

My First 50K

Holiday Lake

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If someone had told me I would be running an ultra- marathon anytime soon, I would have laughed at them and then asked them what an ultra marathon was. I had never even run a marathon and the world of ultra running was entirely new to me. The thought of running a marathon had seemed insane to me. I have been running consistently for the past 4 years training for the Marines, but these runs ranged from 2-5 miles. Before this race the farthest I had ever run was 16 miles, and that was the training run several weeks prior to the race. The training run had put a hurting on my legs, but it gave me confidence because I knew I could have kept going.



My path to running my first ultra marathon is rather simple. I signed up for an advanced running class at Liberty University to help me prepare for the Marines. I figured running on my own time and in this class would improve my level of fitness. I didn't know I would be required to run an ultra marathon as part of the requirement for completion of this class. I considered dropping the class because I didn't want to run or train for an ultra race. And that is where Dr. Horton comes in. Dr. Horton is my teacher for my advanced running class, and he is an ultra running god. He also knows how to push the buttons to your ego. The very first class he said there are 'sissies' in this class that will drop out. Well so much for dropping out I thought, because I'm no sissy. So, I decided to stay in the class and just go with the flow.

Well, the first ultra marathon was coming up and Dr. Horton was trying to get people in the class to run in it. I had no intention of running in the Holiday Lake race because I thought I wasn't ready. Dr. Horton convinced me to go on a training run with a group one Sunday afternoon. We were going to run one loop around Holiday Lake, which was 16 miles. I had never run that far in my life, but after being called a sissy by Dr. Horton I decided to go.

The training run went well, but I still had no intention of running in the Holiday Lake race. I wanted to train more and run in a later race. As the race neared, every class Dr. Horton would call me out and ask if I was going to run in the race. I kept saying maybe, and he kept pushing my ego buttons. The decided factor happened the Tuesday before the race. We were finishing the class and Dr. Horton was again trying to convince me to run the race. Just then a girl walked up and gave him an application for the race and the race fee. She said she hadn't been training much, but that she wanted to run. Once she left Dr. Horton looked at me, but he didn't have to say anything. I knew what he was thinking. How could I not run now after this girl just signed up? So, I told him I'd have the application and money for him Thursday. I kept my word and gave Dr. Horton the application and race fee Thursday, just two days before the race. I had just signed up for my first ultra marathon.

I showed up Friday night for the pre-race dinner and sign in. To my surprise I wasn't nervous at all. I met some cool people that night and had a great meal, and was feeling good about the race the next day. Well, I was a little worried about the snow that covered the entire race. I hadn't ever run an ultra-marathon much less run one in the snow. So, after eating a good dinner and talking to some new friends, I headed off to bed. People I had read about said they normally had a hard time sleeping the night before a big race and I was no different. I would say that I had a hard time sleeping due to my excitement more than my nervousness. The cold didn't help either. The cabin I was in had no heat and even though I had two sleeping bags and was well dressed I would wake up every once and a while rather cold. Wake up was to be around 5:30 am and I was hoping it would come soon.

Sure enough at 5:30am Dr. Horton's voice came alive over the loud speakers informing everyone it was time to wake up. I was relieved the cold night was over and that I would soon be running, at least then I'd be warm. When I walked outside I noticed that it was snowing. I didn't really care, there was already enough snow out on the trails for all of us to enjoy. I wasn't hungry because I had eaten a large dinner the night before, but I knew I would need the energy so I ate some bagels and donuts. Everyone seemed to be hurrying about trying to make every last possible adjustment to their clothes or gear. I had laid everything I would need for the race out the night before so I was ready to go. I knew I sweat a lot when working out, so I brought my camel pack along with me. I'd need fluids more often than there were aid stations. As far as I was concerned I was ready for this race. Still I was not nervous.

At 6:25 I made my way to the starting line for the 6:30 start. Everyone seemed to be in good spirits and I felt good. I found a buddy of mine that I was going to run with, or at least that was the plan. Before I knew it, the mass of people began running. I was running off into the unknown and I liked it. I wanted to be challenged by this run. I wasn't to be disappointed.

My buddy and I took off with the crowd and after a short run on the road the trail turned off into the woods. This forced everyone into a single file line. The people up front were blazing through the snow and making it easier for those in the back. I was right behind my buddy for the first several miles, but I soon realized that although I wasn't tired I knew I couldn't maintain this pace for the whole race. My goal was to finish not run for a great time, so with this in mind I told my buddy to have a good race and that I'd see him at the finish line. For the first several miles I had a hard time letting people pass me. With all my training for the Marines I've gotten used to running short and fast and not being passed, but today I had to swallow my pride and continually remind myself of my goal to finish.

Before I knew it I was at the first aid station. I drank some Gatorade and ate some food, which to my surprise was difficult to do. So, far I was enjoying myself and I wanted to keep it that way. I would find a group of people running at a pace that was comfortable and stick with them. If they walked too much I'd pass them, or if they were too fast I'd let them leave me behind. There were plenty of groups to pick from. I met a lot of friendly and talkative people during this race, and their conversation and positive attitudes took my mind off any pain or discomfort I might be experiencing. Aid station after aid station passed and I was still feeling good and still enjoying myself. I wasn't experiencing any pains and my knees felt great. I began to notice that I took longer at each aid station than the normal runner did. I'd pass a lot of people, get to an aid station, watch them all pass me, and then pass them again. This happened at almost every aid station, but I didn't care. I loved aid stations. The people were nice, the food was good, and I needed the fluids. I was surprised by the fact that eating was very difficult. I had a hard time eating a cookie or a sliced up piece of fruit. I knew I needed to eat to maintain my energy so I would sit there and force myself to eat while people passed me.

As I neared the halfway point I was starting to feel tired in my legs but was still in good spirit. I crossed the halfway point at about 3 hours and this meant I had 6 hours to finish the race. At that moment I knew that short of a terrible injury, I would finish this race. It was a good feeling, but I still had a lot to do before it was over. I wanted to change my socks, hat, and gloves at the half way point because they were all soaked. When I got to the halfway point aid station I ate some food and then headed to my cabin to change. When I tried to change my socks I realized that my shoe laces were frozen and I was unable to untie them. I sat there for a minute thinking of what to do. I didn't want to continue running in wet soaks because I might get blisters, but I didn't want to waste a lot of time working on my shoes. So, reluctantly I decided to run the remainder of the race in my current socks and hope that no blisters would develop. I gave my race number to the man waiting at the

start of the second lap and took off for another 16 miles. "Round 2" I said to myself and headed back out into the snow.

As soon as I started my second lap I connected with a group of three people going at a good pace. We had some good conversations and laughs together and it helped pass the time. After a couple of miles a man named Jeff and I broke from the group and headed out a little faster. Jeff was an older man but a good runner. We would run a little ways and then walk. I stayed with him until the next aid station, but then I had to use the restroom and fill my camel pack. He said he would be going at a slow pace so I could catch him, but I never saw him again during the race. After this aid station there was only 12 miles to go, but I was beginning to feel tired. I knew that if I kept moving forward I would finish on time, but that is easier said than done. From 12 miles out to 8 miles out I spent running by myself. There were runners in front and behind me, but no real groups to tag along with. I would come up on a group and run with them for a little, but then they would walk too much. I still had enough energy to keep running, so I would press on past them. These several miles were mine to suffer alone. I found it much harder to stay motivated with no one in front of me to keep up with, or behind me to push me. As I neared the second to last aid station I prayed a simple prayer to God. I said, "Lord, you've gotten me this far, but I'm really struggling right now and I need your help." As soon as I finished the prayer I entered the aid station. I ate some food and drank a lot of fluids. I was getting ready to start out running again when two guys ran up. I hadn't seen them before and they didn't have numbers. They told the people at the aid station that they had shown up late and didn't get their numbers at the beginning. So, they both got their numbers there and started running behind me.

Right away these two guys started talking to me. I was glad to have some fellow runners to talk to again. We kicked it off and I was surprised by their upbeat attitude this far into the race. They said they were inducting me into their entourage and that we were going to finish together. They would not leave me. If I had to walk they would stop running and walk with me. I told them on more than one occasion that I wouldn't care if they wanted to press on but they wouldn't have it. They kept encouraging me, pushing me, and simply helping me keep going. I was feeling very tired at this point and my legs were sore and stiff, but these two guys wouldn't leave me. They seemed to care more about making sure I finished than finishing themselves. Even with my two new found friends those next several miles to the last aid station were the longest of my life. When we finally stumbled into the aid station I was all but spent. There was only four more miles till the end. To my surprise these two guys seemed to love aid stations as much as I did. They ate and drank and made conversation with the workers, and they didn't seem to care about the race. When I was ready to make the final push to the finish they were right there with me.

I thought that I would enjoy these last several miles because they would be the last several of the race, but I was wrong. They dragged on snowy foot by snowy foot. I knew that I could walk the rest of the way and still finish well under the time limit, but my two new friends kept pushing me, so I kept going. I had lost all focus and was no longer enjoying myself. I was miserable, but I kept going. I thought we had to be getting close to the road that would lead us to the finish line, but then we ran past a helper and he informed us we had two miles to go. Two miles is nothing, normally, but today I thought they would break me. Finally, after passing some runners that had resorted to walking, we came upon the road. This meant less than a mile till the finish, and I wanted to run the whole thing. So, I dug deep and ran. I could hear the cheers of people at the finish line and that gave me a boost. I ran those last several hundred meters at a strong pace. As I neared the finish line, people that I had met the night before at dinner, in the morning, and on the trail were there to cheer me in. It was a great feeling. My two new friends and I finished the race in just over 7 hours. Dr. Horton was the first person to greet me. He shook my hand and told me that he knew I would finish and that he was glad I had ran this race. I thanked him for pressuring me into running this race and that it was worth the pain I was feeling. I shook some hands of friends at the finish line, drank a lot of fluids, and got my Holiday Lake shirt for finishing under the cut off time.

I hobbled around for a little talking to friends and taking pictures. My legs still hurt regardless of the race being over, but I was happy. It took me around 20 mins to pack up the few things I had in the cabin because of my soreness, but I was finally in my car and ready to go. My first ultra experience had one more surprise for me. My car was stuck in the snow. The last thing I wanted to do was ask someone who had just ran an ultramarathon

to help push a car out of the snow and ice. To my surprise, as soon as stepped out of my car the two men I had finished the race with were standing there loading up their car perfectly parked next to my car. They said it looked like I could use some help and I gladly accepted their help. They had saved me once again.

As I drove away from the race I passed some runners who were still running and I was so glad I wasn't in their shoes, but I cheered them on. Twice on the way home I had to stop to stretch my legs, and I went to the hot tub with some friends as soon as I got home. My legs were only sore several days, but as the pain and soreness faded, something else grew in strength. My desire to run another ultra hit me hard the following day and it hasn't left yet. I'm not sure which one I'll run next, but I will run another and another. I've been hooked.