

Race Report « The Gax 100 miles » 2021

“EVERYBODY HAS A PLAN UNTIL THEY GET PUNCHED IN THE MOUTH.”

(MIKE TYSON)

I like plans. I like to structure my goals, as it gives me discipline in my thoughts, in how I go about my day, in my training, in my race goals, and in my race strategies. Some goals are long term, and some, well, they are on a whim but then become my basis for everything else that follows. I am the man with the plan!

8 months ago, I signed up for a 200 miler along the west coast of Sweden. More of an adventure than a race – having to conquer 3 nights of sleep deprivation, countless kilometers of beaches, rocks, marshes, bushwhacking, with a very small field and only a few checkpoints along the way. I put in the hard work with the guidance of my long-time coach Casey Morgan, I arrived with my family in Sweden 3 weeks prior to the race, strong, battle ready and hungry to take on the biggest challenge of my life!

I had just run my last 8 hours long run a few days back and I was finally beginning my tapering for which I was so looking forward to, for a change, only to receive the bombshell email.

“Race Cancelled”

What? Why? How can this happen?

Well, in Sweden, conservation is big, and if you run in nature reserves and wildlife sanctuaries, you will have a hard time getting all the permits in the best of times. Add Covid, and in short, a birdwatcher who happened to work in the government made an objection to the race, and there was not enough time to redraw the course and get all necessary landowners to agree to a race taking place on their land. So, plan A down the toilet. Absolutely gutted!

But, in my line of work, it's all about quickly coming up with another plan when your plan A fails you. So, 10 minutes of feeling sorry for myself later, I wasn't going to let 8 months of training waste away relaxing on the porch and drinking red wine looking at a stunning sunset with my favorite ladies! No, I needed to race, and it had to be long enough to test my training and to experience the highs and lows that come with such distances! So, I texted a few Swedish friends ultrarunners and then I remembered! The Gax 100 miles. This was the first miler I had ever raced, and I really suffered! Perfect! So, I got hold of the race director [Urban Ljungberg](#) and asked him if he had a spot for me. The stars must have been aligned or a good angel was on my side as it just so happened that one runner had just cancelled last minute, and there was one more spot left!

I immediately took it! Plan B was on! A few caveats to the plan, however. The race was only 36 hours away, 600 km away, with no hotel booking, no mode of transport, and nothing prepared. It was time to call on the help of Mrs. F and boy did she deliver! Train booked, last hotel room in the whole of Ystad, booked! I packed my bags, my wife and kids drove me down to Gothenburg, I gave them a big kiss and a hug, I jumped on the train to make plan B my new plan A!

On the way over, I had enough time to draft a few race plans in my head! Well, there was only really only one plan – To break 20 hours. The weather looked promising, although the forecast was starting to eek upwards in temperatures with blazing sun which was a little concerning as the first half is almost all exposed. But Plan A race strategy was Sub-20, and when I set a plan, I intend to make good work of it.

The race morning, I was feeling refreshed, I slept well, had a good dinner with the rest of the competitors the night before, did my pre-race routine, and I headed to the start.

I felt happy and excited. I was just so relieved to be able to scratch that itch of racing again! With the Hong Kong riots in 2019, then Covid-19 which still prevents most races from taking place, it had been too long!

The countdown, 5,4,3,2,1 and off we went at 10am sharp! 100 miles along the Osterlen trail in Skane, South of Sweden! Magical, and though it looks flat on paper, there is plenty to test you. And unlike races in HK which allow you to run for 5km then “rest” as you climb up a hill or stairs, this is almost all runnable if, only if, your body can handle it.

So, plan A in the works, sub-20. 9 hours to halfway CP2, and another 10 or so hours to the finish. Immediately, little clusters of runners formed, and given my pace, I found mine and went with it. It was a little speedy to start, but I was feeling comfortable, breathing was fine. Heart Rate was reading a bit high, odd, but that had to be a bleep with the sensor, so I observed but did not take it too seriously. As the miles ticked off, it started to get very warm. And being so dry, I was not sweating, so I could not cool down. And my heart rate was still showing high Z2, low Z3, which for a miler is a little bit concerning. Possibly a combination of the heat, the race nerves, the heavy backpack, and my pacing?...

Well, that odd reading I thought to be a watch problem was setting me up for my sparring match with Mike Tyson, and it came far quicker than expected. By 36km, yours truly had just gotten punched in the mouth, a very solid right hook! My stomach was not happy, and I knew I was in trouble...I managed to hold things in till CP1 (43km) despite dry heaving multiple times. I slowed right down, and I rested for a while at the checkpoint. But not being able to eat a quarter of the way into the race was setting myself up for a very tough day! Plan A started to slip from my reach, and plan B of sub-22 looked pretty hard at this point. Plan C sub-24?

After seeing many runners come and go, I decided to head off. The volunteer at the aid station asked me if I was ok to continue, and I smiled and slowly headed out. Within minutes, the dry heaving resumed, and it took a little flying critter to accidentally find its way into my esophagus, and then the dam broke!

I ran, I walked, I stood still, I took a knee, I lay down, no matter, I was profusely vomiting! I could not stop. I tried to take salt tablets and just take sips of water, but I was overheating with the unrelenting sun, and it was getting worse. I felt wobbly, and I was just thinking to myself, how could I be here? Was Plan C even possible? Plan F perhaps (finish)? I ran close to 80km the week before and it felt easy and uneventful. Now I am 50km in and I am in a miserable state?? My family, my coach Casey Morgan, my friends were all sending me messages of encouragement, but I just could not dig myself out of this big hole of horror.

I did the unthinkable and I called the local taxi company. Was I going to yield and switch to Plan X? DNF? Elliot! Really? After all that training and hard work? But today was really going horribly! But really Elliot?? I finally decided my day was not going to end here, that and hearing how much it would cost me to DNF in the middle of nowhere! So, I got up, and I started to walk. I stumbled on a man watering his garden who took kindly to me and offered me some water. He hosed me down which helped me get back some life, but it was short-lived. At 57km, my Swedish ultra-friend [Tommy Carlsson](#) who eats 100 milers for breakfast, was casual running with his friends and saw me lying down in my sorry state. He looked concerned and asked me if I needed anything. I remembered him telling me he runs with a backpack full of sparkling water. So, I asked him if I could have one! And sure enough, natural, pear flavor or other, he had them all!! It did not take long to start feeling at least alive again. My wobble turned into a walk, into a slow trot, into a jog, and then I was at least running 3 min, walking 1 until I caught up with him and his friends again. Finally, I overtook them and ran most of the way to CP2, and as I arrived, I

could hear the screams of encouragement from the runners and volunteers as I shouted! "I have come back from the dead!"

They were just as surprised but happy to see me arriving, let alone running after seeing me look like death for so long!

I sat down! I had made it to CP2, halfway done, what a relief!

Around me, there were a few broken runners, and according to the volunteers, DNF's were piling up. Obviously, the heat took its toll on the competitors, especially those with more aggressive goals.

I heard a really interesting saying from a volunteer who related a message he heard from one of Sweden's best ultra-runners: "When you feel at your lowest is exactly when you should continue, because you know that it won't get any worse!" So, good to remember when you have no more will to live and just want to pull the plug!

So, I souped up, got up, changed my tee shirt, fitted my headlamp on my head for the night section ahead. I thanked everyone, I threw in a Gar Yau, and off I went for another 50km till the next checkpoint!

It was quickly cooling down and the sun was setting, which was so nice and pleasant. Things were looking up. Plans A, B looked out of reach considering my state, but Plan D, possibly even back to plan C...?? I was feeling better, not great but better, and I was on the home stretch... a long stretch but still, something to look forward to.

The next section was mostly all beaches and running through beautiful quaint sleeping villages. It was so quiet; it was so peaceful. I was still struggling to take on any calories I had on me, and I was getting painful heart burns for each gel I tried to swallow. Then I could feel my quads seizing up...Why? It took me by surprise, and unfortunately, it just made the stop and start approach to finishing my race even harder. But I continued to plug along, slowly making my way back up the field as runners started to slow, some to snail pace.

When I reached the 110km mark, I felt so sleepy. I had caught up to a few runners for which I was happy with, but sleep walking/running was not helping, so I needed to nap. I did the wrong thing of getting too comfortable laying on a bench, and not setting any alarm. I woke up and the runners were all gone. I had slept close to 45 minutes! So, I got up, slapped myself in the face, and off I went.

By 115km, Mike was back! My stomach was coming back to haunt me. I thought I was past the worst, but Mike still had a little surprise for me, his famous uppercut! And once again, by the side of the trail, I just vomited until I had to put a knee down just to avoid falling over.

But I was 45km away. Come on Elliot. You got this. You chose to be here and put yourself in this sorry state, some are not as lucky. Come on Elliot!

So, I got up, and I started to walk, then trot, then jog, finally running until I made it to the unmanned station at 119km. There, it had a selection of different foods, and I had a cinnamon roll which helped. But I was so tired. I decided to set my alarm for 10 minutes and to sleep again, and then I was off again.

This time, despite taking some time to get the legs moving again being so seized up, I felt like things were looking up. I headed out, the darkness started to show hints of light, and it was time to bring this baby home!

So, I ran walked, and then I ran, on pavement, on gravel, had an apple, ran on hard beach, jumped over crashing waves, stumbled on soft sand. The rolling waves along the beach, the seagulls flying over me, the wind blowing, the sun slowly rising from its sleep, all so magical, I was just happy to be here, experiencing this.

I finally made to CP3, at 130km, with just 30km to go.

I stayed 15 minutes at the checkpoint. I ate a banana, drank a coffee, and changed my tee shirt. I decided not to change socks. I did not have too really, and best to leave things as they are if it's not an issue.

The next 30km were mostly soft sand sections, cobble stones, rolling hills, and a few long sections of road. It felt hard, and I quickly realized I should have taken on extra water. It quickly got hot and having to ration water was not great considering I was very thirsty.

I found myself out of water for close to an hour, wondering if I should just knock at someone's door and ask for water. Finally, I saw a tap at a campsite which was a godsend.

The miles ticked off, and slowly but surely, it became less than 20km to the finish, then less than 10km. At 5km from the end I received a phone call from my wife and kids, and from my parents immediately afterwards. I was emotional. Very emotional. I had never felt so shit in any race, and I had pulled through. So much had happened in the last few days, so much had happened period, that it just got the better of me. But it felt so good to just release, and cry.

1km from the end, I overtook another competitor who just could not run anymore. I encouraged him to run with me, but he just could not move his legs past a slow walk, so I went ahead to finish my race.

And 24:15 later, not plan A, B, C but plan D, and another 100-miler bagged. I will remember this one for many reasons.

1. Because it broke me to build me stronger.
2. Because I did not quit for my parents and their hard struggles.
3. Because I ran it thinking of Mo. [#Go4Mo](#)
4. Because I felt, for the first time, that I had the full-fledged support from my family.
5. Because the people, both runners, volunteers and supporters were absolutely fantastic and so hospitable.
6. Because the Osterlen trail is just so magical.

After the race, it was time to go home – 600km north of the finish, with no plan. So, I rinsed myself in the square's pond, and I called Mrs F who planned out my trip back so well. And with a little help from my friend [Patrik Alvånger](#) driving me up to Lund to catch my train, 6 hours or so later, I was back home with my family!

Battle worn but already looking at the possibility of sneaking in one more long run before we head back to Hong Kong. After all, I would not want to feel too fresh going into quarantine...I am sure my wife would agree!

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