

Whacking Out on the Wabasha Waddle

Sometimes guys just gotta head out on a road trip, no matter how inadvisable.

BY TED GAMBLE

DUNDAS, MINNESOTA, Friday, August 1, 2014, 6:00 P.M.
Today is the Wabasha Waddle.

There are no winners, and there are no losers.

No medals will be awarded, and there won't be any T-Shirts.

There are only two runners, me and Rob.

We'll be starting from my house at 6:00 P.M., run through the night, and hope to arrive in Wabasha, 65 miles away, about 11:00 tomorrow morning.

There are no route markers, no race officials, no entry form, no fees, just Rob and I accompanied by "the crew," Hank and Nick, for support.

As I packed my food and gear, I reflected on how we got here.

It started on a Saturday morning run last spring. The four of us had recently competed in events of differing distances and difficulty, and we started talking about doing something together. So, what's next? Several relays, marathons, and adventure-style runs were talked about. But there was no real excitement, since we've all done those types of events before. There was no, "Yeah, let's do that!" moment.

Someone mentioned that we don't need to participate in an official event. We could make something up.

An idea began to form.

Ever since I began running, I've dreamed of running back to my home town of Wabasha, Minnesota. My father and my wife's family live there, so we've made the trip by car many times. It began to dawn on me that it might be more fun to run this route than to drive it. It's mostly quiet country roads with little traffic, and the route passes through only three small towns. It's probably safe. I think I can do it, but I don't want to do it alone. Who wants to join me? Would you guys crew?

To my surprise, Rob said that he would run with me. Nick and Hank volunteered to crew. And the Wabasha Waddle was born.

Rob and the crew arrived shortly before 6:00, and we gathered at the starting line in front of my house. Rob borrowed a pickup truck from a relative for the crew, and we loaded up. We were well stocked for the evening with coolers full of water, Gatorade, and lots of food. Despite Nick's tweets and e-mails to the local press, we were all alone. The streets were deserted, and the neighborhood was empty.

And with little fanfare we jogged down the street and headed for the road leading out of town. Hank and Nick were running with us, the conversation light and filled with laughter. Finally! After months of training and planning, and planning and training, we were on our way. After a little more than a mile, Hank and Nick turned back to fetch the truck.

The plan was for the crew to drive ahead about four to five miles and meet up with Rob and me. From there we would repeat this leapfrog process until we eventually reached Wabasha.

The distances would vary and depended on the terrain we encountered, the weather, and of course, our level of fatigue. There was no way that this was going to go quickly; our goal was simply to arrive under our own power. Our strategy was to follow a run/walk strategy from the outset. While training, we found this to be a very effective method of covering a lot of distance, if you have a lot of time. More important, it also forced us to go slowly from the beginning. With all the anticipation, I'm sure we would have gone out too fast, and the forced walking made us slow down. We anticipated several stops for water and food, so we estimated 15-minute miles for the duration. There would be no speed records or PRs set tonight!



► Hank and Nick crewed us during the Wabasha Waddle.

Dennison was the first of the three small towns that we would be passing through. It's about nine miles east of Northfield. "Dennison Days (Daze?)" began that night, so the road was filled with traffic, a steady stream of cars on their way to the party. But where was the crew? They should have passed by now. We wanted to call, but both of our cell phones were in the truck. We reminded ourselves to grab our phones when we finally hooked up. (We never did).

Eventually, they passed us, horn honking, windows down, hooting 'n' hollerin'.

Rob and I were still laughing as they pulled ahead and parked the truck on a side road. They got out, set up some lawn chairs, and sat down with some cool drinks while they awaited our approach. They were late because they had to get beer for the celebration when we reached the finish, so all was forgiven.

With all the activity surrounding Dennison Days, there were several police cars patrolling that evening. We wondered whether we would get pulled over or questioned. If I were a police officer, I'd be asking questions!

Sogn Valley is a deep V-shaped valley about six miles past Dennison with only a few houses. Running into the valley is much easier than running out. It's about a 300 foot, half-mile descent to reach the bottom. About halfway down, Rob and I spotted the truck parked at the bottom of the valley. Hank and Nick were sitting in their lawn chairs behind the truck with some drinks, watching the



▲ Sogn Valley, six miles past Dennison.

cars drive by, waving to some of them. As we came near, a car pulled onto the shoulder about a hundred yards in front of us. As it made a U-turn, our headlamps (it was getting dark) illuminated the Dakota County Sheriff logo on the side of the car. We could see two officers get out of the car.

“Uh-oh. This is it.”

“We are done before we even really start.”

“I hope we’re not in trouble.”

These were some of the comments between Rob and me as we approached.

It turned out that they just wanted to see what we were doing; they were only justifiably curious. We weren’t breaking any laws, so they wished us luck, and we were on our way. That was the last police car we saw until we were only a few miles from Wabasha.

A couple of hours later we arrived at Highway 52, where the road was closed due to construction. A bridge was being built over the busy four-lane highway. Both Rob and I had driven out there earlier in the week to check it out, and we both concluded that we could get through easily enough. After a quick snack, Hank and Nick took the truck on a short detour (about four miles). We agreed to meet on the other side for a more substantial meal and a change of clothes. Although the evening air was cool, it was a sticky and humid night.

We rounded the barricades and trotted down the road. It was pretty easy running, and eventually the road began to incline as the pavement gave way to gravel. Soon we were at the end of the road and reached the summit of the gravel pile. We looked down on a steady stream of cars going in both directions and decided that it might be difficult to cross. Doesn’t anyone stay at home!

The way directly in front of us was too steep. We reversed course a bit and found we could get to the bottom if we switched back and forth on the slope on the side of the pile. After an uneventful crossing, we met the crew on the other side.

It was just before 10:00, and we were 20 miles into the journey. The first segment was done, and we were right where we should be if we were going to finish by 11:00 A.M. We took about 30 minutes to rest and refuel. After changing into dry clothes, I felt like a new man. As we were getting ready to leave, a middle-aged woman in a minivan approached from a side road and asked if we were all right—I suppose we were a strange sight. Dry clothes, full belly. Yes, we were all right.

We were now entering unfamiliar territory. Both Rob and I have run from Northfield to the highway a few times, and we both knew the route. However, neither one of us had gone farther. Besides, it was dark, but we were only 12 miles from Goodhue. We should be there in roughly 2 1/2 hours, given our current pace.

Unfortunately, my Garmin’s battery wore out, and with no point of reference, in the dark, on an unfamiliar road, I couldn’t tell how far we had come, how far

we had to go, or even how long we had run. I had no idea where we were, and it seemed like our progress began to really slow.

At one point, I asked Hank how far we had come. He estimated 28 miles. I smiled and gave Rob a high five: we had just crossed into ultra territory. We were both feeling good. Only five miles to Goodhue!

Both of us are numbers guys, and we started to think:

If the truck has come 28 miles, and that includes the four-mile detour . . .

We went through the construction area, and that was less than a mile . . .

We're still under 26.2, and we're still eight miles from Goodhue!

So we continued on, and finally the lights of Goodhue appeared in the distance. Hank and Nick drove ahead to find a much-needed toilet and maybe some snacks. There must be a convenience store, or something, open yet. It was now approaching 1:00 A.M.

The crew came back a few minutes later with good news. They found a bar that was still open, but we would have to get a ride if we were to arrive before closing time. Rob and I hopped on the tailgate and cruised through the sleeping town. We found the bar on Main Street and hurried to the door. The lights were on and it looked open. But it wasn't. It was 1:15; we were only 15 minutes late.

At the end of the block there was another bar. It, too, was closed. Now what? Goodhue's only convenience store was closed. *Not very convenient*, we thought. Someone had an idea. There must be a park here somewhere. Every town in America has one, right? Surely, Goodhue does too. Maybe there's a porta-potty? Eventually, a park was found. With a porta-potty! But no snacks.



► Goodhue potty break at 1:36 A.M.

Soon we were back on the tailgate riding back to where we were picked up, the cool breeze drying our sweat in the humid night air. Felt good.

The second stage was complete. We had come a little more than 30 miles.

We left Goodhue and embarked down a long, lonely stretch of deserted country roads. Lake City was 20 miles away. The next several hours were spent running, walking, eating, drinking, running, walking, eating, drinking, and so on. One foot in front of the other, one foot in front of the other, we kept reminding ourselves, each step bringing us one step closer to the goal. We kept following the run/walk strategy, and both of us were still feeling pretty good. It was an uneventful time with two exceptions.

There are several cattle farms in that area. We came upon one that was close to the road. The open-air barn was lit up, so we could see the cows. Maybe it was because the barn was near the road, but these cows seemed unusually large. As we trotted by, I noticed “eye shine” from several of the animals ahead of us. They seemed pretty close and I couldn’t see a fence. Had they gotten loose? I wondered. I scanned the area between us and the cows, and there wasn’t a fence—they *were* out! *We had better be careful*, I thought. They are a lot bigger, and faster, than us, a lot of mobile hamburger.

I was a few steps ahead of Rob, so I called over my shoulder that I was going to cross the road just to be safe.

Rob answered, “That’s not a cow. It’s a mailbox. Oh, that *is* a cow!”

After we had calmed down a little and the laughter had subsided, he said that he probably would have run into the cow if I hadn’t said anything. Later, Hank said that he saw the cows, and he wondered how we would react.

The second incident was a few miles later. The crew drove ahead a few miles to rest. Eventually, we caught up. As we approached the truck, we noticed Nick’s head tilted back, mouth agape. We couldn’t see Hank in the passenger seat. We looked in the window and spotted him curled up against the door. They were both sleeping!

We shook the truck and Hank woke up. He stepped out of the truck and into the ditch, stumbling a bit on the slope.

Rob told him to wake up Nick and drive ahead a mile since we didn’t need anything.

“Are you sure?” he mumbled.

“Of course we are. See you in a mile.”

We jogged off.

We expected the truck to pass soon after, as it always had. After a few minutes, we began wondering if something was wrong. Maybe Hank was having trouble waking up Nick? Maybe they’re having a snack? *Whatever*, we thought, and kept going.

Eventually we hit the one-mile mark, and we stopped to discuss the situation. What should we do? Should we go back or keep going?

I wanted to keep going, but between the two of us, we only had a half bottle of water. If they were sleeping, they wouldn't wake until sunrise, and that's still a few hours away. So we turned back.

We decided to take a break from the run/walk pattern and walk all the way back to the truck.

We discussed the situation on the way.

We discussed various methods of torture, but in the end, we relented. After all, we still had a long way to go, and we didn't want to make them angry! But we must remember to grab our cell phones (we never did).

We arrived at the truck, and they were sound asleep. However, it wasn't hard to wake them up. After some apologies, followed by repeated assurances that all was forgiven, we got a ride back to where we turned around.

This set us back by about 40 minutes. As I mentioned earlier, we calculated a 17-hour run. Prior to the run, I had plotted out various checkpoints along the way. If we left my house at 6:00 P.M. and averaged 15-minute miles, we would get to:

Dennison by 8:00 P.M. Check.

Highway 52 by 10:00 P.M. Check.

Goodhue by 1:00 A.M. Check. Well, we were 20 minutes late, but close enough.

Lake City by sunrise. Originally, I thought we should arrive around 6:00 A.M., but that probably won't happen.

Wabasha Beach by 11:00 A.M. Doubtful.

Whenever I tried to hurry us along, Rob wisely reminded me to enjoy the journey. That's really what this was all about. He was right, and this is fun. This was all about the experience, and it would probably never happen again. But I continued to struggle with my self-imposed deadlines. Come on, let's go!

As we approached the 40th mile, we stopped near a driveway that led to a hog farm. It was time for a change of clothes and more substantial food. As I downed my second hamburger, I noticed that it was getting light. I also noticed a nose-hair-curling stench. Was that us or the pigs?

As the sky began to lighten, I began recognizing the scenery. I love running in the dark, but it was nice to see beyond the glow of our headlamps again.

Forty miles down, only a marathon to go.

We came to a *long* downhill. I was looking forward to this. The hill drops 400 feet over the distance of a mile. It was nice to put it in cruise control for a while and coast. However, this was where things started to hurt just a little bit.

I had put duct tape on my feet in an effort to ward off the blisters. And it worked. I wasn't having any foot problems at all. But with the long decline, my feet began to slide forward in my shoes. My toes were slamming against the

front of my shoes with each step. Ouch! I think this was when the blisters began forming on my toes.

We reached the bottom of the hill and turned on to Highway 63 toward Lake City, now only five miles away. It was flat, easy running, with a wide shoulder. We started noticing the early risers pulling their fishing boats to nearby Lake Pepin (not really a lake—just a wide spot in the Mississippi River). We could see the hills of Wisconsin on the other side of the lake.

After a couple of miles, the crew went ahead in search of coffee. They returned after only a few minutes, and we took our coffee. We tried to run but quickly found out that it's nearly impossible to run with hot coffee in your hand!

Eventually, we reached the outskirts of Lake City. I grabbed a banana from our cooler to fuel the final stretch.

It was 7:30, and we were about 90 minutes behind schedule. Oh, well. Forget about the time and enjoy the journey. Getting there is the accomplishment. Speed doesn't matter. I was finally starting to believe it.

I've heard that the first half of an ultramarathon is physical while the second half is mental. This run proved that adage true. Lake City is about 50 miles from Northfield. I was only suffering from a few minor aches and pains but nothing major. If my leg hurt, it hurt for only a little while. The pain would shift to my back, or my neck, my hips, or my feet but never for long, so the pain was easy to deal with. In between, and just for fun, there was the occasional bout of nausea. Rob was experiencing the same aches and pains that I



▶ Lake Pepin.

was, so we weren't too concerned. There is a brotherhood in pain that makes the physical part easier to deal with.

The mental side was a little tougher. Throughout the night, if either one of us was struggling, I would try a little encouragement:

“Hey, Rob, I just had a vision.”

“A what?”

“A vision. Of us. We're at the beach. In Wabasha. And we're sitting.”

“Wow, am I there?”

“Oh, yes, you are. We're both there. Hank and Nick are there, too. And you know what?”

“What?”

“We're drinking a beer. It's cold. We're smiling. And we're happy!”

“Wow, am I there?”

“Yes, we're all there!”

We had that conversation, or something like it, more than once.

We were nearing the lake when Rob suddenly jumped, like he was scared. When I asked what was wrong, he said, “Someone just ran between us!”

Only there was no one there.

We had a good laugh over that. We've been running together for several years, and nothing like that had ever happened before.



▲ The outskirts of Lake City.

I had told Rob that once we got to Lake City, we were golden. We'll be by the river, the scenery will be amazing, and we'll be very, very close to Wabasha. Mentally, I was already there, only we still had 15 hilly, curvy miles to go. My legs kept moving, but my head was telling them to stop. That's when things started getting a little more difficult.

After Lake City, one of the crew was always running with us, I think to keep us from unintentionally veering into the traffic.

As we began this final push to the finish, Rob turned to me and said, "Since we're running along the river, this road must be pretty flat, right?"

"No," I said, "it's actually pretty hilly."

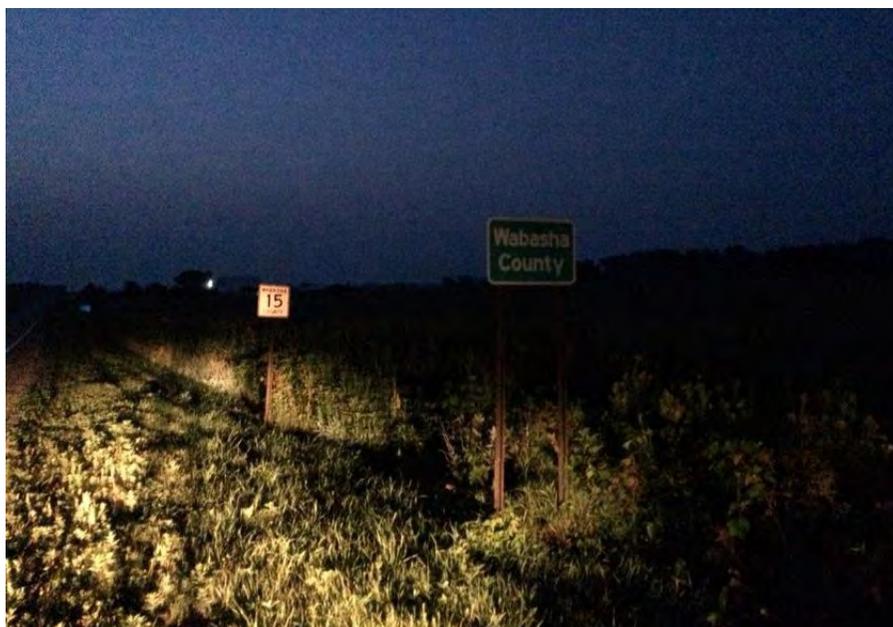
"Since we're running along the river, this road must be pretty flat, right?"

"Right!"

We kept moving: one foot in front of the other, keep going, one foot in front of the other. My feet began to hurt. They begin swearing at me. I swore back. We are getting closer. Keep moving. Don't stop.

Hank pointed out that we have less than three miles to go. That's less than a 5K! We can do this!

With two miles to go, we turned on the road that took us into Wabasha. Nick was standing behind the truck, waving his arms, flailing his legs. I think he's dancing. I laughed so hard it hurt. I'm starting to have fun again.



▲ Wabasha County and a hint of light.

We enter Wabasha. I begin pointing out the sights.

“My wife was born in that hospital!”

“I used to deliver newspapers in this neighborhood!”

“There’s Slippery’s!”

“There’s the beach!”

The beach. We’d made it.

I noticed a picnic table near the water.

“That picnic table is the finish line,” I told Rob, and we hobbled across the sand to the table.

We had done it. We were done. Rob leaned on the table for support. I sat and rested my head on the table top, exhausted and relieved. We had actually done it.

Northfield to Wabasha: 65 miles, 17 hours and 2 minutes. I don’t know how we came so close to our original estimate when we were so far behind earlier that morning. We certainly weren’t moving any faster after we left Lake City. But now it simply didn’t matter anymore. We were there, we had done it, mission accomplished.

I looked at Rob and smiled.

“Hey, Rob. I just had a vision.” 



Since his running obsession developed about a dozen years ago, **Ted Gamble** has completed five marathons, 12 ultramarathons, and several overnight relays. He can be seen running the streets and endless gravel roads that surround the small south-central Minnesota city where he lives with his wife, Linda, and two kids, Matt and Katey. When Ted’s not training for his next “running adventure,” he works for a large regional banking institution.