

This is long but so was the race....

My pat answer whenever someone would ask me how I hoped to do at the Holiday Lake 50K++ was “finish before the cutoff”. I really had no idea how I was going to do, or what time I should shoot for. I took little comfort in the knowledge that Holiday Lake is known as the “easiest” of the ultras put on by uber-ultraman David Horton. At 34(ish) miles, Holiday Lake promised to be my longest, hardest, hilliest, trailiest run to date. After all, I was going into it with only one notch in my marathon belt, and that was the OBX - a flat road race.

So, my stated goal was to finish within the cutoff time of 7:30. This was reinforced by the pep talk that Dr. Horton gave to the ultra newbies after the pre-race pasta dinner on Friday night. He told us repeatedly that our primary goal should be to finish. “Your friends and family back home aren’t going to know or care anything about your time - they’re going to think you’re crazy regardless.” He also gave us a lot of tips about handling the race itself, such as what to wear (no tights unless it’s below mid-20’s), how to fuel (eat as much as you can handle but save the Mountain Dew “jet fuel” for the second 17-mile loop), how to handle nausea (open mouth and insert finger), and how to handle the stream crossings (run straight through). In addition to the practical tips, he gave us points to ponder that were both challenging and inspirational. “Many of you are going to want to quit - don’t you do it!” “It never always gets worse.” And, the pearl that would see me some tough spots the next morning - “this too shall pass.”

He also told us that we wouldn’t sleep well that night, and he was right on target. My mind already racing with anticipation, it went into overdrive as I chewed over the snippets of conversation that I had been hearing all evening as my fellow runners compared notes about their most recent 50 and 100-mile adventures. As I lay in my sleeping bag in the bunkhouse, I wondered if there was anyone else in the 260-runner field who was anxiously calculating and re-calculating the pace that would be required to beat the first cut-off time at the halfway point.

I did eventually drift off to a restless sleep, and woke at 5:00 a.m., a half-hour ahead of my alarm and Dr. Horton’s wake-up call over the camp intercom. I could tell that my stomach wasn’t going to stand for too much, but I did manage to get down a half a bagel, some juice and a cup of coffee. Before too long my wonderful crew arrived - my wife and daughter, who had spent the night in a nearby motel. They delivered my water bottle and gels that I had inadvertently left in the van the night before (there had been a mild panic when I had discovered that I didn’t have them with me), I got some last minute hugs and words of encouragement, and all of the sudden it was 6:20 a.m. and we were lining up at the start.

And then we were off. At least, we were supposed to be. All was good as we shuffled along for the first third of a mile up the road, but when the course veered off onto the trail, we had a major traffic jam as the cluster of the 200+ runners who hadn’t been at the front of the pack sorted itself out into the single file line necessary to run the singletrack. Even after we were on the trail, it was stop and go for a mile or so until the field started to spread out. Everyone seemed to be good-humored about it, though - a much different vibe than with a road race. Even so, when we got to aid station #1 at mile 3.5, I was a bit alarmed to see how much time had already gone by, so I blew through without stopping. I was feeling good and wanted to make up some time - I still had over 13 miles to go before the halfway point cutoff and needed to make up some time.

The first loop went fairly smoothly, overall. I was running at a comfortable (slow, by road racing standards) pace and was feeling good, and after a time I realized that barring injury I was in no danger of missing the 3:30 cutoff at the halfway point.

The much-anticipated stream crossings were cold and wet as expected, but fun nonetheless. It wasn't too long after the second one, though, when I started sensing some irritation in my shoes - some sand and grit had worked its way in and I knew that I was going to be running on size 9 hamburger patties if I didn't do something about it. I became fixated on a clean and dry pair of socks. So, when I ran down the hill toward the halfway point and my wife Jennifer approached me as she had at every aid station and asked me if I needed anything, my one-word answer was "socks!" I could tell by her expression that socks was the one thing that she hadn't been prepared for, but she took off running up the road to get them. I sat down on the curb and took off my shoes and wet, gritty socks. One minute. Two. Three. I asked my daughter Morgan where the van was parked and she wasn't sure. Four. Five. I sent Morgan running up the road to meet Jennifer and grab the socks. Six. Where *is* she? (I learned after the race that the van was parked over a quarter mile away). Seven. Finally I spotted Morgan running back toward me with socks in hand. Eight. I grabbed them, pulled them and my shoes back on, and headed back out for the second 17-mile loop.

I lost nine minutes at that halfway point aid station, sitting down, getting stiff, fretting about the minutes going by. The delay was entirely my fault - while we had originally discussed the possibility of changing shoes at the halfway point, that morning I had explicitly told Jennifer that I would not be changing, per the advice given by Dr. Horton at the ultra newbies pep talk the night before. So, there was no reason to expect her to have had the socks with her. While I was ticked at myself for wasting so much time, and a bit concerned about how stiff I had gotten, I took some comfort in how good the clean, dry socks felt. That is, until the next stream crossing. Lesson learned. Wear socks that rise a bit higher on the ankle and don't let in the grit. As for the water - suck it up.

The second loop was a different animal from the first. Talkative runners got quiet and started focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. Packs of runners dispersed into pairs or singles. Runners started to shuffle and trip and stumble on roots and rocks that they had dodged easily on the first loop. Aid stations became more and more inviting. I was so fortunate to have Jennifer and Morgan there waiting for me at each aid station. The tables were so well stocked that I only took them up on their gatorade and food offers a couple of times, but it was wonderful to have their support.

The last few miles were tough. We got to what I figured was around the 31-mile point, the finish line for a "normal" 50K, and I rhetorically asked myself why this one had to tack on some extra distance. I lost all pretense of good running form and realized that I could walk nearly as fast as I could run. While it is common for ultramarathoners to walk up steep hills, my definition of "uphill" changed to anything with an incline of about 2 degrees - hey, if my treadmill would say it's an incline, that worked for me.

Finally, I heard the crowd at the finish, across the lake. I reveled in the sound and picked up my pace, then the sound faded and I realized that I was now running away from the sound. I slogged on a bit more, and finally could see the road through the trees. I burst out onto the road (well, I didn't actually burst - any ability to do that had left me about 10 miles earlier) and knew that it was all downhill from there, literally. Morgan soon joined me and ran me into the finish. I can't imagine a better way to cross the line. I heard Dr. Horton announce my name, shook his hand, and joined the ranks of the ultramarathoner as an "official" finisher with about 50 minutes to spare before the cutoff time.

Ultrarunning is an amazing sport. The camaraderie and mutual encouragement between runners is remarkable. I am used to running road races in which mid-and back-packers (me among them) will cheer on the frontrunners as they speed by in the opposite direction on the second half of an out-and-back course. This was the first race that I have ever run in where the leaders cheered back at the rest of us in return. The personal challenge and commitment

involved in an ultramarathon is just as remarkable. I hurt toward the end of the marathon last fall. I hurt *bad* during the last few miles of Holiday Lake.

Many thanks to Dr. Horton, the rest of the organizers and the volunteers, my fellow runners, and my #1 crew. It was a great experience. Now my only question is whether I should spend the next year working on improving my time at the 50K distance, or go ahead and move up to a 50-miler.