitting, the thought of approaching your longest distance yet, the fact that your day will no longer be dry. But I kept my focus on just 5 mile increments now that all AS were behind me.

We left the one guy we had been riding with heading out of AS3 and Gary seemingly took off on the decent so he was out of my sight. Although I was feeling some fatigue, I left that last AS and fell into a focused race zone. It was a pretty exhilarating experience. Things were getting a bit epic. The rain was falling, I'm basically soaked at this point and my patience in those first miles had paid off. I had the strength and energy to not just coast the downhill and peddled when I could. I was able to push myself this late in the game and it was motivating and exciting. Plus, the faster I could get to the finish the sooner I could get into dry clothes. I had to pee so made a quick stop to take care of that and was contemplating again if I needed my Houdini, but at this point I was generating enough energy that I was actually warmer than on that prior big descent when it wasn't raining. Go figure! At the bottom of this descent there is a creek (which I knew

about and was told I should be able to ride through it). It appeared a bit suddenly, but I quickly assessed, shifted gears, and just went for it (who cares if I get wet!) and then didn't realize just after the crossing the road inclines so I quickly shifted again and made it yay! Then....the final climb. One more. Come on legs we've got this! I took the hairpin turn and ooph – looked down and oh hey, pleasantly surprised I still had my granny gear. Sweet! Shifted and spun in that gear and just grinded away. I rounded the bend and low and behold I saw Gary up ahead of me – I caught up to him?! He had stopped at the top of the climb and I asked him if he was set as I approached and prepped for the last miles, which was another speedy fun descent then flat to the finish. At this point my glasses were so fogged up I couldn't see, which was not an ideal situation at 28 mph and trying to avoid rocks, so I slide them down my nose to peer out the top until I hit the main road. I also quickly realized that I could better my goal time and finish in under 4 ½ hours. Oh, yes this is getting so exciting!

Hard right onto the road and back into town. I was so pumped up at this point, I pushed myself and road hard through the rain soaked street and water was splashing up all over me but I didn't even care because here I was, approaching the finish to accomplish this challenge that, quite frankly, was a bit daunting to me after the training cycle I had and getting sick. I rounded the bend and nearly ran a stop sign (of course as a car approached from the side road), so slammed on my brakes only for the person to wave me on – whoops, but thanks and now I need to resume my momentum, so I stood up and hammered, then turned left back onto the rail trail. Hardly a sole in sight (wasn't the best day for a cheering section), but I wasn't doing this for the finish line accolades (don't advise anyone to do this race if seeking a big podium highlight), I was doing this for me. I was on such a high, my legs were talking, but I was hammering like the Tour de France guys when their bikes are tilting back and forth giving it all they've got, and I road down that final stretch with the biggest grin on my face and crossed that finish line with several minutes to spare under 4 hours 30 minutes. And I felt great.

P.S. I had so much fun on the descents and happy with the confidence of downhill speed I've gained over the years and trusting/knowing my bike. I fully executed my race plan and it's exciting to see the outcome of doing so. Bonus of the day is I happened to finish first female (new to me scenario #....I lost track).

Lessons Learned:

1. Patience is key. I really focused on practicing patience and believe it paid off in those last 15 miles.
2. Trust the years of training and don't discount a training camp that might not have been 100% ideal. The consistency of staying active goes a long way.
3. Implementing the race plan and sticking to strategies can and does lead to successful outcomes.