

Holiday Lake 50K++ 2009

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I very nearly did not run the 2009 Holiday Lake 50K++. It wasn't because there was any question about whether I had trained properly for the ultramarathon. There was no question at all - I hadn't. In fact, when a friend noted a week prior to the race that I must be in "taper mode", my wife had a hard time keeping her muffled snicker from escalating into an all-out guffaw. Taper from what? Tapering presumes training, and my sporadic running routine of late could hardly be called training.

But still, I was intent upon running, believing that muscle memory from last year's race, stubbornness, and the fact that the cutoff had been extended to 8 hours would allow me to get a coveted finisher's shirt.

Then, on the Thursday before I was to leave for the race, my Dad got sick. Seeing your father in a hospital bed with IVs stuck in both arms can readjust your priorities in a hurry. There would be other races. This was my only father. I emailed Dr. Horton that I wouldn't be running.

So, Friday evening found me in my Dad's hospital room instead of the pre-race pasta dinner at Holiday Lake. There was no question in my mind that that was where I belonged. Then, toward the end of the visit, Dad asked me if I was running the next day. I said "no" and tried to change the subject - I had hoped that it wouldn't come up. His eyes locked on mine and he asked me why I wasn't running. I stalled. While he had made it clear in the past that he thought that running ultras was excessive and even unhealthy, I knew he would be upset at the thought of me canceling on account of him. I hedged and made a comment about the race being held again next year. "Good luck tomorrow," he said, and closed his eyes. That was that; there would be no more discussion. I was running.

By the time I got home from the hospital, it was close to 8:00 p.m. I wolfed down supper - I had hardly eaten anything all day - and hurriedly finished the packing that I had begun a couple of days before. By the time I had finished ooh'ing and ah'ing over the Valentines that my 5-year-old had collected at his school party and read him a bedtime story, it was after 9:00 p.m., and I still had a 2-hour drive ahead of me. Finally, though, I was in the car and headed toward Holiday Lake, buoyed by my family's hugs and good wishes, and chuckling at my son's instruction to "win". At this point I was seriously just hoping that I would finish.

A couple of hours later, I pulled into a dark parking lot at Holiday Lake. There were a number of vehicles in the lot, but apart from the hum of a generator powering the heater on a nearby RV, all was quiet. That suited me fine, as I all wanted to do was crash. My original plan had been to camp, but it was late, dark and cold, so I decided to sleep in my jeep instead of going through the effort of pitching my tent. I reclined my seat as far back as it would go, draped my sleeping bag over me, and tried to go to sleep.

A cold and fitful few hours later, it was 5:00 a.m. and time to check in at the registration table in the dining hall. I made it inside the building, gave my name at the registration table, and was told I wasn't on the list. It didn't take long (after a momentary panic) to figure out that my name had been removed based on my emailed notification that I was canceling, and they handed me my bib.

At 6:25 a.m. I joined 256 other runners at the starting line, and after singing the National Anthem and hearing some final instructions from the race director, we were off into the

dark.

As with every race, I set off at the start of Holiday Lake with several goals in mind. My primary goal was to finish within the 8-hour cutoff time. I didn't think that would be a problem, unless something really bad happened. My secondary goal was to beat 7 hours. I thought that was doable in light of my 6:39:35 time from last year, but could be a challenge, as the course had been changed with the addition of more trails and more hills. My uber goal was to beat last year's time. Given the hillier course and my inconsistent training, I figured that would be a stretch.

Many races have a hill at the start to spread the runners out, and Holiday Lake was no exception. The first half mile was a gradual incline up the road leading out of the camp. I had started out toward the back of the pack, but couldn't resist passing a number of runners as we made our way up the hill at an easy jog. While it was important to conserve energy in light of the 33+ miles that lay ahead of us, I knew that we were headed for a logjam as soon as the course moved on to the trail.

Toward the top of the hill, the course took a sharp right-hand turn into the woods, and runners took a momentary pause as they merged into the single-file procession. No flying elbows or aggressive jockeying for position here; there would be many miles ahead in which to make up for any lost time. While the run up the road had been conversational, even communal, things got much quieter once we entered the woods. Conversations waned as the runners we had been running next to were now either in front of us or behind us on the singletrack trail. We put our focus on trying to find a rhythm, even as we stutter-stepped in the dark to avoid roots and rocks in the trail. Focus also turned inward, as we contemplated the magnitude of the trek that lay ahead.

I don't remember much about that first 16+ mile loop. The sun came up, we chugged along. After a few miles we hit the first aid station, grabbed some cookies, and chugged along. Another aid station, and another, grab more cookies, refill water bottle, and more chugging along. Somewhere in there we met up with the leaders, passing us by in the opposite direction on their second loop. Man, they made it look easy.

I hit the halfway point at 2:50, feeling a lot stronger than I had a right to. I was on pace to finish in 5:40 - nearly an hour faster than last year. Uh, oh. The next 16+ miles could be interesting. Still, I discarded my initial goals of beating the 8 hour cutoff, and breaking 7 hours. I had a shot at breaking 6.

I took off my long-sleeved shirt, stuffed it in my drop bag, took some vitamin A (Advil), stuffed a couple of extra gels in my shorts pocket, refilled my water bottle, and took off, retracing the loop in the opposite direction. Over the next couple of miles, I studied the faces of the runners who were still coming into the turnaround. Some looked strong, some looked like they were in trouble. I wondered how I looked to them.

My legs got heavy as I started to feel the miles. I made sure to keep taking in fuel at each aid station, but I was starting to feel the effects of that as well. I knew that I was burning a lot of it off and would quickly run out of gas if I didn't keep eating and drinking, but my stomach was talking to me and I wondered if was going to be able to keep it down. I considered employing the insert-finger-down-throat technique to get it over with, but wanted to avoid that if possible. I chugged on.

I ran through most of the 20's with the same 10 or so people. We'd occasionally pass each other, then be passed, then pass again, but were all running at essentially the same pace. We chugged on.

Then, finally, the last aid station. Just 4 miles to go. I checked my watch - 5:20. Just 4 easy, 10-minute miles, and I would break 6 hours.

There was no way, and I knew it. My legs felt like they weighed 100 pounds each, and there was almost no gas left in the tank. I ran like a wind-up car - I'd start off running, then my legs would override my brain and slow down to a walk. I'd take off running again, then slow down. Start again, then slow down.

Finally, we reached the road. Just a half mile to go, and downhill at that. Gravity and the sound of the crowd at the finish line took over, and I managed to keep a steady pace through the finish, coming in at 6:15. A long way from 5:59, but I was happy.

Next year....