

Mount Washington Solo Run

(7.6 miles, 4725 feet vertical (1417 meters))

August 22, 2001

We have been going to Breton Woods for cross-country skiing for approximately fifteen years. Above the bowl where the cross-country trails are set, Mount Washington looms high and extremely cold in the winter. I always wondered what it would be like to run up the Mountain Road in the summer, under more benign weather conditions. Add the fact that I grew up in the Alps, and it was obvious that a run at it was unavoidable. Still I needed a last push and that came with the great performances of the club runners in the Mount Washington road race this last June. Talking to them, I also realized that it was not shameful to alternate running and walking, if necessary.

Having failed to find a companion for the run, my wife Lisa decided it was wise for the family's sake to provide support during the run by driving the car up the road and wait for me at the designated parking spots. I managed to start running from the base around 9.30am (before, it looked as if the cloudy day would not open up). By that time, the sun was out in its glory and the temperature around 80 degrees. The send off by the toll collector was less than auspicious: "Are you aware that cars have the right of way?" he said less than kindly. The first four miles were painful and hot and I managed to run approximately two thirds of the way. I found that the unforgiving view of the unrelentingly uphill road was hard psychologically. Around mile four, when you start running along the crest, it rained, the temperature dropped to around 50 degrees, and the wind was gusting (the temperature would drop to 42 degrees at the top). I felt miserable and cold, and changed into a winter running shirt, which made me feel better (along with my daughter saying: "Go daddy go!")

The remaining miles were harder for me and I alternated between running (very slowly) and walking every thirty seconds or so (probably, a bit more walking than running). I was in and out of clouds and, at times, I had great views of the Great Gulf, of the Wildcat ski area, and of the valleys below, but I was not in the mood to fully appreciate them. The mile and altitude markers were comforting. I had, instead, ambivalent feelings about the tourists riding the shuttle buses, pointing their fingers at me and taking pictures. I realized that I was almost there when I heard the whistle of the steam train in the fog.

I made it to the top in 1.56.41. Not speedy, but respectable. As I learned from the tape they give you when you drive up, that is faster than the time taken by the Stanley Steamer (the first car to climb Mount Washington), but slower than the fastest time for horse drawn carriages. I am very happy I did it (so I do not have to do it again), but I would not call it an enjoyable running experience: the pitch is too demanding. Among the silly running endeavors, running Mount Washington is high up the list (but not as high as running the Pikes Peak half/full marathon in Colorado). In any case I did it the easy way:

there was a fellow who has run it uphill, at different times, backward, blindfolded, and, finally, pushing a barrel with a hundred pounds of sugar in it! These are some of the challenges somebody else from the club (but not I) may want to take up in the future.