

Emily Stock

Holiday Lake 50k 2015

Runner's High: - noun – definition per Merriam-Webster: “a feeling of euphoria that is experienced by some individuals engaged in strenuous running and that is held to be associated with a release of endorphins by the brain.”

It was dark, freezing cold and I was surrounded by seasoned long distance runners. My headlamp had broken that morning, I had packed the wrong socks, I hadn't had a decent bowel movement in 48 hours and my mind was racing. How did I get here? Do I even deserve to be running alongside some of the best collegiate runners and other experienced pros? I have 32++ miles of trails to conquer? I've made a huge mistake. I'm not ready. I can't do this. Then I heard Mark Guzzi's trademark laugh, saw a clementine come flying my way and knew then and there that I couldn't back out.

Rewind a few months ago: A fellow runner and dear friend, Hannah Mills, and I both work at lululemon athletica in Short Pump. Mark is our running ambassador and frequently comes in the store to brighten everyone's day. He is revered and loved by every member on our team and consistently challenges each and every one of us to not only step, but leap outside of our comfort zone. Hannah and I were training for our first marathon (Richmond- 2014) and on the day of the race, it was Mark who met up with us at mile 24 and ran us in to the finish line. The moment of completing your first marathon is something you never ever forget and we are both so thankful that Mark was there to share that moment with us.

A month after the marathon, Mark stopped by the store with an envelope, a challenge and a registration form. Holiday Lake 50k. I thought he was joking. 50k? What is that? 30 something miles? But the sincerity in his voice when he said he believed in Hannah and me made me tear up and ultimately accept his challenge. Because “Why be just a marathoner when you can be an ULTRA marathoner??” –Mark

I continued to train as best as I could and was able to go on a 20 mile trail run with Mark, Hannah and her boyfriend John Ludden, affectionately known as Abe. With that as our final long run, we embarked on the challenge of HL.

The pre-race dinner was fantastic! The comradery amongst the runners and David Horton's team of all-star organizers was unmatched. It truly felt like a family dinner. We stuck around for the newbie-race prep and sat with our mouths ajar as we learned about utilizing syringes filled with iodine for blisters, Balm of Gilead for chapped bums and how to pee standing up (for the ladies). Clearly we were in over our heads.

Fast forward to race day: Hannah, Abe and I nervously waited at the starting line shivering in the dark. We had made a pact that we would all stick together for the duration of the race and finish together. No man left behind. And we stuck to that pact. My boyfriend and confidence booster, Nic, stood on the sidelines with a sleepy grin and thumbs up. The poor thing had

listened to my borderline neurotic rambling and self-doubt all night and here he was, up before sunrise to cheer us on. He's a keeper.

The race started and off we went. The course was beautiful, well-marked and the aid stations were fully stocked and manned by genuinely upbeat volunteers. I had no complaints whatsoever about the logistics of HL. Bravo Horton and Co!

The experience itself was long, exhausting and absolutely wonderful. We met so many delightful people with all sorts of backgrounds. Everyone was motivating and positive. The stream crossing was my biggest fear and also completely overhyped in my head. We ran through it and kept on going, numb toes and all. (Sidenote: Mark had prepped us for this on the 20 miler with an even deeper stream crossing!)

Our trio decided the best way to mentally get through this race was to focus on making it from aid station to station. At the halfway mark, we were greeted by Nic and the volunteers. I don't think Nic has ever seen me so viciously devour a cube of potato dipped in salt. Thankfully he still loves me despite seeing me in "race mode" eating.

Back on the trail we came to the power line/fire road purgatory. Abe's calf and IT band had seized up pretty bad, my knee was howling and Hannah's hips were getting too tight. Another runner came alongside us and could tell our motley crew was struggling so she paced us from power line pole to pole. I can't remember her name but wherever she is -- she should be canonized for her compassion on the trail.

As we got back to the single track trails, Abe told me to go ahead for a bit. He and Hannah would catch up. I trudged along and all of a sudden, I found my pace had increased. The pain in my knee had completely subsided. My breath and the thud of my feet were all in perfect harmony. For 20 minutes I glided along the trail. Everything synched. Everything was right in my little world. To try and put down in words how a runner's high feels is like trying to define love. It's not something you can describe but rather something you have to experience. I felt like a well-oiled machine moving through the trail. My legs just carried me forward with a fluidity that felt almost unnatural. This is why we, as runners, get up at ungodly hours in the morning. This is why we work the long runs in with the short sprints or cross training. This euphoric feeling is why I look past the blisters, the achy knees, the Charlie horses and the occasional trip or fall on the trail. For those blissful 20 minutes, nothing else mattered in the world.

After my zenned-out Emily time, I slowed my pace and regrouped with Hannah and Abe. Together as a team of huddled masses, we made it closer to the finish line. Waiting at the end was Mark, grinning from ear to ear. We crossed the finish line and shared hugs and high-fives all around. I thought my heart could burst from happiness and probably all the caffeine blocks. Nic was the MVP of the day with pizza and beer waiting for us as well. Seriously, I'm keeping this guy around.

Looking back at our experience at Holiday Lake, I only have the fondest of memories. Hannah and I both have a special place in our hearts for Mark. No one else has challenged us to push

ourselves in such a way that Mark has. We wouldn't have been able to do HL without him and I'm sure he'll have another challenge for us again soon.

Thanks again to David Horton, all the volunteers and the Holiday Lake 4-H camp for providing such a memorable time and a new PR for three ultra-running virgins. And a huge thank you to Mark Guzzi for believing in two lululemon girls that "you CAN do more than you think you can."

-Emily Stock
Ultramarathoner