

Holiday Lake 50K

2/13/10

If I'd known how hard it was going to be, it would have been even harder.

Given the weather we've had this winter in Virginia, I was glad just to be facing snow on the ground and not another foot of it coming down on us. I picked up my friends Prissie Nguyen and Molly Rogers on Friday afternoon and we headed to Appomattox. As moms whose children have spent a **lot** of time at home lately due to snow closings, we were so glad to have a chance to be out of the house, we didn't even mind that the reason was to run a 50k. In the snow.

Grandison Burnside and Mark Willis from Richmond met us at the hotel and we took my Odyssey to the 4-H Center. We realized then that we probably should have brought a 4-wheel drive, as getting in and out of the parking field was our first challenge to overcome.

I asked a lot of runners at dinner, but couldn't get a consensus on the need for YakTraks or screws. Earlier in the week, I followed Matt Carpenter's guide to "screwing your shoes" and drilled sheet metal screws into the soles of a pair of trail shoes. But given that the snow was more powdery and slushy than packed and icy, I opted not to wear them and went with my regular Asics 2140 trail shoes.

After a mostly sleepless night, we were up at 4 a.m. and by 5 we were headed to the 4-H Center. I slid the van into a parking spot in the field and crossed my fingers that I'd be able to drive out in the afternoon.

I love the pre-race hour hanging out in the dining hall.

At 6:20 a.m. we headed outside; it was almost 30 degrees and didn't feel too bad. Light snow was still falling. I wished Molly, Prissie and Grandison good luck and moved up a little (starting closer to the front than mid-pack is new for me, but it worked out okay at Swinging Bridge 50k last month).

I took advantage of the road section and ran up the hill and into the woods...about 45 minutes to the first aid station. I ended up behind a runner named Kevin who was running his first ultra... we went back and forth over the course of the day. When conditions were runnable, Kevin set a good, steady pace. The powerline area was slow going...like running in sand. Sometimes it was easier to walk on the crust of the snow even though I broke through and sank past my ankle about every fifth step.

Finally we started to see runners coming back from the turnaround. Amazing that they were able to run so well through the snow, which was now turning to slush as the sun came out. I hit halfway in 3:02 (slower than last year's 2:54, although I was working a lot harder). From my drop bag, I got a fresh bottle which I had pre-filled with Hammer Perpetuem powder. I saw Mark Iscool, asked if he would fill the bottle with water for me, and then mistakenly handed him my old bottle, not the new one. So I started the second loop with plain water (i.e., no calories except for one gel). Oops. Fortunately, I saw Molly as I headed back out and she had an extra Gu. And the aid stations were very well-stocked.

Running the reverse loop was even slower. There's a lot of uphill in the first section, and it was hard to run through the slushy snow. I had to use my Hellgate strategy of "just get to the next aid station, and the rest will take care of itself." And just like Hellgate, Holiday Lake had its own "Forever Section," which for me was the trail that ran beside the road as you headed to the third aid station.

Finally, the aid station came into view. I grabbed a pb&j tortilla and a cookie, and kept going. Counting down...back to the lake. With about two miles to go, a VT student flew by me; she was quickly out of sight. And then, at last, the road...I've never been so happy to see pavement. I ran down the hill for a time of 6:21, and 5th place (women). The first top-5 for me at any of Dr. Horton's races. (But Dr. Horton was right--no P.R. this year. In fact, it was my second slowest time of the five years I've run HL.)

My friend Prissie ran HL last year as her first 50k and finished well in 5:33, but this year she's recovering from an ankle sprain, and wisely decided to call it a day after one loop, which at least made a good 4-hour training run for her upcoming marathons, Shamrock and Boston. Molly had her ultra debut last year here in 6:14, but the snowy course got the better of her, and she took a little extra time, finishing in 8:37. Grandison, a veteran of several Ironman races and marathons, finished her first ultra in 7:50. (Oops -- her results are listed under the wrong gender.) Congratulations to Mark Willis on his first ultra (6:27) and Brian Hayes (who says I talked him into running this as he paced me the last 7 miles of Hellgate—sorry, Brian!), also his first ultra, a 5:14, good for 7th overall. Wow.

Thanks to Dr. Horton and each and every volunteer for enduring the cold and snow for hours. Despite the conditions, I really appreciated the chance to be out there.

-Martha Wright



With Dr. Horton and my new favorite shirt

Photo by Prissie Nguyen