

So it's been a few days after my first ultra, and I finally don't have to walk with a limp! Man Holiday Lake was such a great experience—I even said it was the most fun race I've ever done (and I've done a good number of 5ks, 10ks, 15 milers, sprint triathlons, and Olympic triathlons for my young age of 19. And I ran this past years' Richmond marathon).

I learned about ultramarathons this past summer when I started to get into running more than 4 mile jogs around my block at home in Cincinnati, Ohio. I read Christopher McDougal's *Born To Run* super quickly; I was amazed that some humans actually run longer than a marathon. I'm pretty sure I told all of my friends about the book, and even some of the eight year olds I watched while I lifeguarded. So I was aware of uber long running races, but I never thought I'd partake. Although I was fascinated.

I get to Virginia Tech in the fall as a freshman and instantly join the triathlon team where I quickly learned that everyone in the club is crazy. The older guys of the club told me of their ironman's and ultras, and just by hanging out with them I found myself doing 6, 8 mile runs like they were nothing. And every time I laced up my shoes I was having fun. I remember I called my 22 year old sister and bragged that I ran 13 miles in one day.

After the short triathlon season an insane idea popped into my head—let's do a marathon. I convinced my two best friends to do the Richmond marathon, and that was fun as hell. Next order of business: Holiday Lake. But as time progressed we were talked/thought out of running a 50k. We wanted to be fast for triathlon nationals in April. Out of the three of us musketeers, I'm pretty sure I was by far the most distraught about not doing Holiday Lake. I love the woods and running, so Holiday Lake was right up my alley.

As February approached we made the final decision that we didn't have enough time to train for the 50k ++, so we accepted the fact we would not be running Holiday Lake. Until we got called out by 10<sup>th</sup> year senior Justin Morrison. Why were the freshman not doing Holiday Lake? Uhh...

The Saturday before Holiday Lake, the three of us freshman go on a 12 mile-ish run on the A.T. At the top of the first mountain, I speak up. Aren't we supposed to be doing what we want and having fun in college? Why are we doing with this speed-only no-drinking crap when we want to go crazy and try all different types of things? I want to do Holiday Lake. So I'm doing it. And because I'm doing it, you guys are too.

Iron fist laid down, we put our three hands in a pile, and yelled “HOLIDAY LAKE” as we continued our run. About ten minutes later we realized what we just committed to, and Chris Crowley and Wyatt Lowdermilk backed out. Super displeased, I said they had no excuse to leave me hanging. If one goes, we all go. Changing our minds again, we pinky promised we’re to run the Lake.

Our training consisted of two eight mile runs, one on Monday, and one on Tuesday of race week. Wyatt had been sick, and I got sick on Thursday with a sore throat and stuffy nose. I think we all wanted to back out but we had already sent in our money to Dr. Horton, so game on. We find ourselves at the 4-H center on Friday night, stuffing carbs into our bodies and becoming increasingly anxious at the task before us.

It all got real real fast. After the coldest night sleep of my life I was pinning my race number to my shorts and fastening duct tape on my nipples. It was all a quick blurr. The starting line. The first mile marker. The line of runners with headlamps as I looked back. The sun rising. Me having to retie my left shoe four times...The epicness of it all.

I first look at my watch at an hour and eleven minutes in, pleased at how far we’d already gone. I ran the first lap with my dog Chris Crowley at a pretty fast but comfortable pace. We didn’t talk, Chris refuses to, so we observed the scenery and kept our eyes on the trail. We reach the 4-H center at around 2:20 minutes, and Chris blazes through the aid station where I wanna chill for a second. So gah, I snag my m&m’s (magic) and pretzels and refill my water bottle and start the second lap. We’re passing people left at right, feeling really good. We reach the 3<sup>rd</sup> aid station and our crew is cheering like crazy. Strictly triathlete and ultra-hater Grayson Cobb even managed to yell “hell yeah Rudy, tearing it up!” which was sure to jinx me.

Around mile 24 (by my guess) my right IT band started to tighten up...eek not good. Chris was feeling fine, the philological freak he is, and kept chugging along. I thought I had to pee so I picked it up. Couldn’t pee. Legs got tight. Then it was all a downward spiral from there. I started to slow, lost Chris, and started to shuffle to compensate for my leg pain.

I reached the second aid station with only two people passing me. After the lovely thirty second respite I tried to open up my stride but my knees hurt too badly—back to the shuffle. Those miles between aid station two and aid station one were some of the longest miles I’ve ever ran. They were so freaking slow. It wasn’t like I “hit a wall” (I know what that feels like from Richmond) and ran out of energy; my right knee just decided to stop

working. I was pretty sure aid station one was right around every single corner, but it seemingly never came. Then I heard some cheers—aid station one! Lo and behold it was not the aid station, but my triathlon teammates who were crewing. They saw I was in pretty bad shape. One asked if I needed anything, and I said I'll take anything. I got some shot blocks that helped a little bit. Another guy asked if I wanted a new pair of legs. Yes please. Woe is me, right?

Aid station one finally came, and I pretty much wanted to die. Once again, it wasn't like I was completely spent, I was just afraid of injury cause my joints physically hurt so much. A guy told me about 45 mins left and I'm pretty sure I cursed him for that awful length of time. Twenty or so people passed me those last 4,5 miles, and I just didn't care. The competitiveness slowed after 30 miles. I finally finished with a severe limp. I collapsed into a teammate's arm, all my weight on her, smiling. I received hugs from all the guys, and had a fantastic handshake from the legend Horton.

So it was a good run despite the last ten miles or so. But it was fantastic. I liked the lack of glamour in the whole thing. I liked all the dirt. I wanna thank my boys, the other four Hokies who ran, the crew (such a pickup every aid station!) and Horton for putting on such a wicked event (and series). I'm sure I'll see ya'll soon.

---Paul Rutenmiller