

14th Annual Holiday Lake

“Here Comes the Younger Generation”

Feb. 14, 2009

By Dr. David Horton

The Holiday Lake 50K is the first ultra of the new year in our area. It is also the first event in the Lynchburg Ultra Series (LUS)/ Beast Series. It is also the easiest/fastest ultra of the six Beast ultras. It is also the most beginner friendly race of the six events. As a result, there is usually a lot of first-time ultrarunners and that was true this year as well. Nothing brings me any more pleasure than seeing others find the world of ultrarunning. Their joy is so pure and contagious. Look at our website, xtremeultrarunning.com, and read some of the first-timer stories. It will make you remember the joy that you experienced when you first found ultrarunning.

Holiday Lake has everything (except mountains) that a good ultra contains: pre- and post-race meals, lodging, parking, restrooms, showers, and meeting rooms at the start/finish area . . . ALL in one place. The folks at the Holiday Lake 4H Educational Center are very helpful and seem to really enjoy having us at their facility. And a big thanks to the ladies that did the meals . . . super job as always.

We had a beautifully designed race shirt this year. The race happened to fall on Valentine's Day, so Dawn Mugford of Canada crafted a shirt with a heart in front and trees and a really nice running scene. The Valentine logo was also used on the finisher's shirt as well. I publically apologize to Dawn that I mistakenly gave credit for the shirt design to another person. Dawn did an incredible job . . . thank you!

We were mandated to make a course change this year because of some trail closures. As a result, there was only .6 of a mile of paved road at the start and the same amount at the end of the race. The loop included more trails and fewer roads. The general consensus was that it was a MUCH better course. I did not hear a single person say they liked the old course better. The old course was close to 34 miles. The majority of runners had the new course measured at 32.1 miles, just one mile over a TRUE 50K course. I thought the new course would be slower, so I increased the time limit from 7.5 hours to 8 hours. As it turned out, the new course isn't slower at all, but I will probably leave the time limit at 8 hours.

The weather service had predicted showers all week long for Saturday. Saturday morning was cold with the temperatures around 28 degrees. The rain never materialized and it got up to over 50 degrees Saturday afternoon. Because there had been tons of wind on Wednesday and Thursday, the muddy sections had pretty well dried up. Overall, the footing and the temperatures were probably the best we have ever had.

Michael Stratton of Blacksburg, Virginia and Virginia Tech, started a trend of getting Hokie students to come to Holiday Lake and the other Lynchburg area ultras several years ago. This year, there were 23 Virginia Tech students and several VT alumni as well. I teach a beginning and advanced running class at Liberty University and one of the requirements for the advanced class is completion of an ultra. I had 11 of those students running Holiday Lake this year and all 11 finished. There were also four other Liberty students who completed the race, as well as 12 faculty and staff members who started and finished.

With all the Hokie and LU students, the starting field was much younger than your average age at most ultras. There were 58 runners who finished that were 25 or younger —almost one fourth of the field.

The average age of the top ten runners was 25.4 years of age. In the top 20 runners, there was only one runner over the age of 40. The youngsters are taking over.

Another trend in our area, besides lots of younger runners, is more and more local runners are running ultras. We had 62 runners from our local area complete Holiday Lake. There is much more acceptance of ultrarunning as a legitimate sport and not a crazy sport for old has-been runners. I'm really glad to see these two new trends.

We also had several couples run as well. There were fathers and daughters, fathers and sons, and husbands and wives who ran and completed the race. This is really cool to see families run ultras together.

We had 257 start and 248 finish the 2009 Holiday Lake. This 96 percent finishing ratio is great and comparable to previous years.

The ladies field looked like it would be Justine Morrison's (Washington, D.C.) race to lose. Morrison had a terrific season in 2008, winning every ultra she ran in our area. Heather Fisher (Blacksburg, VA) had run well in 2008 and looked to have a chance in giving Morrison some competition. I did not think anybody else had a chance to keep these ladies in sight. As it turned out, I was correct.

The men's field was deeper in the chase for the winner's title. Aaron Swartzbard (Reston, VA) had been a two-time winner of Holiday Lake. Clark Zealand, director of three of the six Beast Series races, used to be the fastest local runner we had. But with living in Canada for several years, starting a family, and getting his doctorate, he had not regained his former running competence. But I had noticed he was on the comeback trail based upon some of his workouts. Swartzbard had been a contender in every ultra he has run in recently. There were other runners who were also expected to have a chance at winning. Jonathan Basham (Allentown, PA) had previously finished second at Holiday Lake. Local runner, Jeremy Ramsey had won the 2008 Hellgate 100K. Chris Clarke (Blacksburg, VA) had won the 2008 LUS.

Morrison took the lead from the start, gaining a three minute lead on Fisher by AS 1. Her lead continued to grow to 10 minutes by mile 25. Morrison started out very steady and strong, whereas Fisher started out slowly with the following places at the aid stations: 56, 49, 44, 40, 34, 29, 24, and 21st overall at the finish. Morrison finished in a fantastic time of 4:25:18. Fisher closed on Morrison finishing exactly 4 minutes and 30 seconds behind Morrison. Alyssa Godesky (Baltimore, MD) took third place in 4:56:53. Katie Hedley (Richmond, VA) took fourth in 5:02:56. Local runner, Donna Elder, came in 5th place with a time of 5:04:58. The ages of the first four female runners were: 28, 23, 23, and 22. Elder is 46 years old . . . way to hang in there Donna!

Swartzbard took a one-minute lead over the field by AS 1. There were 11 other runners within 3 minutes of the lead at this point. By AS 3 (12.1 miles), Swartzbard had a 3-minute lead over Zealand and local runner Jordan Whitlock. Whitlock is a 21-year-old runner in my running class who had run only one ultra before Holiday Lake this year. Swartzbard could not break these two runners, having only a 2- minute lead over Zealand at 25 miles and 3 minutes over Whitlock at this point. By the last aid station, with 4.5 miles to the finish, Swartzbard had extended his lead to 4 minutes over Zealand with Whitlock another 3 minutes back of Zealand. Swartzbard finished in a fine time of

3:50:11. Zealand took second with a time of 3:44:41, EXACTLY 4 minutes and 30 seconds behind Swartzbard, the exact time difference between the first two ladies. Zealand is back to his fast running like he used to do. Kevin Lane (Asheville, NC) came on strong to take third in 3:58:16. Clarke took fourth in 3:58:44 with Whitlock taking 5th and also breaking 4 hours finishing in 3:59:20.

Elder was thus the women's master winner, with Greg Zaruba (Smithsburg, MD) taking the men's title. The grand masters winners were Dana Beyeler (Russell, PA) and Janice Heltibridle (Mauertown, VA). The super master winner was Robert Francis (Branford, CT).

John Price (Virginia Beach, VA) started for the 14th time and finished for the 14th time. Next year, Lord willing, John will finish for the 15th time and then shortly later begin his trans-America run.

I would be remiss if I did not thank our sponsors: Montrail, who generously gave tape, shoes, sandals, numbers, and a canopy. Patagonia, who provided us GREAT finishing shirts at a discount. Clif, who provided us bars, bloks, and the replacement drink. Finally, I would like to thank local optometrist, Dr. Frank Villa, who has been our biggest supporter and our longest running sponsor. Thanks to all of you.

One of the highlights for me is congratulating each runner as they cross the finish line and then shortly thereafter, awarding them their Patagonia Capilene 2 long-sleeved finisher's shirt.

There are now 248 runners who are eligible for the LUS/Beast Series. How many will finish each?

The next race in the LUS/Beast Series is the Terrapin Mountain 50K with a very nice new challenging course to be held on March 28. The next event I will be directing is the Promise Land 50K on April 25. I hope to see many of you there.