

It is October and I haven't run more than 5 miles in a couple of years and even those 5 miles were more jogging than running. I have given work and other parts of my life more of my time and running less. Deeply, I am feeling the need for positive change. I get online and register for the Holiday Lake 50k. It is near my parents' house, north of Charlottesville and I have run this race once before in 2008.

I drive through a New Jersey snowstorm to VA on Thursday night and arrive to find my parents (planned support crew) coughing. Friday I let them know that I cannot bring them to the race because waking up at 3AM and the long day of driving and supporting me at the event will not be of any benefit to their health. I will have my sister Fran and brother in law, Mitch come instead. My parents hesitantly agree but later my mother tells me how disappointed they feel not to be a part of the event and I also would like them to be as close as possible to the experience.

Training for the event was empowering and I am amazed at how quickly my body returns to long distance running form of strength and hunger to be challenged. All went well until the last long training run the weekend before the race. I know Holiday Lake can be muddy and so I purchase a pair of trail shoes and try to break them in on a ½ marathon in the hills of western NJ.

By the end of the ½ marathon my right knee is in screaming pain. I put a magnetic knee brace on and take some anti inflammatory pills but Wed before the race the knee is still very painful. I ask a doctor friend to take a look and she informs me there is nothing structurally wrong and it most likely just needs a couple of weeks of rest. I love ultra running because the decisions I make have non trivial and sometimes immediate consequences. This time the first decision will be before the race even begins.

I struggle with my decision to run or not. If I run and do damage to my knee, it could stop me from running for the remainder of the year. If I rest and skip the Holiday Lake run I will only have my own disappointment and I can run another race later in the year. Everyone gives me their opinion(s) but the decision is mine. If I choose not to run, when I wake up Saturday morning at my parents house I will feel like I should have at least gone to Appomattox and started. I go with my gut and Friday night decide to at least start the race. If the pain intensifies or I feel structural instability I will stop at an aid station or simply walk until I reach one. Running has become more than simply a sport to me, it is part of how I define who I am to myself and to others.

I never sleep much the night before the run but worrying about this knee issue has kept me from sleeping most the week. I wake up Saturday morning at 3AM excited but I can feel the tiredness in my legs. I convince myself that the physical part of the race is less than 50% and I will have to start the race and figure the rest out on the trail.

We arrive at the Holiday Lake 4-H center an hour early. It is near freezing with the big moon lighting the sky. Walking into the Office I see Dr. Horton and some of the other runners and immediately feel at home. My knee is tender but no piercing pain when I jog. My decision to come gains some confidence and I chat with a couple other runners about what runners chat about at 5AM on Saturday mornings.

The Holiday Lake 50k starts after we sing the national anthem and a prayer. I start the run at the very back of the pack and want to simply jog and test my knee without disturbing other runners and their pace. I am confident the up hill segments will be fine but the downhill is where I felt the knee was unstable. We all run up the road and I run as gentle as I have ever run on my legs. I push left and right a little at a time without pain. We enter the single track and I shift my body weight forward and then back to see where the knee is most comfortable without completely the way I run. I open my stride a bit but it quickly brings soreness.

The single track opens up and this is my favorite part of the race. On the flat wide surfaces I talk with other runners. I listen and am inspired by their stories. How they came to running and specifically ultra running. Truly a bonding experience and a way to run through miles without focusing on pain or the finish line. I have met several long standing friends over the years this way and have never met a person that I moved away from quickly from their demeanor.

I struggle to get out of my head and be present to the woods, the air, the trail, river, etc. To allow my mind to relax and stop managing everything or thinking about the future. I am back on the single track and realize that I am limping slightly downhill in order to reduce the impact on my knee. I know running with this fear and resulting light limp will eventually hurt my other knee and legs. I press myself to let go and weight the knee. It is sore but doesn't become unstable.

I run into and quickly out of the river. I stop, turn around, walk back into the river and drop my sore knee into the water. Instant relief. Relief to my knee and for a moment, relaxation for the rest of my body. Water, how simple and powerful. AND heavy, I walk out of the river and start to run but my feet are buckets of water.

My sister and Mitch are cheering as I near the end of the first loop. I can hear them cheering across the lake and can't contain the smile on my face. I run faster and into my sisters arms. After a big hug I get some liquid down and let them know that my knee is sore but functional. My sister has met someone she knows from Virginia Beach in the crowd (what a small and connected world). They bring me some soup and it warms my whole body as I slurp it down. I leave and for the first time consider running without my knee being an issue.

I am running behind a girl who stops and asks me if I can spare some toilet paper. I pull some from my pack and she follows me for a while and then I no longer hear her footsteps. I feel good being able to help her and my pace increases.

Every runner I pass either oncoming or by slowly overtaking them at this point is verbally helping the other runners with 'good job' and 'keep going', etc. I meet several more runners in the flats and the conversations are much less trivial. The sentences are shorter and it is visible that each of us is dealing with our own inside issues and struggles.

I arrive at the last aid station with 4 miles left to the finish line. My knee is sore but my quads and calves are also sore. I grab some quick food and a drink. The drink goes first and then I start to run with the food so I can eat it slowly. I am running behind a girl who is pulling me a little faster than my solo pace. My body is trying to run differently to deal with the leg pain but I keep correcting myself to maintain some form. Her foot hits a root and she falls onto all fours and skids across the leaves. I help her up and she pushes me to run again. I tell her "don't worry, I always fall at least once and it hasn't happened yet today". She smiles but I know inside she is checking to see if there is any real damage or just some minor pain on her knees and palms. She is much younger than me and I think to myself that I should let her know to roll when she falls instead of taking the impact directly on her knees and hands.

We talk a bit while running the single track and switch the lead several times in order to keep or increase the pace. I can barely keep up but tell myself that if I let her go, I will end up jogging instead of running. We turn onto a trail and I am leading. I immediately fall down. I trip, fall hard, totally flat and barely get my arms in front of me to break the fall. She stops and asks if I am ok. I am laughing so hard I cannot breathe enough to answer b/c my last thought was to tell her to roll when she falls. I get up and follow her lead.

We pass several more runners and are within 2 miles of the finish line when the pace slows. I look back and the last man we passed is 20 feet behind us and he looks strong but spent. I call back to him and ask his name. Justin he replies. I say "come on Justin we are going to finish this like champions". I take the lead and push my legs to move faster. We are all silent and running hard, each of us inspiring the others b/c we all know there is pain we are working through individually in order to stay together.

We break out of the single track and onto the road towards the finish line. Alexis accelerates and Justin and I are now doing our best to keep up. I look over and we are all smiling. We cross the finish line and are greeted with cheers, warmth, relief and food. I look at the clock and have run 5 minutes slower than my time 10 years earlier. I am in disbelief. I hug and thank my sister and Mitch. I thank Dr. Horton for the opportunity and for creating such a well-run event. I feel complete and whole even with a sore knee

Chris Mitchell