

Milestones

Appomattox, VA
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Holiday Lake 50k++

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I could start with my first pair of “trail running” shoes purchased while under the influence of a doctor-administered sedative. Or I could fast forward to crawling home through the woods a few months later with a stress fracture, or a year after that loping through a suburban greenway following a red fox on a very cold January day 2006 for my first 7-mile run. We all have various milestones along our paths that remind us of who we are, where we have been, and where we are going.

About year ago on an ultra cold February Friday morning, pumped full of more adrenaline than common sense after a 12 mile training run, I hurriedly assembled some camping and running gear then headed for Appomattox to make an attempt at some serious foot travel the next morning. I got cut-off at the half, tucked my tail between my legs and headed back for the mountains. Six weeks later, I was able to complete my first marathon, a distinct milestone, a notable marker, but not my destination. After unsuccessfully recovering from some PF for a few months with minimal running, a fellow runner urged me to treat it more aggressively with enough success that I could start building up mileage. I laid out a plan. Holiday Lake was still in my sights as the next milestone. There were 30 weeks for training available and I used most of them. There was a rolled ankle, a foot sprain, stressed out adductors and core muscle (or lack thereof), and just plain old worn out days along the way. But I'd still take all the hard days rather than give up a single good one. Along the way Beth, my neighbor from down the street, decided to run Holiday too. We did a few runs together. I kept her from running too fast and she kept me from running too slow.

There were some hard days. These were my key runs since early December:

14 miles -2 complete up and downs on Whitetop Mt FS road with 30+ mph winds and light snow

20 miles out and back on the AT across Whitetop sandwiched between 20-mile bike rides

16 miles -1 ½ up and downs across Holston Mt dirt road with a thin pack of snow and ice,

20 miles out and back on AT sandwiched between 9-mile bike rides,

24 mile Gov'mint Road loop -from Damascus south on AT, down Holston Mt, back on FS 32 (Government Rd). The same thing a few weeks later with about a 90-minute start in front of Beth and Nick.

Maybe this was a little on the training overkill side for Holiday Lake, but I didn't want to get caught with my draws around my knees at the 3:30 cutoff like last year. Also my general level of fitness is below par and needs extra work. Besides, bottom line **-running in the mountains is just plain fun.**

As the event draws near Beth, Nick, and I arrange to carpool the 4 hr trip, along with my wife Bonnie. Nick is not racing this event this year but wants to go crew for a friend who

has the ability to 1st OA. We arrive, in Appomattox, check in at lodging and head for the 4H Recreation Center at Holiday Lake for check-in, a meal, pre-race briefing by the infamous and notorious, race director Dr. Horton. The Dr. takes a special interest in his runner like none I've seen. In a special briefing afterwards for first timers, he talks to us on some key issues of running long, like nutrition, electrolytes, urination, "if you're breathing is too hard, you're running too hard", talking to and making a friend on the trail is more interesting than anything on an iPod, "don't wear tights unless its really, really cold, just don't wear tights", and the psychology of getting to the finish. But in the end we are supposed to do whatever works for us. I especially liked this xHortonation: "It never always gets worse." He ran a top-notch event on every level of organization and execution.

So I made it to the starting line a second time, sore in places, maybe 10hrs sleep last two nights combined, but 10 pounds lighter than last year, a couple of pounds stronger, more trail hardened, and with the support and collective wisdom from a growing group of runners I know scattered from just down the street to the far reaches of the WWW. People like you who take the time to encourage, instruct, and just listen to one another through the highs and lows of training and racing with our very soles. (Sorry, couldn't resist that one)

The weather was superb -almost storybook perfect for running -unlike last year's sub 15°F start and snow the year before that. This year the start was just below or at freezing. After a prayer, the national anthem, we start. 6:30am is still dark; headlamps light the way for the first mile or so. I'm a back of the packer and know there are some bottlenecks along the first half-mile, so I just walk and wait until people thin out. A gentle single track takes us across the Holiday Lake dam and transverses a steep hill above the lakeshore with velvet green mossy shoulders for the second mile. I take a customary stretch break and water some shrubs. The mid section is mixed fields of pine scrub and deciduous woods, even a bit of asphalt, but largely jeep roads. The sun was bright and encouraging with just an occasional brush of a breeze. The trail condition was excellent also. It was damp enough to give the clay and humus a cushy, luxurious feel, with only a few muddy spots that could mostly be avoided. With a mad dash, the pair of water crossing barely got both socks damp. It was definitely a plus-plus experience in weather and trail conditions.

We drop our lights at the first aid station at 3.5 miles. Up to here I've been struggling some with a little extra early-run pain, but it ease's up. I start with a refill of Clif sports drink for my handheld, breaking the cardinal rule of "race with what you train with". Then, I never meet a cardinal rule I didn't want to break or at least rough up a little bit. It worked fine without gastrological misadventure. I asked the volunteers to water it down some and they were most helpful. Bananas are my staple, and I pocketed a few chunks at each station and ate on the trail. My stops rarely lasted more than a minute maybe two. At the aid station a few miles before the start/turnaround/finish point. Dr Horton is waiting for the leaders coming back who are due in soon. He's munching a hamburger. "Here, wanna bite of hamburger?" He points it at me about chin level. I have a very strict personal policy of not turning away an offer of food. I take a chomp and hit the trail. Sure enough, just a little ways into the woods here comes Brad Mongold looking like he's on a Monday morning recovery run. He finished first with a sub 6:37 pace and just a few minutes off the course record.

My savior of the day was Adrienne. She is a nurse with 10 years of military in her past, working at an ER in Arlington, Va. She's a "tri-gyrl". Some of her friends talked her into running it with a good bike and swim base but not as much on the hoof. We talked miles away through the first mid-section and the woods leading up to the end. She kept me on my S-caps regime when I would have forgotten. My first mile was about 18:00. A

12:21 pace would cut you off at the half. Adrienne and I make the turn around at about 3:07. I take a stretch break before going back into the woods on single track hugging the high water shoreline. I find this second section of single track the more difficult. It has several moderately steep climbs but only a 100m or so. Adrienne and I drift apart before getting back to the mid-section.

Official finishers must complete in 7:30. I have a boat load of time in the bank for a finish and wonder if I can break 7:00. At 22 miles I make the second cut-off easily with no sign of a “wall”. I did take some IBU just before the turnaround and this keeps my foot pain in check. I chat with several people as we run the flats and downs and walk the ups. “The first shall be last.” I’ve heard that somewhere and so it is with the aid stations on a loop and reverse course. At this point we’ve done 50k. All that’s left is the plus-plus to make 34 miles and home. I’m tired and struggling some. A group of 6 or 8 filter into to the last couple miles of single track, much prettier in the daylight I’d say. By myself at the end, I pop out of the woods with a quarter mile down hill pavement run to finish. Bonnie and Beth are there with cameras, so I corndog it up a bit and finish with a run. Dr Horton congratulates me at the banner, 6:37:51. Beth finished an hour and a few minutes earlier. I make my way to the lake for a standing ice bath. After a shower, Adrienne finds me and I thank her for the kindness that kept me going. We round up Nick and hit the road.

On the way back I survey the mountain that is the Promise Land 50k off in the distance. Maybe April 26 will be a milestone.

Oh Yeah

Fashion Statement.....

