

Race Report: The 2019 Cat's Tail Trail Marathon

Stinging bees, rolling ankles, and pursuing number 5

“One and done. I’m definitely never doing that again.”

I remember so clearly muttering those words to my friends Wanda and Michelle four years ago. We were sitting around Brio’s in downtown Phoenicia, New York, nursing our twitching muscles and bruised bodies with beer and pizza after barely surviving the first running of the nefarious Cat’s Tail trail marathon.

A runner’s memory is a fickle thing. How quickly we forget the pain and begin dreaming of another go — for a course PR, redemption for a previous Did Not Finish (DNF), or sometimes just for the love of our sport.



I love Cat’s Tail for many reasons. I once vowed never to run it again, but it’s now my favorite race and the one I look forward to more than any other each year. It boasts brutal climbs that shred your quads, boulders that shred your knees and palms, and rocks and roots that shred your feet. It was the race that really introduced me to gnarly beast coast trail running. Plus there’s something epic about a point-to-point adventure up, over, and down the biggest, most rugged, and most beautiful peaks in the Catskills.

I need the occasional northeast mountain fix. This past weekend, Panther, Great Ledge, Slide, Cornell, and Wittenberg were the drugs of choice.

I’ve run this race four years in a row. Each year tells its own story.

- **Year 1** (2015): Cold, rainy, no views. I tried to drop and willingly take my first DNF but couldn’t get cell service to tell my friends. So I kept going and gutted it out in misery, eventually finishing in well over seven hours. I vowed never to return.
- **Year 2** (2016): I returned. A tad warmer, but still rainy and cold, no views. I brought a different mindset and didn’t worry about the clock or conditions; I just wanted to enjoy the journey with friends. I had an absolutely blast with Wanda and David, possibly the most fun I’ve ever had in a race. It’s amazing what can happen when you go into an event with no expectations. Cat’s Tail became my race of choice.
- **Year 3** (2017): Finally, sun and views, although a bit warm. Pushed myself and broke seven hours for the first time by two seconds (6:59:58), something I never imagined doing until that last 100-foot sprint to the finish line.
- **Year 4** (2018): I properly raced it for the first time in sunny weather, racing the clock with my buddy Ron for the last ten miles and finishing in 6:41.

Which brings me to 2019 ... My fifth attempt at Cat’s Tail. I realized a month or so ago that this had become a streak. I’m in awe of friends who have run Boston 18 times in a row or Mt. Washington 20 times in a row. If I finished this fifth running of Cat’s Tail, it would be my fifth in a

row. I'd been with the Cat since its birth on a nasty, chilly, rainy September morning. It had grown up since then — attracting more runners, drawing more blood, scheming for more DNFs — and I had grown up alongside it. Blood brothers, one could say. And we had developed a healthy respect for each other over the years.

Respect me, it said. Respect me and I'll give you the adventure of your lifetime. I'll chisel a few more scars into your shins, carve a few more bloody tracks into your elbows, snatch a few extra pumps from the finite number of heartbeats you're allotted in life. I don't care. Just roll with the punches and kicks, and I'll give you an experience you'll cherish to the uncertain end of your days.

Year five began in earnest with what came to be known as “the Crew from Connecticut”, the CT Trailmixers, gathering at the parish hall at one end of little Phoenicia for packet pickup Friday afternoon. We were staying different places nearby — some of us at motels, some at AirBnB homes, some in the backs of cars — and we congealed in the gravel church lot across from the hall as race director Mike Siudy set up race packet pickup. It was an expo to rival the big city road marathons: Mike, some sheets of paper with the runners' names, a stack of bibs, a box of safety pins, and a few beers spread out on a folding table.

I love the trail running community.



We chatted with Mike, speculating on the sunny and warm forecast, the extremely dry conditions, and all the myriad of other topics runners discuss when getting mentally prepared for a big race.

Dinner was at — you guessed it — Brio's. More than a dozen of us pulled together the chairs and tables on the outside patio, taking full advantage of carbo-loading in all its unique forms under a warm, sunny evening. I enjoyed my Beyond Burger, sweet potato fries, and Devil's Path IPA, the latter being a night-before-Cat's Tail tradition. I raised my glass, as did my friends.

“Here's to a successful race tomorrow. Good luck!” And we clinked.



I was sharing a room with my friend Stefan at the Slide Mountain Motel, where a few others were hanging out as well. After dinner we stayed up for a few minutes, talking and savoring the flames of a fire pit outside the motel on a cool early fall night. The sparks from the fire danced upward and mixed with the thick stars overhead, flashing for a few moments before winking out forever. I craned my neck and stared upwards, the perimeter of my vision lined with the darker shadows of the Catskills surrounding the heavens like an ebony ring at the edge of my vision. I closed my eyes and swam in the depths of black infinity, letting the mountains and the stars and the warm feeling of being with friends beside a fire in the wilderness transport me.

And then I went to bed.

* * * *

My alarm was set for 4:00 am, although I woke up at 3:04 and hadn't been able to fall back asleep.

That's OK, because it was race day, and I could already feel the adrenaline surging through my mortal frame.

Stefan and I prefer to get to races early. Like, really early. We drove the short eight minutes from the motel to Phoenicia, and pulled into parking spots along the street directly in front of the parish hall, just feet away from the finish area. We could stagger a few extra steps after crossing the finish line and crash into our Hondas. But that's how we roll, and it was worthwhile taking the pressure off any last-minute rushing.

Eventually we left our cars and walked over together to the shuttle bus, where co-RD Charlie Gadol was waiting for us. One by one, the Crew from Connecticut boarded with other sleepy runners. The bus drove us through dark and winding roads to the foothills of the mountains. My good friend Karen and I grinned at each other as we bumped along: We both share a love for the Catskills, and riding early morning buses together has become a familiar and favorite race day routine.

The bus deposited us in the middle of nowhere, less commonly called the Fox Hollow Parking area. We waited in line at the port-a-pottie while the massive shoulders of Panther Mountain, the quad-crushing first climb of Cat's Tail, menaced over us.



Soon the second bus arrived with the remaining runners, and we all gathered at the starting area at the top of a hill. We milled about, tightened shoelaces, ate last-minute breakfasts, and chatted nervously. I recognized some familiar faces and friends, including Alanna, a local trail running star who grew up in Connecticut and sometimes joins us for our more epic CT Trailmixer adventures. Lots of hugs and fist-bumps all around.

A simple, uneven white line had been spray-painted in the road with the word START written above it. Stark and low-key.

Shortly before 7:00, Mike stepped onto the bed of one of the pickup trucks to share some final race instructions. At one point, he asked a fairly common question, often asked at the start of a race.

“How many of you are running Cat's Tail for the first time?” A large showing of hands.

“How about for the second time?” Far fewer hands.

“How many of you are tackling Cat's Tail for the third time?” Hands here and there.

“How about for a fourth time?” Interestingly, no hands.

“And how many of you are here for the fifth time, having run in every Cat's Tail before today?”

I raised my hand. I knew Alanna and another local runner from Connecticut, Jennifer, were also raising theirs. And there were a few others, although I didn't know who they were.

And at that moment, I found my focus for this year's race, my objective, sharp and clear: Make it through. Finish to keep the perfect streak going. Find the Cat, grab its tail, and ride it all the way back to Phoenicia. I had a perfect streak going for only one other event, the Disney Dopey Challenge, but this was different. Deeper. More personal.

Cat's Tail features a wave start with about a dozen runners in each wave. For the second year, Mike let the Mixers — that Crew from Connecticut — start together in wave five. It was a good feeling, surround by friends, toeing the line at the start of a journey into the wilds of New York. We didn't know what the day would bring, and that uncertainty added to the spirit of adventure that we all shared.

At 7:18, we lined up. "Who here is *not* from Connecticut?" Mike asked wryly for the second year in the row. I grinned, took a group shot, and stepped back behind the awkwardly-scrawled START line.

And at 7:20, at Mike's command, we were off.

Stefan rolled down that first hill on long, striding legs. "Don't wait for us!" I called to him jokingly before he banked left and disappeared into the trees. He was hands down the fastest among us, even though he was aiming to "take it easy" today.

One by one, we followed his footsteps and turned left onto the trailhead, leaving the road behind, swallowed by the trees, trekking into the mountains.

Cat's Tail has three distinct segments. The first is a horrendously long climb up Panther Mountain, across Giant Ledge, and back down to the mile 9.5 aid station. The second is the toughest section: six miles or so of back-breaking, rock-scrambling, knee-jamming technical bouldering. The third section is the "easier" section, about nine miles of net downhill over still rolling and often technical terrain before you're dropped unceremoniously back onto the road for a last sprint into Phoenicia for the finish.

Breaking out the race into these segments helps me mentally and emotionally handle the immensity of Cat's Tail. The end of each segment is only 2-3 hours and single digit miles away. It's much less daunting.



Within a few minutes of entering the woods, Panther Mountain reared up on its massive shoulders, and we began to power hike. There would be a lot of that during the day. Most of us in wave 5 aren't fit enough to run up these things. I followed advice taught to me by a guy who once thru-hiked the 2,200-mile Appalachian Trail in 100 days: Push down on alternating quads with each step uphill as a counterforce to my straining muscles. It seems to help, so I stuck with it.

I checked in with the other Mixers around me. I gave Karen a hug and shouted good luck to Michael. I was climbing steadily with my before and behind me: Terry, Carina, Wanda, David, Elaine,

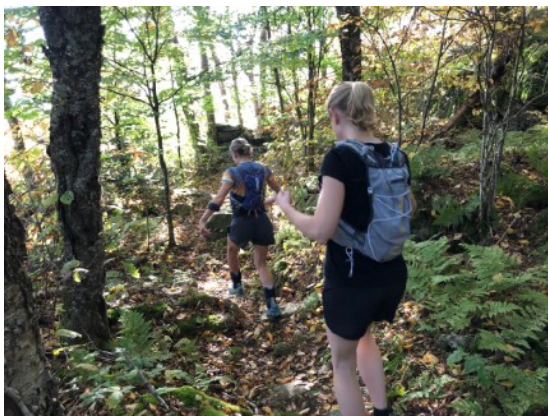
and Jennifer.

That's when I heard Terry cry out: "Ahhhhh!" I'd never heard him shout like that before. "Bees!" And he began dashing up the hill like an elite athlete sprinting a 5k.

We'd run over a nest of bees. Mike had warned us of a nest along the route, but that was supposed to be miles away. We'd found a new one.

"Run fast!" "Hurry!" "Go on!" The Mixers found ourselves swearing and swatting and running up Panther, the first big climb of the race, sapping the energy from our relatively fresh legs.

Fortunately I came through unscathed, but Terry and Carina both emerged with stings. "It feels like somebody's jabbing a crochet needle into my calf," Carina said a short while later. But we didn't see any signs of abnormal swelling or redness, so we kept on marching.

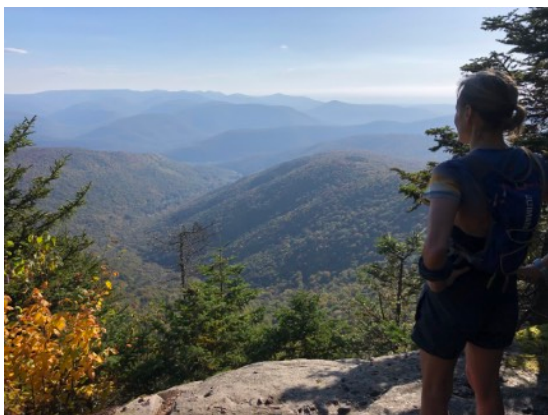


Eventually, as always happens, we began to split naturally into our own paces. I fell in line with Elaine and Jen. I had run a bit with Elaine in the past, and Jen had run in one of our Flings with the Mixers, but this was our first time racing together. We struck up good conversation as we summited Panther. We had formed our team.

Jen was attempting the perfect Cat's Tail Five streak, just like me. Elaine had run Cat's Tail once before — that first year of rain, wind, and fog. The year of no views. So when the tree canopy opened up alongside the trail, several thousand feet up on the side of Panther, we paused to savor the vista.

"Views!" Elaine said happily, not minding losing a few seconds of time to gaze at the lush mountains around us, mostly deep green but with spatters of yellow signaling the coming autumn. Indeed, we shuffled through miles of fallen leaves, the seasons moving along slightly faster than they were in Connecticut.

But despite the leaves and colors, it was still September. Which meant the temps could still rise to uncomfortably warm levels. Which they did as the day drew on.



After a scamper across Great Ledge, Elaine, Jen and I dropped down some treacherous single track, quickly checked into the mile eight water station, and continued on our way over a wider Jeep path that descended back to earth.

That whole first section was grueling but enjoyable. How much had changed over the years. Back in 2015, during this very section, I was frantically tapping my iPhone with wet, numb fingers, trying to get a signal to alert my friends that I was dropping. No signal, no text, and ultimately — thankfully — no DNF. This year, it went by pretty quickly with the nice weather and awesome company.

We rolled into the major aid station at mile 9.5. I found my drop bag, deposited my gloves and arm sleeves, grabbed a peanut butter and chocolate chip burrito I had made the day before (something different), and topped off my hydration vest. I'd had great luck with Skratch all year, and continued with it here at Cat's Tail. Elaine, Jen and I left the aid station refreshed, albeit laden with heavier packs.

Perfect for the climb of Slide Mountain, the first ascent of the toughest middle segment of the race.



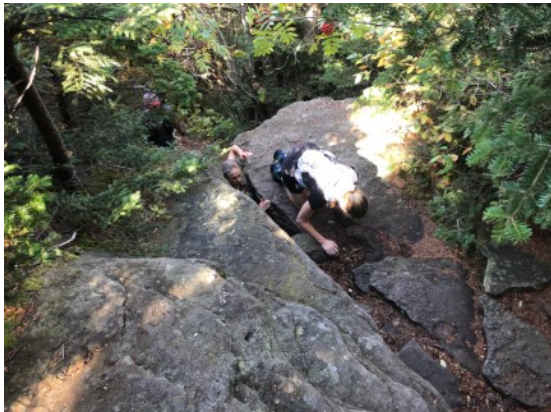
Slide is the highest summit in the Catskills at about 4,200 feet. That makes for a loooooong climb. Elaine, Jen and I fell into a routine about this time: I would lead on the uphills, Jen and Elaine would alternate leading on the flats, and Elaine (who was best on the descents) would lead on the downhills. We rotated around all day and it worked great.

We grunted, sweated, and staggered our way up Slide, eventually reaching the top. The deciduous trees dropped by the wayside behind us, replaced by the scraggier pines that seemed to thrive in the higher elevation. The sun continued to shine through the forest, brightening the magic path before us. Even amidst our suffering, we paused occasionally to enjoy the simple beauty of the trail, the magic of the mountain, the fortune of being able to do what we were doing at that very moment. We knew that someday we would no longer be able to do this thing we love.



But not today.

The next two hours was a roller coaster ride on the most technical terrain I've ever been on. We hauled ourselves up ridges of rock punctured by massive tree roots. We scaled rock walls, clinging onto branches for dear life. We squeezed in between close-knit boulders, hoping the seams on our vests wouldn't burst. We crawled backwards down rough-hewn mountain ladders. We ingloriously slid on our asses down granite slabs, hoping the ground was closer than it actually looked. I'm not much of a praying man, but I did whisper a quiet plea as I navigated the famous Cornell Crack, hoping that my foot which was jammed into the crack for support wouldn't get caught as I lunged forward to the ground. During this entire time, of course, we needed to keep our eyes open for the precious round metal discs that served as trail markers indicating we were still on the correct New York Foot Path.



As tough as it was, we were having a blast. There wasn't much of a rhythm, but perhaps a lack of rhythm is its own form of rhythm. We just made

our way forward, step by step, rock by rock.

We reached the summit of Wittenberg, which the Cat's Tail turn-by-turn direction sheet proudly claims offers the best views in the Catskills. That morning, standing with Elaine and Jen at the top of the world, the worst of the technical climbing behind us, doing what we love in a race we love, it was hard to argue with that. Another runner took a picture of the three of us, and we continued on our way.



At last we were cruising down a wider, less technical path that opened up before us. We happily reached the mile 16.5 aid station, which signaled the end of the tough middle section and the beginning of the final “easier” section.

I was feeling warm and a little dehydrated, so I topped off my bladder with a mix of half water and half Coca-Cola. Sounds crazy but it works for me and my sometimes wonky stomach. I'd been popping Gu gels and chews all day (but not that burrito — that didn't sit well), but by that point, five hours or so into the race, I just wanted sweet liquid calories, and Coca Cola plus water does the trick. I shouldered my heavy-again pack and dashed

out of the aid station to catch up to Jen and Elaine.

This last segment may be the easier of the three, but it's by no means easy. It's still very technical in a rocky and rooty way; it's difficult finding steady footing. The trail is full of ankle biters — small stones and slippery roots snatching at your tendons and ligaments.

I don't remember exactly where I first rolled my ankle. But I remember it hurt like hell. I gasped, grunted, and stopped for a moment to give it a rest. I was having a bad year with my right ankle, rolling it at least once on most longer trail runs. Today was no exception. As in the past, I walked for a bit, and then slowly returned to my trail jog pace. I caught back up with Elaine and Jen.

Then, about half an hour later: Another roll. This one hurt more, and I swore out loud. I encouraged my friends to continue running, and they took off into the warm afternoon woods. I walked for a short while, and again, gradually returned to a tentative running pace.

I again caught up to Elaine and Jen. This pattern was frustrating. But even more frustrating was the third time I rolled that same right ankle. I hobbled around for a bit, again, encouraging my companions to go ahead without me. They were chasing the clock for a sub-seven hour finish, and I didn't want to slow them down.

At that moment, I vowed to finally order an ankle brace if and when I made it through the race. I don't think I tore anything, although I knew I needed to be extremely careful these last few miles.

I ran for about half an hour alone in the woods. I wasn't racing fast, but I kept up a steady pace, flinching every time my right foot turned a stone or angled in any direction. My left quad was throbbing as I was using that side of my body to make up for my tentative, weaker footfalls on my right side. I had lost all my running form and what little grace I'd had to begin with. I just wanted to make it through the end of the race without any more damage.



I was very happy to eventually hear Elaine's and Jen's voices on the trail ahead of me. We rejoined as a team with just a few miles to go, and committed to sticking together to the end.

"We've got to finish as a team," Elaine or Jen said. I don't recall who said it, but it was the meaning that mattered. And that felt good.

At long last, after seemingly endless switchbacks and false turns, we ran down a hill and emerged — each of us definitely scathed in different ways — onto the road and the last aid station. We were less than a mile to the finish. I was thrilled beyond

belief at having a flat surface for running; I relaxed and let go of some of the terror of more deeply injuring my ankle. We were on the home stretch.

I swigged some more Coca-Cola, but Elaine and Jen barely stopped. Elaine abandoned her vest, throwing it into the car of one of her friends who was waiting for her, and they continued right along. I caught up with them as they were leaving the parking lot.

There comes a moment in every race where you realize, barring an Act of God against you, you know you're going to finish. A massive weight lifts off your shoulders, and you might find an extra spring in your step. That's how we felt as we cruised through that final mile.

"You know, Jen," I said, finally confident enough to voice what I'd been eager to say for the past couple of hours. "Short of you getting hit by a car and me getting eaten by a bear, we're gonna finish our fifth Cat's Tail."

Betchya' wondering what happened next.

Actually, nothing bad.

We ran by the river, crossed over the bridge, and approached the main intersection of downtown Phoenicia. A volunteer in a yellow safety vest started clapping at our approach.



"Woohoo!" she shouted as we neared. "Go across the street, take a right into the field, and you're done."

Do you know how good that feels?

We did as we were told, running across the street and turning right into the field behind the parish hall. We adjusted our paces and formed a single row.

I looked down at my watch. "We're gonna break seven hours," I said.

"All right!" "Yes!"

We followed the flags and banked around the field. The crowd at the finish line caught sight of us and began clapping. I saw my friend Joshua, who had run last year and was taking this year

off. I saw Stefan, who had no doubt finished well ahead of us. There's something deeply special and humbling about having your friends clap and cheer you into the finish of a tough race.

We turned the final corner and finished side-by-side-by-side in about 6 hours 57 minutes. It wasn't a PR for me, but it was my second fastest time by about a minute and a half from two years ago. With each painful ankle roll I was convinced a sub-seven hour finish was out of reach. However, when you run with friends, you often push yourself along faster than you would if you were solo. That was certainly the case for the three of us today.

We embraced and smiled and winced and smiled again. Mike gave us our finisher hats, and then rewarded Jen and I with a special gift for being perfect Cat's Tail streakers: Patagonia lightweight jackets with the Cat's Tail logo and the words *5 Time Finisher*.



I didn't get choked up all day until that moment. It wasn't the jacket, although that was a wonderful recognition of what we'd accomplished. It was more the journey I had taken with Cat's Tail for the past five years. At the start of that journey, this race had forced me miserably into a rocky corner, shivering and soaked to my bones, wishing I were anywhere but in these mountains. But I made it through, and each year since, have grown — just as the race has grown. It was in my blood, and I had certainly left enough of my blood on the course for me to be in its blood.

For me, Cat's Tail has become the most poignant and personal reminder of what we as human beings are capable of achieving. There are certainly harder, more meaningful things out there — raising a family with honor and love, volunteering and giving back for a cause that you're passionate about, running a 100-mile ultra — but these 26.2 miles through the dappled light of the lush forests and rugged mountains of New York have come to represent my personal journey of growth.

Each year I make it through Cat's Tail, I know I can make it through anything in the year ahead.

But it's not just about survival. It's about bonding with your friends and fellow runners. It's about helping each other out. It's about sprinting through nests of bees. It's about taking selfies on top of mountains. It's about helping each other slide down slabs of rock. It's about sharing stories of the trail. It's about exposing your soul to the other runners around you who are sharing your suffering and excitement. It's about stepping onto the path before you, uncertain with what the day will bring, not knowing if you'll make it through successfully, but giving it all you've got — and staggering through the finish line at the other side, living to tell your story and run another day.

It's about making the most of what precious little time we have as the universe swirls around us. If we're just a spark rising from the flames of a firepit outside a motel nestled between ancient mountains, flashing briefly in the night before disappearing forever in the ocean of stars, we owe it to ourselves — to each other — to be as bright of a spark as possible.

Live urgently, friends.

Cat's Tail, see you next year.