

Holiday Lake 2011 race report

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The Holiday Lake 50k++ was an amazing experience for me. It was my first ultra and my first run over 20 miles. Having been injured and away from serious training it would also be only my second time venturing past the half marathon mark in over a year. Needless to say, the combination of all this left me quite nervous in the days leading up to the race. Would I wear the right amount of clothes for the cold temps, but not too much? Would I get my hydration and nutrition right? Would I bonk at some point? Was my taper adequate but not too much? Could I finish? Could I finish under 7 hours? You get the picture...I was a mess.

Friday night's pre-race dinner was great. The food was good and ultra running legend and race director David Horton was his usual irreverent (but motivating) self, berating people good-naturedly for not 'belonging' on an ultra course and harassing the women for trying to compete with men. Seeing and talking with people I'd helped at aid stations and gone on fun runs with, this time as a fellow racer, both calmed my nerves and added pressure all at the same time. I got home and went to bed only to stare at the clock.

Saturday morning came and I awoke with my hands literally shaking in anticipation. My usual pre-race breakfast of tea and a pb&honey sandwich didn't help me much. I would have to wait for 6:30 to calm down I guess.

After check-ins we all huddled around inside trying to loosen up and prepare for what we were about to do to our bodies. Talking didn't help. Neither did the move out to the pre-dawn 16 degree morning when someone said it was time to line up. Nothing changed the nerves until after the national anthem had been sung and the prayer had been prayed and Horton stood up on a picnic table and said, "Have a good day...GO!"

I started with the race about 2/3 of the way back in the pack. I knew I would probably be stuck in a bottleneck but I had a plan. Set my Garmin to 11:30 pace alerts for the first loop and then reassess at the turnaround, hopefully running a negative split. That plan lasted all of 1/2 a mile. Being caught up in the wave of runners, running a still manageable 10 minute pace, my Garmin chime was going nuts and I was already annoyed with it. Time to shut it down and just go with the flow. I hoped it wouldn't come back to haunt me. At the stairs about .6 into the course I slowed to a walk, fell in line with all the other runners, and joined weaving mass down the single-track.

I ran along as the crowd finally spaced out, only stopping to top off my bottle at AS1. Looking back, I should have cruised through it. After that I found my pace, kind of, going a little faster than I hoped at 10ish minute miles but also not willing to let the group of 4 girls I'd joined leave me behind. Stupid pride. It started to get light out which made things more enjoyable. Walk the ups, cruise the downs, run the flats. Walk for 5 minutes every hour on the hour. This went on for a while without incident. I left some groups, got left by others, and generally settled down. I navigated the creek crossings only getting one foot wet, but my Darn Tough socks and Hardrocks kept my feet happy. After making it through AS 2 I was feeling pretty good. I fell around mile 10, tripping over a rock and cutting my left (read: good) knee up. It was the perfect wound that didn't hurt at all but wouldn't stop bleeding. Excellent...best blood award potential. I talked with interesting people and I ran by myself. Close to the turnaround I saw friends who were ahead of me and passing by on their second loop. That was uplifting. I came in to the halfway point around 2:50.

At the turnaround, I decided it was worth the time to take off a shoe and address a couple of hot spots on my toes. A quick shot of body glide and back into it. Say hi to some friends that had come out to cheer us on. Quickly refill the bottle and grab a handful of food. My wonderful crew (my patient girlfriend) accompanied me back onto the trail giving me the opportunity to re-load my GU's and get some snacks on the run. Plus, we had to stop for a picture on the course. All in all, I felt that the first half had been good to me and that the 2nd half would be challenging but doable. My right knee had been previously injured and was noticeably sore but that was to be expected by now. Everything else was feeling 'good.'

I started running the second loop by myself for the most part until I met a friend at AS 5. In my own little world, I didn't recognize Chris but he remembered me from running together at the Terrapin Mtn ½ marathon last March and so we set off together. Our game plans were pretty similar and I enjoyed the company. Looking back, I can only believe that the mileage covered was much easier because of the conversations Chris and I had. I was still feeling decent, not great though, and had a bout with a quad cramp as I hobbled into AS 6. A few orange slices and an s-cap from a good Samaritan helped. Around mile 26 though, Chris began to have stomach issues and dropped back a little. I was back to running alone.

The next 7 miles or so would be a rough patch but also the part I had felt was missing from my ultra experience. I decided that I was feeling good and that the sub-6 hr mark was something that may not be attained but that could be close. I opened things up a bit and began to chase people. From that point on my miles all came in at 9-10 minute pace. This gave me the feeling of all out exertion I had been lacking but also made things quite uncomfortable for me. My morale grew when I noticed that the runners I was catching up with were the same that blew by me earlier in the race. I slowed for a minute with a good friend walking through some hard miles, but other than that, I cruised on. I prayed, I sang songs to God (and probably made people think I become delusional), and I tried to praise Him with my efforts. Having these moments to look back at the transformations He had taken me through physically and spiritually to bring me to this point was something not to be taken for granted. Finally, the feeling I had been looking for. That feeling of knowing, for sure, that what you're doing is not of your own doing. That the only way this could be accomplished is with the help of your creator.

I was past AS 7 when Donna Elder appeared on the trail and smiled to me saying, "You're almost there! Keep it up!" When I came off the stairs and onto the road, it was pure joy. I was finishing. People drove by and gave me the thumbs-up and when I rounded the final corner, I saw and heard my friends who had traveled out to cheer us on. Those final steps towards the finish line were awesome. As I finished at 6 hours and 15 minutes, Horton stuck out his hand for the traditional handshake and instead got a sticky, sweaty, bloody hug. I don't think he really minded though. Hanging around and watching friends finish the race only made a great situation even better.

All in all, ultras have me hooked. I'll road race again but they just don't compare. I'm already trying to convince myself that my knee will be ready to run Promised Land in April. Either way, I'll definitely be at Mtn. Masochist for my first 50 miler.