

PL 50k ++ 2014
A view from the middle by Rebecca Weast

Saturday was a wonderful day for a race. I found myself, around 5am, stretching at a picnic table and catching up with Crozet runners Nicholas DiPirro, Dan Spearin, and Jeff Lysiak, dimly aware of how absurd this whole exercise would look to the average spectator. Runners swarmed around the start area, good luck was passed around, headlamps switched on and ... we were off!

The initial hill-climb in the dark kicked off a relatively uneventful first third of my day. Up ahead was a winding road full of bobbing head-lamps and short shorts. In the dark this section of the run feels a bit surreal, which serves the dual purpose of helping the time to pass more quickly, and helping me forget that even though I might feel good in that moment, that there was plenty of pain to follow.

Runners shifted around, settling into comfortable climbing paces, and my indecisive early-race inner dialogue kicked in with full force. "ooh, I feel good now, this is great! Oh, but I should slow down, I'll burn out. Yea, I'm definitely going too fast ... but I shouldn't be too conservative, I can totally go faster than this! Whee, I feel great! Why do I feel so great, this is weird. Oh, crap, I need to eat something ... wasn't I supposed to be at that next aid station by now?" and on and on. The runners around me were pretty quiet, swapping comments on the weather and the beautiful sunrise, and cruising along the rolling up and down (ok, mostly up) between AS 1 and our first stop at Sunset Fields.

Coming down the dirt road into Sunset Fields, I encountered a pair of sassy older gentlemen whose names I didn't learn, but who were friendly and talkative, and whose conversation successfully broke up my indecisive inner dialogue. I finally hit a groove.

My memory of the downhill into the Dark Side of the course was ... not favorable. Last year, it felt like this section went on forever! So I was pleasantly surprised when this year's trip down felt positively quick and (relatively) painless. Right about here I decided that I was going to have a good day. I came to the aid station at the bottom of the trail and, sure enough, Dr. Dave "(mostly) Benevolent Overlord" Horton was there, sitting and quietly noting things on his clipboard. The sight of this man doing anything quietly is ... unsettling. Welcome to the Dark Side.

The 3-ish miles between here and the next AS were uneventful – I leapfrogged Sassy Old Guys #1 and 2, and discussed the intricacies of sleeping on the ground. Things were good.

Heading out of the Ice Cream AS (mile 19ish) a hip injury that had been quiet up until this point started talking to me. S! caps and calories didn't get it to quiet down, and I realized that the rest of the day would be a bit of a mental grind. Towards the end of this segment, the Sassy Old Guys dropped me as I tried to work out the kinks in my legs. I spent a mile or two working my way through a relatively low point, both mentally and physically. I was very excited to finally get to the aid station.

After chowing down and loading up, and getting some encouragement from the wonderful AS volunteers, I steeled myself for the climb up the falls. Although the sun was strong by now, it hadn't yet gotten uncomfortably warm. My goal was to get the climb over with before that happened. Right after turning up onto the trail, I encountered a couple of speedy Hokie ladies (who's names, again, I didn't learn. I should really work on that) who'd I'd been trailing all day. They told me they were hoping to finish around 6:30, and suddenly I felt very optimistic about the rest of my run – all I wanted was to finish under 7. Woohoo! I decided to hang with them for as long as I could, and I'm SO glad that I did; they were super friendly, and talking/running/hiking/cursing with them kept my spirits up while keeping me honest about how much juice I had left in the tank. I may not have felt great, but I definitely had the legs for the climb.

Incidentally, when I was about halfway up my climb, Speedy Crozet Dudes Jon Anderson and Dan Spearin were finishing up their days on the other side of the mountain. I realized this, and was a bit jealous. This only lasted for a moment, though. I was hypoxic enough from the climbing and the panting that coherent thought wasn't really an option.

Topping out at Sunset Fields part 2 (the redux!) I was happy, but my legs were done. My hip was talking louder than ever, and I was not looking forward to the dirt road downhill. The Hokie ladies dropped me right about here, and went on to a strong finish. I spent the final 5 miles playing mind games, and visualizing my post-race shower and lunch. I ran through the trail section of this descent faster than I'd remembered from the year before, and got a little extra mental boost ... which lasted all of 3 minutes once I began pounding my way down the dirt road. I was passed by several very strong looking runners along this stretch, and I had no answer. Oh well, I was going to meet my goals, and I didn't have anything left.

Running down into the finish, I almost caught one woman who had passed me along the road – I missed her by 1 second, but it made those last few yards exciting. After hugging the Benevolent Overlord I turned to find the Crozet dudes – Jon Anderson, Dan Sperin, and Nick DiPirro – along with speedy Richmond lady Ann Stanley, CAT powerhouse Marc Griffin, and the day's friendly, pre-marathon tapering spectator Bob Clouston all very conveniently sitting discussing their runs. I plopped down in the circle and was done.

I got to hang out and watch some solid finishes from Martha Wright, a smiling (or grimacing ... but I think it was smiling) Kathryn Laughton, and a very rugged and manly looking Stuart Brown who wound up winning Best Blood, and a shnazzy fleece blanket.

I don't know that I have a good way to sum up the events of the day – there was fun, and pain, and sweat, and lots of food and great company. I don't think it can be said enough how wonderful and hardworking all of the volunteers are, and how great and consistent Benevolent Overlord Dave Horton is at organizing these events each and every year. This is a really special community. Those average spectators – the ones who would think this is absurd – they're really missing out.