

Looking-Up at Holliday Lake 50K++

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When I decided Holliday Lake 50K++ would be my first ultra, I read everything I could find specifically about this event and about training for trail races in general. One of the best sources I found were the race reports written by runners and filed after each event. You people are incredible – the training and sacrifice and the stories of struggle and perseverance and accomplishment... WOW! I knew I was getting very close to the mother-ship. So I decided if I survived this thing, I would write a report that would try to offer some helpful insight for the next group of prospective newcomers to this insanely wonderful and challenging sport. Therefore, most of this report is geared toward those folks, like me, who are looking for reassurance as they step-off the pavement and run way past 26.2 for the very first time.

So why did I choose this event? I was talking to Josh and Jeff at *Riverside Runners* in Lynchburg about marathons in the area. I had just completed the Marine Corp Marathon in October after a ten year hiatus from running events. I call that break the “building years” – building a family, a career, a farm (– insert your favorite excuse here). Anyway, I needed a goal to keep the come-back train on the tracks and Jeff mentioned Holliday Lake. He explained it was a 50k trail race but it was a great transition from marathons because it involves a lot of good-old-fashioned running.

It sounded like a good fit – our farm is only twenty minutes from the Park and I had used the roads that criss-cross the State Forest for my marathon long-run training. I liked the idea of running “off-road” as the pavement was starting to get a little rough on my 41 year-old bones, and Holliday Lake is a special place for my family. I learned to swim there as a kid and over the past ten years my wife, Elizabeth, and I have taken our four children there to teach them how to swim. We have also camped, canoed, hiked, and created many wonderful “family memories” there. But I soon learned that this special place had a dark side... David Horton.

I had never heard of Dr. Horton (I know – hard to believe). So I read about his accomplishments on the website... can this guy be real!?!? Then I read *The Quest for Adventure* and watched the DVD, *The Runner*, and began to wonder if this was really such a good idea after all. I mentioned to my wife that I was thinking about running a trail- race at the Lake and her response was “That sounds like fun – we can bring the kids?” Uh... well... I decided to keep the details to myself for a while. So there it was – my goal for the next three months was to prepare to enter the ultra community and place my running future in the hands of a “mad-man.”

I began running some of my long-runs on the actual course at the Lake and kept time as I passed the aid-station sites so I could piece together a reasonable first-timer pace. Like most of you who have run for many years, I am constantly running with-against-around-through various types of injuries. This journey to the starting line would be no different as I listened to my Orthopedist explain the wonders of “piriformis syndrome.” Well, that’s what I like best about the ultra crowd... they don’t have much patience for whining and simply don’t tolerate self-pity. They’ve heard all the war stories (because they’ve lived through most of them) so just get on with the business of lacing-up and logging miles. Reminds me of one of my favorite running quotes – but I’ll save that for the end.

As I trained along with my new friend “sciatic pain”, I realized I would have to keep my long-runs below 20 miles and make-up for this with familiarity of the course. Each time I started to struggle with self-doubt I would read several more race reports from prior years and think about Dr. Horton’s surreal accomplishments. This really helped keep me focused and motivated on those sub-20F mornings and evenings. Over the next few months I was able to complete several training runs at the Lake in weather ranging from sunny and 50F to light freezing rain and 25F. If you are a first-timer, I highly advise running the course at least once before the event. It gave me a big confidence boost to know I could be passing certain landmarks at a given time and still make the first loop cut-off. Each time I ran at the Lake, I finished one loop around the course but was unable (and/or unwilling) to turn-around and continue back out. Each time I also wondered how I would manage this second part of the race - both physically and mentally.

On with the show... as my wife and I drove out to the Lake on Friday evening, I was so nervous about the next day that I really couldn’t imagine eating a bite. Then we stepped inside the dining-hall at the 4-H Center and I stepped into a running world like none I had known before. Everyone was so relaxed and so friendly (and so lean!!!). I picked-up an autographed copy of *Running Through The Wall* from the author himself – Neal Jamison. If you like reading race reports and running stories as much as I do, you need this book. Dr. Horton was a gracious host and a very reassuring race director. The meal was excellent (hats-off

to the 4-H Center Staff) and we were given a really cool race t-shirt as we settled down for the pre-race briefing. Dr. Horton is as charismatic as he is CRAZY and he definitely has a career as a motivational speaker should he ever give-up the trails (doubt-it). He even gave a separate briefing to the first-timers that proved to be the perfect antidote to pre-race jitters.

As I turned-in Friday night, the camaraderie of the evening meal gave way to the demons of self-doubt. How was I going to get my body around that course – twice?!? Sleep was pointless. So I opened my new book and began reading Neal's "Personal Encounters With The Ultramarathon." One of the first stories is about Sophie Speidel's first ultra at, where else, – HL 50K++. She is an accomplished endurance athlete, wife and mother, and a fellow Wahoo! Her story was so compelling and so POSITIVE - it changed my whole attitude. It also reminded me of the many sacrifices my wife makes to allow me the time to train. This long-winded testimonial would not be possible if not for her generous support and encouragement. So I finally relaxed enough to get about four hours of something closely resembling sleep.

6:30AM - Starting time - I thought I had planned for everything. One of the racers sang the National Anthem – a very special and memorable moment. Then I pushed the on-button at the bottom of my flashlight and watched the lens, bulb, battery, and push-button switch all fly straight out of the end of the barrel and land in a ridiculous and useless pile of scrap on the ground. Just the omen I needed!!! As I prepared to blindly step into the panic abyss, a grizzled old veteran leaned over with a smile and the reassuring words I would remember for the rest of the race... "Look up." The weather was so perfect (all day) that the sky was already beginning to lighten and I realized I would be able to see just fine by the time we got to the trail. You see, that's what I'm talking about with these people. There's nothing they haven't seen and nothing they can't handle. If you're willing to put in the time and effort and have the right attitude, you can accomplish more than you think... and these folks will be right there to kick you in the butt and pat you on the back at the same time!

The race began with the usual pomp and circumstance – someone yelled "Go!" – and we were on our way. I knew from the old race reports the course would be crowded at the start. No need to run up the hill at the beginning because you are going to stand in line as everyone works their way onto the single-track around the Lake. So I stayed in the back of the pack walking and making nervous conversation and waiting for my turn to really start the race. The trail around the Lake is not severe... a few ups and downs and little room to pass. Just settle back for a slow and easy start. I'll describe the course in terms of minutes (slowpoke pace) because I'm not really sure of the distances -and we're talking "Horton miles" anyway - so who really wants to know?

After about twenty or thirty minutes the course turns onto a grassy fire road and the bottleneck ends. There's a slight uphill climb for about 10 minutes before leveling out to a comfortable stretch into Aid Station One (AS1). The surface was fairly solid and would remain that way for most of the course. This is a blessing as this course can suck the shoes right off your feet with just a modest amount of precipitation. My plan was to hit AS1 at about 45 minutes and I was right-on-time. I never spent more than 60 seconds at an aid station... long enough to drink one or two cups of water and refill my 20-ounce hand-held bottle with whatever electrolyte drink was on special (Conquest, Gatorade, or Cliff-something). I'm not too particular about what I drink while running and I suggest first timers get-used-to not getting-used-to anything. Staying open-minded and versatile will serve you well throughout one of these little excursions. When it gets bad (and it will) remember Horton's advice: "This too shall pass".

As you leave AS1 the course turns down a gravel road for about 5 or 10 minutes before turning into the woods and climbing a pretty steep hill. This is a good time to mention an important concept. When you are going downhill – RUN – when you are going uphill – run slower or walk fast. I tried to maintain no worse than a shuffle-style of running when doing any uphill work early in the race and then walked all severe uphill on the second loop. I also tried to incorporate a minimum of two sixty-second walking breaks between each aid station. The trip to AS2 is pretty uneventful after that first climb and you can make some pretty good time as the course hits a hard-top road for about a mile. The next important concept is nutrition – you have to EAT a lot during this thing to safeguard against "the wall". My plan was to eat a Gu pack and an Endurolyte capsule at some point between each aid station and then eat only bananas/pbjs/pretzels at each station during the first loop. The second loop was still too far away to think about.

The segment from AS2 to AS3 is also fairly easy as the course follows gravel fire roads through a beautiful pine research plantation maintained by the Forestry Department. There is one creek crossing followed by an uphill climb to the pine groves. As you enter a wooded section there is one more climb on the gravel road before a nice mile-or-so stretch into AS3. Now, I have to make a confession. I did not get my feet wet during the entire race – Really! I didn't run through the creeks during my training runs because I was wearing a new pair of New Balance 992's. So I think it was just a habit to "skip-toe" across. I don't know how important that turned-out to be – and I'm a little hesitant to admit this to Dr. Horton (now he'll probably have us swim across the Lake at the start of next year's race – he's a sick man you know). I've

never run with soaking-wet shoes and I wasn't too excited about trying it on my maiden voyage... maybe next year.

My pace was still holding-up... thirty minutes to get from AS1 to AS2 and thirty minutes to get from AS2 to AS3. AS3 to AS4 is probably my least favorite section of the course. I am about 1:45 into the race and this is the place where I seem to lose time on every training run. After AS3 the course turns past the Forestry Headquarters and remains on fire road for a quick downhill and then one of the longest uphill sections of the Course. It's not severe so keep running with maybe one quick walking break in the middle and then a left turn onto more fire road until a slow descent to the next creek crossing. I opted for "the log" at the creek – hold the name-calling until the end please. Now the trails begin and remain for the rest of the first loop. After the first creek crossing there is dual-track until another smaller creek-crossing and then a slow up-hill climb to a small clearing. You are close to AS4 - just another turn into hardwoods that eventually leads to the state road intersection. I was close to AS4 when the leader, Bradley Mongold, flew by me like a man possessed. I barely had time to react. I jumped to the side and yelled "Go-Get-it Brother". Then I just stood there for about ten seconds and watched him fly out of sight. What an inspiration!

What other sport is characterized by such inclusiveness? A plodder like me sharing the same course with RUNNERS like that! That was exactly the shot-in-the-arm I needed as I arrived at AS4 with about 2:20 elapsed. I knew I was working with a little extra time now. I recommend slowpokes like me allow at least one hour from AS4 to the cut-off because you will be passing most of the field on their way back out and you never know what might happen – don't miss this cut-off!!! As I belled-up to the bar at AS4 for my usual fill, there was Dr. Horton flipping burgers and offering me a bite. This guy is everywhere! I declined, but his offer reminded me to find my protein bar and begin the chore of chewing-it-down before the turn. Not much for taste, but I think this boost of protein was the key to my second loop and I would eat one more about midway between AS4 and AS3 on the backside.

The extra time I was building before AS4 would now be critical during the last leg of loop one. As I moved to the side of the trail to allow more of the top ten runners to pass, I turned my right ankle so fast and so hard that I thought I was done. Sometimes it's better to move to the side of the path and stop rather than try to keep going forward and step on a root hidden under the leaves. I walked/trotted for several minutes pleading with my ankle to forgive my transgression. Now was a good time to "Look-up" and be thankful for the extra time. Several runners offered very positive and very valuable encouragement as I steadied the ship and soon began running again. My ankle was now the perfect diversion from my old friend "sciatica". I coughed-down an Aleve capsule for good measure. During the race I also took one 8-Hour Tylenol at the beginning of each loop.

The urgency and anxiety of making the first cut-off haunted my subconscious during the first loop. It would soon give-way to great relief and a big psychological boost as I made the turn at about 3:15. My wife and children would not make the race until the very end... the real world of swimming lessons and soccer practice goes on despite this trail-thing Daddy is doing at the Lake. That's ok – I needed to see someone at the turn that would offer positive inspiration no matter what I looked like, and children have that unique and sometimes frightening gift of being brutally honest. So who in my life could say "you look good" and sound reassuring despite all evidence to the contrary... my mom! There she was clapping and cheering at the 4-H Center and offering a towel and a hug. I was doing that "looking-up" thing again! I made a quick change of shirts and restocked with Gu, protein bar, E-caps, and a fill of "Gatorade Rain" (nectar of the gods). Then a quick stop by the food table for a handful of pretzels, fig newtons (my new favorite race food), a quarter-cut of pbj and several slices of banana. I stayed at the turn for only 4 or 5 minutes.

As I headed back out for loop two I felt pretty good and really positive. Seeing my mom was a big boost as she did a great job of hiding her concern over my condition. If you can get someone to crew for you, I think it is important. I didn't realize this before the race, so I began to adopt crew members during the race. Anyone will do... my personal favorite was the photographer. He was snapping pictures and offering encouragement all day. Just get anyone you trust to drive to each aid station and lie to you about how strong you look. It's a big help!

The last section of the course as you finish loop one is my favorite - all lakeside trail and the severe hills are all mostly downhill. So guess what happens when you turn around and run back out? That's right! The uplifting rush I felt at the end of loop one was soon stomped by the brutal realization of loop two. I hit a mental low like none I have experienced before... I had never done this before??? How would I do it now??? I was following another runner, Kevin Vioral, through most of this section. Just having another person in sight that was actually running was so critical to keeping me moving. As we climbed out of the Lake bottom and I was wishing I was anywhere else, a really wild thing happened. I looked up to see a lady with a kind and friendly smile running down the trail toward us... in a dress!!! Yes, a DRESS! She was running along so casually and as she passed, she laughed and asked "How much farther does this crazy trail

go?” I could only offer a bewildered and exhausted smile and a weak response that she didn’t have far now. She smiled and waved and then she was gone so fast I wasn’t sure it ever really happened. I stumbled forward for a few more minutes following Kevin up the never-ending hill in silence. Then, he finally glanced back at me and asked “Was that lady really wearing a dress?” I laughed with relief and gasped “I thought I was hallucinating.” He offered that you don’t usually hallucinate like that unless you’re well past the 50 mile mark. Then we settled back to the chore at-hand. (See Bill Vickery’s awesome race report for further explanation.)

That brief moment of levity and the inspiration of seeing this wonderfully care-free lady running in a dress and just appreciating the gift of such a beautiful day was enough to bring me out of my slump. The course soon leveled out for the two mile stretch through the old-growth hardwood back to AS4. I passed the spot where I twisted my ankle on the way in and did the “Looking-Up” thing again. I was back on track and making time and beginning to think this dream (nightmare?) might actually become reality.

My plan was to get back to AS4 by 4:30 and then make AS3 by the 5:30 cut-off. At AS4 I began to try Dr. Horton’s “Rocket Fuel” (Mountain Dew) and I also began to eat simple sugars – my favorites were the Twix Bars and Milk Ways. I made it to AS3 with exactly 5:00 elapsed (:30 ahead of pace!). The wonderful volunteers advised I only had 9.5 miles to go! I just can’t say enough about all the volunteers at the aid stations – encouraging, quick, helpful... they really made this a special event! And then it happened... I hit the point in the race when I knew I would make the final cut-off. Heck, I could walk it in from here.

Then I also had an unexpected crisis of motivation. There’s NO WAY I could come this far and then just WALK to the finish line. So I adjusted my goal (never thought I would have that luxury) and began the push to finish under 7:00.

The rest of the race was a mix of the ever-present pain I knew I would endure but also a surprising mix of satisfaction and relief as I passed familiar landmarks for the last time in the race. I soon came upon one of the most inspirational sights of what had already been a memorable day. Andrew Persson was hobbling along on a badly injured knee but still moving forward at good speed and refusing to quit. It was clear he was a RUNNER, and under normal circumstances someone like me might see him at the start of a race but definitely not near the end. His display of raw determination kept me from thinking about my “problems” for the rest of the race. He never once had a negative comment and just kept moving forward. This final example of sheer fortitude will keep me coming back to HL -50K++ for years to come. It reminded me of the many awe-inspiring sights my wife and I witnessed at the Marine Corp Marathon last fall.

After clearing AS1 for the final time, I soon caught sight of Carter Wiecking and Peter York and their steady pace pulled me into the final stretch of Lakeside trail. As I hit the hard top and the final stretch I sprinted to the end and a finishing time of 6:49. I embraced Dr. Horton and all I could think to say was “Thank you for this wonderful gift... God Bless You!” And in true Horton style, he barked “I didn’t GIVE you anything!!! You did it all yourself!” With big smiles we shook hands, he handed me a finisher shirt, and I knew I was hooked to a future of running that I could never have imagined just a few months ago (thank you Josh and Jeff).

At the finish I had a memorable reunion with my Mom, my wife, Elizabeth, and our children Virginia (10), Wyatt (8), Kate (6), and Olivia (3). My sister, Sarah, and her husband, Mark, were there with my niece, Grace. Another great family memory at Holliday Lake! Another big thanks to the aid station volunteers and the staff at the 4-H Center. And, of course, a special thanks to the crazy-man himself. Your example and your gift have changed my running life forever.

I was experiencing quite a bit of discomfort at that point and it took several days to learn how to walk again. But the pain and injuries reminded me of that quote I mentioned before:

“So often we lose sight of the simple fact that the ability to participate is, in and of itself, a remarkable

gift. It’s one thing to compete when conditions are ideal and you’re healthy and primed to run fast.

It’s another thing altogether, though, to toe the line when you’re uncertain as to whether you’ll even

be able to run half, a third, or even an eighth of the race.

You do it anyway, because you love the challenges associated with the sport. Yes, there’s a certain

forlorn resignation involved with your decision – that running, like life, may never again feel perfect –

but you're at peace with it. And that's the real beauty of it all." -Tito Morales (*Marathon & Beyond*)

See you at Promise Land!