

Holiday Lake 2008

Chris Mitchell

The holiday weekend in Virginia was most excellent. I arrived on Friday and was treated to a wonderful meal by Adam and Michelle Booker. I also met their little girl Chloe for the first time who didn't really know what to make of me. We feasted well on salad, pasta, eggplant parm and then a massive piece of tres leche cake - YUM.

My sister and nieces provided entertainment and unlimited support for the entire weekend. Lupo the best dog to ever walk the planet was also helpful in making sure attention was given in a democratic fashion - some to all.

Saturday 5AM - Alarm. Don't know why I bothered to set it as I woke every 30 minutes anyway. In picking up the girls to get them into the car, Callen felt sick and was carried to the bathroom. I already had Mackenzie out of her crib. We waited for Callen to throw up but she didn't. The clock was pushing me towards the brink of being late and Carrie told me to go ahead without them. I put Mackenzie back in her crib and she began to cry. I ran downstairs grabbed my stuff and trotted out the front door. My sister was holding Callen's hair as she hung over the toilet and Mackenzie was crying abandonment. I jumped in the car and sped off. I didn't feel good about leaving her like that but quickly turned my thoughts to the dark country roads of Appomattox.

6:15AM - I arrived at the 4 H center, registered and pulled of some clothing. It was a very calm morning and 25 degrees. Of the 250+ people, many were wearing shorts and no more than double long sleeve shirts.

6:30AM - Race begins and we try to cram 250+ onto a single track trail after running up a hill from the 4H center. Jogging in place runners slowly enter the woods. The sun is not up yet and there are plenty of headlamps although the wonder of the morning light is upon us and the headlamps only make interesting the experience of looking back and seeing a trail of lights weaving through the woods.

7:30AM - The course has opened up and runners are finding their own pace without being hindered by the speed of others. I am feeling good and my legs are reminding me that I should have spent less time in the squash courts and more time running over the winter. I acknowledge them with a quick - "noted". I have been running behind this guy for sometime and find our pace similar. After another 10 minutes I stride up next to him and begin chatting.

Monte is from Richmond and is a very seasoned marathon runner. This is his first ultra and he is cooking along at a marathon pace. He and I trade stories over the next couple of miles/hours. We volley the lead back and forth each time the trail narrows and continue to keep each other in good spirits. We cross two streams soaking both feet each time. The water is very cold and welcome. The weight of the water in our shoes as we exit the stream goes unnoticed on the first loop and becomes very noticeable later as the course reverses and we cross back over each.

The course is a 17 mile loop. We run it counter clockwise, return to the start and reverse direction. After 17 miles we are both feeling good and spend almost no time before running back onto the trail. We walk up several steep grades and then fall into allowing the faster runner to lead. Monte looks at his GPS and comments, "If we hadn't walked up those hills we would have broken a 4 hour marathon". The look is somewhat of

disappointment and somewhat of wonderment that we are moving at a pace much faster than either expected. We trot on along somewhat elated somewhat frightened of the pace.

We start to overtake other runners one at a time. We are thankful that there are few overtaking us - most the faster runners went well ahead in the early stages of the run. The pain becomes intense at times and I begin to breathe deeply and forcefully trying to overoxygenate my body. The conversation is down to several sentences every so often and rhetorical. We run. I run through my doubts, I run into my pain. I want to think of the finish when it will be over but continue to bring myself back to the trail under my feet. My toes smash into roots and snubs of trees. I trip, recover and flail. Monte does some acrobatics of his own. We are clearly tired and our legs no longer want to lift our feet. The intention between us is thick. It goes unspoken. It grows and intensifies as unspoken. This conversation between us is from the sounds and cadence of our feet, our breathing. It is both of suffering and celebration.

Several miles from the finish Monte says that he can smell it. He accelerates a bit and I follow closely. We are back on the single track along the lake and overtake several other runners. The sun is out and providing shadow instead of warmth. He relinquishes the lead and I try to accelerate. There are runners approaching and running strong. They are young and their legs are also heavy. They pass. I tell one, "there is no honor passing old men". He is too tired and plods on. We come out of the woods and begin the downhill to the finish line. Monte and I exchange a brief hug - we start down the hill. 100 yards from the finish another runner approaches from behind, we don't accelerate, we acknowledge the runner with enthusiasm and encouragement, as others were our motivation we have now become his. He passes with a accomplishment. We are happy for him.

We cross the finish line side by side. Monte is a champion. He completes his first ultra at 57 years old in 5 hours and 22 minutes. We have opened to the possibilities of the day and are rewarded with extraordinary experience. I walk over to my sister and her family and receive their congratulations. Inside I am awake, alert, alive.