

Vista 300... 2023 Edition

In 2022, I attempted Vista 300 as my first bikepacking race. I saw that Brian Toone had set FKT on a gravel bike. What I didn't know, since I was so incredibly new to the off-road scene, is that he did it on a Cuthroat with big tires. Oh, and he's also not a normal human being... Since I didn't know those two things, and I was an off-road rookie anyway, my ignorance led me to bring a 1-month old gravel bike on 42mm tires to attempt this race. 164 miles in, at Vic's Tire shop, I was done. While I still had energy and some legs, my upper body was completely destroyed from the chunky descents. I threw in the towel.

The DNF did not sit well with me. As the 2023 Grand Depart was nearing, I was hopeful that some of my local friends would be able to make the race with me. The date wasn't working for them, so instead they were planning a group ITT in June. While I knew that would probably be more fun, I couldn't shake the 2022 DNF and allure to the Grand Depart. So, I jumped in. This time, I would bring much more bike, a full suspension trail mountain bike (Trek Fuel EX) on 2.2" Continental Race Kings.

A couple good 100+ mile gravel races early in the season and some really quality MTB training days had my confidence high. I had no intent on racing for a position, since I was still new to this kind of race and I didn't know the competitors. But, I did set a goal of finishing under 48 hours. I felt that would be a tough challenge, but obtainable if I paced myself properly and things went well.

I arrived at Fireside Outpost Wednesday afternoon, got everything prepped for the GD, and went to Pepo's for a burrito. I got to spend a little time around the campfire that evening, meeting fellow racers and others who were just hanging out for the fun of it. It was a nice evening, and I was able to get to bed just before 10:00.

My alarm was set for 4:30 Thursday morning. I like a lot of time to not feel rushed. I had a hearty breakfast and a shower, so I was feeling great.

After a few pre-race photos at the Hiawasee State Park sign, 6:30 came and riders went off. Shortly into the Coffee Branch climb, I found myself pacing with Austin Schreiner, while Brandon Lee and Joe Wharton shot off the front pretty quickly. Austin and I were keeping a nice steady, comfortable pace, and eventually Joe came back into view. Next thing I knew, Austin stalled out and jumped off to the side so I could get by without stalling also. I unfortunately never saw him again. I was disappointed to hear that he had to drop for a mechanical. In our short time together, it sounded like he was aiming for a time very similar to where I'd end up finishing, and it would've been fun to have him in the mix for longer.

I eventually caught Joe before the overlook, and we both stopped there to grab a few photos. I decided to take off first. I'm not an avid mountain biker so I thought I might enjoy the benefit of a head start on the descent. Just after I left the overlook, I passed Brandon. He was taking a quick snack break. Suddenly, I was leading the race, and I wasn't sure how to feel about that!

Between here and Tellico Plains, Joe and I would sort-of ping pong back and forth. He would climb a little stronger, and I would catch back up on the descents, likely thanks to my heavier bike setup. I pulled off to the side about 3 hours in, as I had received some text messages, so I knew that I had phone service. I took advantage and called in an order to Tellico Grains for a pizza and a sandwich to be ready when I arrived in town. This worked perfectly! I also snagged a cookie, a Coke and all the water I

needed to skip the gas station. I ate 4 pieces of the pizza and took the remaining 2 to go. I also packed the sandwich for later. I was in and out of town in about 20 minutes, and feeling fantastic.

Out of Tellico Plains and along the river for some beautiful, fast miles before we got to the construction site Kim had warned us about. When I arrived at the site, Joe was there, waiting for the workers to give him the green light to pass. He said he had been there just a couple of minutes before I arrived. After probably 5 more minutes, which felt like 20, they let us through. I thought we may share some miles here, but after just a couple hundred yards, I realized Joe wasn't trying to pace with me. The next 50 miles to Indian Boundary would be pretty solitary and uneventful. I was happy with this, as in 2022, the long climb up Cold Spring felt more like Hot Desert.

I made it to Indian Boundary in just under 10 hours, and I was very pleased with this. It was prior to closing time, so I was able to purchase an ice cream bar, a Coke and more water. I had my last two pieces of pizza, the ice cream and Coke from the dry front porch of the store, watching a short but heavy rain. I couldn't have timed the stop more perfectly. By the time I was ready to go, the rain had subsided and I still hadn't seen Joe.

Off to the Cherohala Skyway I went, crossing over the first 100 mile mark. I made a quick stop at the first overlook to check the weather, check in with Beth and a few friends, and of course grab a photo. I didn't stay long as I wanted to finish the climb and long gravel descent in the daylight, to help with visibility and warmth. Mission accomplished, and wow that descent felt good on the mountain bike! I made a quick stop at the game check station to top off water, and then headed to Green Cove store for more Coke. As I was enjoying my Coke and peanut butter crackers, Joe rolled in to do the same. He also bought two Cokes, which made me feel a little better about my sudden mass soda intake!

I drank one at the store and bought a 2nd to have with my sandwich later. My goal was to make it to Buck Bald to have my "dinner." Things were going well. Again, I rolled out before Joe and I knocked out the the next couple climbs and rolled into Coker Creek Welcome Center at the 15-hour mark. I topped off bottles again and headed towards Buck Bald. After hiking the first bit of the Unicoi Mountain Trail, I was able to start riding a good bit of it. About half-way through, I popped a spoke in my rear wheel. I couldn't believe it. I wrapped it around another spoke and kept going, wondering if this would force me to DNF. I'd never broken a spoke before, and while I didn't expect catastrophic failure immediately, I wondered what another 170+ miles was going to do to it. From that point on, I tried to always keep it on my mind when things were bumpy or chunky, choosing smoother lines when possible.

I made it to Buck Bald around 16.5 hours in. There was a big camper van backed almost all of the way up to the gate at the end of the road. There were lights on inside, so I knew people were likely there, as it was about 11:00 PM. My understanding of the course is that we need to go beyond the gate and up the trail to the peak. This was a little challenging and uncomfortable with the van there, so my plan to eat my sandwich and 2nd Coke from the Green River store here was going to be delayed. I didn't want to hang around.

On my way back down the out-and-back, I crossed Joe. He was just minutes behind, as usual. From Buck Bald, my next stop was Vic's, where I had quit in 2022. I was

getting really tired and thought I might be able to find a place to lay down there. I poked around for a few minutes, but nowhere felt comfortable or safe, so I continued on, hoping I'd find something better.

Just a few miles down the road, a pretty large church on the left looked like a beacon in the night. I rolled in, excited to find a place to finally lay down and grab a little nap. I found a nice big concrete area to the right of the church and layed down for about 15 minutes. Unfortunately, I couldn't sleep. It was just a little too cold. So, I sat up and ate half of my sandwich and the Coke. The sandwich was tasty, but I just wasn't excited to eat. I think I had waited too long. This was probably one of my biggest mistakes I made during the race. I needed to eat that sandwich earlier, and fully. I packed my stuff back up and found a trash can to throw some things away. As I went to roll back out, I heard a voice off to my right yell out. I looked over to find Joe laying on the ground on the left side of the church. He had been there for 15-20 minutes and also unable to sleep. Knowing we were both tired, and I had already been there nearly an hour, I waited a few more minutes for Joe to pull himself together and we rolled out.

Unfortunately, like earlier at the construction site, Joe wasn't interested in matching my pace. From studying the route, I knew that the next ~20 miles were fairly fast and I was looking forward to the Circle K in Ducktown that several people have given good reviews of.

I made it to Ducktown around 21.5 hours, but I wasn't feeling great. I was still really tired and my stomach was a mess. I bought a coffee, a 5-hour Energy (for emergency use later) and water to refill my bottles. I drank the coffee and ate my cookie from Tellico Grains, but it wasn't helping. My stomach was still rough, and I knew I needed to use the bathroom. Joe also rolled in while I was here, and he was much more efficient than me, despite claiming to also feel pretty rough. He rolled on while I stuck around to try and calm my stomach. I finally went to the bathroom and that seemed to help some, though the tiredness was still there. I left around the 23-hour mark, probably 30 minutes behind Joe. That was the last time I would see him, until after the finish.

Next stop was about 15 miles of singletrack around the Ocoee River and the Whitewater Center. It was pretty much all rideable and fun, but felt like it took forever. There was one slick bridge that had been washed out. I knew it would be too slick to ride, so I attempted to walk it, and ended up falling twice just trying to do that. I'd love to know if anyone made it past that bridge unscathed! If I'm being honest, the best parts of this single track were that I crossed 200 miles and the sun came up! There was a gravel climb after the single track and before the dreaded Sylco trail that I had heard so much about. I decided to try and lay down again, this time in the sun, on the side of the gravel road. I figured some rest might make me hate Sylco a little less. I layed there for 20 minutes, again without sleeping, before deciding to just go get it done. Much to my surprise, it wasn't that bad. There's been some controlled burns and a lot of work done recently. Kim told me later that it's currently the best condition it has been in a very long time.

After Sylco, I was pleased to get back to some faster miles. I was still really tired, but my stomach was a little better and I was getting very hungry. I remembered Cedar telling me to call ahead for a Philly cheesesteak at Ocoee Dam Deli, so when I got service at the top of a hill about 25 minutes before the restaurant, I did just that, along with fries and a Coke, of course.

I hit asphalt shortly after that phone call. Literally. The road was nice and smooth, and I had been dealing with my dropper post sticking really bad, so I decided it was a good time to try and cycle it a few times to loosen it up. Always keeping a finger hovering over the brake lever, I made a horrible mistake of squeezing the dropper and brake lever at the same time, descending an asphalt road at 20+ MPH. My front tire bit the road hard and the bike hopped and I almost wrecked immediately. Thankfully, I was able to pop one foot out of a pedal and get some sort of speed shed before I eventually succumbed to the inevitable. I thankfully went down fairly slowly and in a skid. I got some good road rash and a destroyed pair of bibs, but no real damage to the bike or myself. I jumped back on and headed towards Ocoee Dam & Deli with a hustle, so I could clean my wounds and devour my lunch.

The sandwich was delicious and the people were fantastic. I had a spare bib in my bag and a first aid kit, so I was able to make myself presentable again and get back on the road fairly quickly. I made a stop at Sonic just down the street for two sausage breakfast burritos and some tater tots for my dinner and snacks to be eaten later in the night.

From there to Kim's place at mile ~250, I was starting to feel better. The heavy meal was starting to give me the energy I seemed to lack since Unicoi Mountain, and the icing on the cake was all of the cheerful faces on Kim's front lawn! Wow! The amount of energy you can pull from other people has never ceased to amaze me. I've experienced this before in Ironman races, when I'd see my wife cheering me along the course. It's hard to explain, but having people care about you and cheer for you is such a major energy boost! I hope I can give this back every chance I get.

After leaving Kim's place, I felt amazing. The next long climb that the crew had warned me about was indeed long. I walked some and I rode some. But my spirits were high. Once the climb was complete, I decided to go ahead and eat one of my burritos and tots. I didn't want to get into another calorie deficit the way I did the night before.

The single track around Chilhowee was mostly fun, but sometimes tough. There were some large rock gardens and things I was really hesitant to ride, especially with my wobbly rear wheel. I was happy to get to the end and find the bathrooms at the campground. I topped off fluids and washed my face off. With just about 45 miles left to go, I was feeling good and starting to smell the finish.

My next stop was at Hall's Grocery. They had a Coke machine, so I had to partake, of course. I also went ahead and ate my last burrito. I figured with just 35 miles to go, I could make it on my fluids and remaining snacks. My Garmin showed one big climb left, and it was coming. Everyone downplayed it back at Kim's place, so I wasn't too worried about it. It was indeed slow, but all rideable, and the descent of Smith Mountain after was really fun, aside from some insane ruts towards the bottom. I learned from Kim later that there was a very wet dualsport race through there a week prior that caused the rutting, which isn't normally as bad.

At the bottom of Smith Mountain, I originally planned to go off-course to the piped spring, but I had a full bottle left and I was only 16 miles from the finish, and feeling great. I continued on. I crossed the Hiwassee bridge, rolled through Reliance and went down "Mud Rd" in search of the Spring Creek crossing. I struggled here. I wasted a good bit of time trying to interpret where the Garmin was telling me to cross, but I finally made it. The cold water was not very deep, but it felt good on my tired feet.

Off of the old service road and back on the road to the campground, I was so excited to be nearly finished. I was watching the clock, and I was going to finish under 44 hours as long as I didn't waste any time on the final single track through the campground. It took me a minute to find the entrance, but once I did, I was stoked to see that the trail was very well groomed. It was more of what I'd consider a family hiking trail. I knew I could push the pace and be done in just a few minutes.

That's when things went really crazy for me. About a quarter mile into this trail, I rounded a right-hand corner and hit a wet bridge that I didn't even realize was a bridge until I had went down, skipped across it, and apparently hit my face. I remember going down. I remember being off the side of the bridge, both my bike and me. I remember feeling shocked that it had just happened so suddenly. And that's the last thing I remember for about the next 50 minutes. Within that 50 minutes, my data tells me that I got up just a few minutes after wrecking and physically rode my bike another 0.4 mile to the boat ramp. I don't know if crossing the bigger bridge onto asphalt at the boat ramp made me think that I was finished, or if I just couldn't focus to go on any further. I unfortunately cannot remember. The next thing I do remember is about 30 minutes after I arrived at the boat ramp, I looked at my phone, saw that Beth had texted me, and I decided to call her. I explained to her that I didn't know where I was, what I was doing, why I was there, etc. She tried to explain those things to me and insisted that I call 911, but I wasn't at the point where I could really comprehend. She tried getting me help herself, and I eventually was able to figure out how to call 911 and ask for help too. As the police and EMS were on their way, everything started coming back to me pretty quickly. By the time the EMS actually arrived and took my vitals, which were good, I could tell them basically everything that had happened. We decided I didn't need to be rushed to the hospital, but should probably get checked out soon. That's where Kim stepped up immensely. With Beth 4+ hours away, but already headed my direction, Kim took the best care of my bike and me. She got me back to Fireside Outpost so I could shower while she collected my bike. She then took me to the hospital to get a CT scan. My vitals were still good and the CT scan was clear. About that time, Beth and her sister, Erin, arrived at the hospital, relieving Kim to go tend to other riders in need. I got a tetanus shot and ate all of the food at Waffle House. Beth and I went back to Fireside Outpost for a nap while Erin headed back to Greenville.

This is where the story ends. My ride ended approximately half of a mile short of the official finish line, around 43 hours and 50 minutes. Thankfully, Kim is pretty nice, so I think she's going to award me with a finishing time, with a fair penalty for the shortcut. I am hoping the memory of those 50 minutes eventually returns, but I'm not optimistic. I've never had memory loss before, but it's hard for me to imagine it would come back at this point.

As for the race, I cannot speak highly enough about it. It's such a beautiful course, and so much fun! The people who support and race the event are fantastic. Kim is amazing and deserving of more thanks than I can ever repay. I suppose the only way I can show my appreciation is to just keep coming back to Fireside Outpost for more adventures! Maybe Mountain 420 is next!?

Lastly, I cannot end this without a little shout out to another lady who is pretty amazing. Beth is so understanding of my personal need to continue these crazy adventures, despite the stress it puts her through. I could not do it without her support,

and for her willingness to come rescue me when I get a little too dumb. I'm a pretty lucky guy to love and be loved by this girl.