

2010 HOLIDAY LAKE 50K—15TH YEAR--- THE SNOW YEAR

By David Horton

Most folks would suggest that having a trail race in the middle of February is inviting bad weather and problems. In previous years, we had some cold weather and one year it snowed during the entire race. But NEVER have we had so much snow on the race course before the event. There were 5 to 6 inches of crusting snow that you sunk in with each footstep. The net effect was like running in the softest sand you have ever run in, very slow, difficult, and energy sucking. After marking the course, I realized that it was going to take everyone much longer than usual, probably an hour for most runners.

This was the 60th ultra that I had directed. In all of those events, I had NEVER increased the time limit. This year I felt that I needed to do that, so I increased it from 8 to 9 hours for the cut-off. We have more first-time runners compete in this event than any other race. I wanted them to have a successful experience and FINISH their first LONG race. Hellgate runners . . . don't expect the time limit to increase in that event, it will NOT.

With all the snow that we have had in Virginia and on the east coast this year, I thought we might have a lot of runners that wouldn't show up. I didn't hear a single runner say they were in great shape for this year's race because of all the snow-covered trails. I sent out an e-mail on race week telling the runners not to be a sissy and not show up for the race. We had 286 runners registered, 268 started, and 244 finished . . . apparently we did not have too many sissies.

We also had another problem race day. Overnight, another 1 to 2 inches of snow fell making the roads into Holiday Lake very slick and treacherous. Several accidents occurred and there were several runners who started late. I don't believe in starting late. In the 60 ultras that I have directed, I started one race late, about 30 seconds late.

Holiday Lake 50K is a perfect place for a race. There is lodging available at the start/finish, parking, showers, meals, and great hosts at the Holiday Lake 4H Educational Center. The course has 2,500 feet of elevation gain with a variety of surfaces (normally). This year, the surface was white snow.

The double-loop course is both good and bad. It is easier for us because we only have to mark 16 miles, oh, I mean 15.05. Whereas in Hellgate 100K, we have to mark 66 miles, oh, I mean 62.2 miles???. The good thing is that you see everyone in front and back of you as you finish the first loop, then turn around and go back in the opposite direction seeing all the runners. The bad thing in seeing all the runners, there can be difficulty passing runners on a single-track trail.

Matt Woods (Falls Church, VA) was seeded first based on his 2009 JFK 50 time of 5:54. Jordan Whitlock, a 5th place finisher at the 2009 Holiday Lake, and a Liberty University student, was seeded next. Justine Morrison (D.C.) was the prohibitive favorite in the ladies field. Morrison has won every local ultra except Terrapin Mountain which she has not run.

From the start, it was a three-man race. With the very soft snow and no tracks ahead of them, the first three runners made slow progress on loop one. Woods and Whitlock were joined by Cameron Hanlin (a Virginia Tech student) and stayed together through the first lap finishing in 2:28, a very slow time for the front runners.

I had told everyone at the pre-race briefing on Friday night that I thought the second lap would be easier after nearly 300 runners would have gone through on the first lap. Woods checked into the first aid station on the second loop at 19 miles, two minutes ahead of Whitlock and 8 minutes ahead of Hanlin. At 24 miles, Woods and Whitlock were basically together with Hanlin fading 13 minutes back. From there in, Woods blitzed the course taking the victory in a time of 4:30:24. He ran the second loop in a very fast time of 2:02. On a dry day, I think he may have set a new course record. Whitlock took second in 4:43:45, and Hanlin took third in 5:01:33.

Morrison took the lead from the start and was never challenged. The question I had for her all day was if she would be in the top 10 overall? Her winning time of 5:15:41 placed her in 11th place overall. Her two loops were almost exactly the same time. Local runner Krista Meisch took second in 5:57:26. Erika Thompson (Morgantown, WV) took third in 6:04:35. Meisch and Thompson also ran almost the same time for both laps.

Nine of the top 10 runners were 33 or younger. Eight of the top 10 ladies were 29 or younger. Holiday Lake is becoming a young runner's race. I think this is a good thing to introduce runners at a young age to joy of running ultras, that is, after you finish them.

The master's winners were Jack Kurisky (Burke, VA) and Martha Wright (Richmond, VA). Their respective times were 5:11:12 and 6:21:36. Kurisky was 5th male overall and Wright was 5th female. Great job you old folks.

The grand masters winners were Henry Peck (Lutherville, MD) and Janice Heltibridle (Mauertown, VA). Their times respectively were 5:24:14 and 6:55:10. The super master's winner was Doug Blackford (Todd, NC) in a time of 6:26:07. There were 29 men 50 or older who finished, but only 3 women over 50 that finished. I would love to see more of you mature ladies out there doing ultras. I guess men are just tougher!

This was the 15th year of Holiday Lake. This was also the 15th time that John Price of Virginia Beach has started and finished the race. Way to go John! That is a remarkable achievement. I hope you continue to finish the race as long as I am directing it.

Holiday Lake is the first race in the Lynchburg Ultra Series and the Beast Series. Two hundred and forty-two runners who finished under the 9-hour time limit are still eligible for the two series.

Of the 15 years of Holiday Lake, I think this was the most memorable and special. With all the snow and cold temperatures that we had this year, most folks were not in great shape and the course was by far the most difficult of any year. There were many first-time ultra runners as well. If you don't believe that it was special, look on our website (extremeultrarunning.com) and see over 20 stories by runners competing in the race this year. Completing the race meant much to lots of runners, much more so than the typical 50K.