

## Year of the Rookies

16<sup>th</sup> Annual Holiday Lake 50K, Feb. 12, 2011

by David Horton, Race Director

For 16 years in a row, the local ultra scene begins each year at Holiday Lake 50K. Usually, this time of the year, we are able to have a winter ultra without snow. Last year the runners were greeted with 5+ inches of snow. This year, we had temperatures from 23 to 45 degrees with a dry and fast course. We advertise this as a perfect first ultra. Holiday Lake has everything: meals, lodging, showers, start/finish, and parking all in one place. The course is a 16-mile loop that is run in one direction, and then runners turn around and run the loop the opposite direction. There is just a little over 2,000 feet of elevation gain with 4 separate aid stations and a liberal time limit of 8 hours. I don't know exactly how many first-time ultra runners we had, but I would guess one-third or more were running their first ultra. I teach a running class at Liberty University and I require the students to complete an ultra for a part of their grade. There were a total of 25 Liberty students running the race and over 50 other local runners competing. With Holiday Lake and five other ultras locally that make up the Beast Series, we have a very strong ultra community.

This year, we had the deepest men's field. There were six runners who I thought had a chance to take the victory. I had no doubt that Aaron Swartzbard's (Reston, VA) course record of 3:50 would fall. Matt Woods (Falls Church, VA) won last year in the deep snow. Jake Reed was a cross-country runner at Liberty University who won his ultra debut last year at Promise Land. Kalib Wilkinson, an assistant coach at Liberty University and a 2:20 marathoner, along with Nick Gramsky (Vienna, VA) who is also a 2:20 marathoner, were making their ultra debut at Holiday Lake. Jordan Whitlock, a Liberty student, was also on hand to take his shot at the victory. Jordan had tied for first last year at the Terrapin Mountain 50K. Swartzbard was on hand to try and protect his course record.

Through the first three aid station, the top six runners listed above, stayed basically together with one exception. Swartzbard had dropped over 10 minutes behind the group by this point. At the end of the first loop, Woods and Wilkinson had put one minute on Reed and two minutes on Gramsky and Whitlock. By the first aid station on the second loop (21 miles), Wilkinson had pulled away for a two-minute lead over Woods with the other contenders fading out of contention. At the last aid station (29 miles with 4.3 miles to the finish), Wilkinson still had a two-minute lead and looked like he had the victory in hand. With just over a mile to go, Wilkinson hit the proverbial wall, in a BIG way. He later said he got extremely dizzy and ran out of gas. I wonder what his blood sugar level was at that point? Woods flew by and went on to win, blowing away the course record with an outstanding time of 3:28:55. Reed also passed the fading (dying) Wilkinson to take second in 3:39. Wilkinson staggered in at 3:41, a humbled man. I wonder what would have happened if he had eaten a little more!! Gramsky took fourth in 3:51 and Lance Gordon placed fifth in 3:57. The biggest shock of the day came with the sixth place finisher, Frank "the Tank" Gonzalez of Lynchburg. He had told me before the race that he was going to break four hours. I told him there was NO WAY that would happen. He finished in a dead sprint, crossing the finish line in 3:59:59, making me eat my words.

The women's field did not have the depth of the men's field. Justine Morrison's course record looked safe, and it was. I really thought that Sabrina Moran (Sussex, NJ) would be the runaway winner. Little did I know! Bethany Patterson (Richmond, VA) was a previous winner, but this was her first race after having twin boys within the last year. Through the second aid station (8.2 miles), Moran was leading, but Michaele Rayburn (York, PA) and Jennie Belt (Richmond, VA) were just two minutes back, Patterson was another three minutes back of them. Between aid station 3 and the turnaround, Belt passed a fading Moran and had a four-minute lead by the end of the first lap. From there to the finish, Belt continued to increase her lead on all the other ladies taking her first ultra victory in 4:38:33.

Moran held on for second in a time of 4:52, with Patterson finishing third in 4:55, a GREAT run post babies. Fourth and fifth places were a BIG surprise to me. Bethany Weber, a student in my running class, was running her first ultra and Jamie Darling, my secretary, was running her fourth ultra. Bethany and Jamie ran together the whole race with Bethany pulling away for a one-minute victory over Jamie with these ladies taking fourth and fifth respectively. I was very impressed and proud of their performances. I doubt this will be the last battle between the two.

The Masters' winners were Paul Davis (Shepherdstown, WV) and Sophie Speidel (Charlottesville, VA) in 4:32 and 5:14 respectively. The Grandmasters' winners were Dana Beyeler (Russell, PA) and Martha Wright (Richmond, VA) in 4:49 and 5:20 respectively. Super Masters went to Jack Broaddus (Harrisonburg, VA) in 5:44. There were no ladies over age 54. There were 19 male finishers over 54. What is up with that?

In the top 25 finishers, there were NO runners over 40! This is the future of ultrarunning.

What does the future hold for Holiday Lake? Last year we started 280 runners, this year, 317 runners. I will probably allow HL to continue to grow a little but not TOO much.

I hope to see many of you at Holiday Lake again next year, the second Saturday in February.