

Race Report by MPFiT/Campmor Athlete Iliana Dimitrova

THE HOLIDAY LAKE 50K...

The day I fall in love with PBJ

In 2010, by the grace of God, Dr. Horton decided to give me a chance to battle the Hellgate course. You should know that I had just started running in Aug 2008, and after 15 road races with the NYRR and a BQ at my first (and still only) road marathon, I dreamed of a bigger challenge and entered the world of ultramarathons.

Finishing Hellgate in 2010, and hearing that no girl was man enough to do the Beast in 2010, I set up my sight on completing the races in series and showing him that one can train in NYC for those tough races in the rugged VA mountains. Unfortunately, I broke my leg a week before Holiday Lake 50k 2011, during a fat ass 50K at Harriman NY.

2011 turned into a roller coaster of a year, with sub par performances due to poor training and very, very long workdays. The only training I could do was on the weekends. Coming back from under-rehabbed broken leg, I decided to take it easy and did only a few races in the summer during a month long vacation in Colorado. Soon fall was approaching and I was back to working insane hours, and running only the weekends. Regardless of all the setbacks, and gaining 15 lbs, I decided to sign up for the Hellgate 2011 and failed miserably. However, nothing can break your spirit if there is a burning desire to accomplish a dream. So I set my sights on the Beast 2012. And the first race is Hellgate.

My awesome coach from Mountain Peak Fitness, Elizabeth was helping me get back in shape, both physically and mentally; guiding me to re-discover my zest for ultras. She was amazing; putting up with me skipping planned workouts because of work commitments, encouraging me to get out and enjoy running / training again. In preparation for Holiday Lake 50k we focused on correcting some of my imbalances and total body strengthening. I also did a trail marathon in Jan and 3 long runs with countless loops of 1.6m on the bridal path in NYC. The fact that there was no winter at all, kind of helped with training as most of the time I was running either in t-shirt or one long sleeve shirt in the middle of the winter.

Finally the big day was here. As usual, I was in the office until midnight on Thursday evening, slept a few hours and was on the road to VA by 10 am. By noon it was obvious that I am not going it to VA without a nap. So I pulled somewhere in the middle of west PA into a parking lot and took a nap. There were a few more stops that I made; while I had decided not to drink coffee before race day, I couldn't resist and stopped for a large cup. There was no traffic on rt 81 and the miles were passing by fast; yet, I knew that I am not going to make it before 8pm and will miss dinner. Sure enough I arrived at H-4 camp at 8:06 and Dr. Horton is meticulously punctual; hence no dinner for later arrivals. I was at my bunk bed by 10 pm & my dinner was ½ of Ensure. I was feeling great, given that I had some time, I spread my race day gear on the top bunk bed and was ready to go. Sleeping was perfect; may be because for over a month the only sleep I got on weekdays was no more than 5 hours per day. My alarm was set up for 6 pm. I was dressed and ready by 6:15. First step was take care of business, and it's nice to have the warm bathrooms; but, because I was running late, all I could eat before the race started was ¼ of a bagel.

The race starts on a road that leads from the camp to the trailhead. I think it's less than a mile. The Garmin was on my right wrist, but I had decided that I am not going to look at it and as Elizabeth says, don't get too absorbed by the pace and miles. All I had to do was to complete Holiday Lake. This was not a race that I was going to race. I am far from my peak form in late 2009; carrying a lot more lbs on my 5'7" frame. So I choose to stick with the girls that were around me during the first 1-2 miles. Miles were passing by fast and I was looking fwd to the first AS as by now it was over 15 hours since I had a proper meal. Somehow, I knew that Dr. Horton races wouldn't GU. I also didn't want to linger too much at AS, and given that I was not craving for salt (the weather was upper 40s); there was only one other choice - PBJ.

Now I have to tell you a story about PB&J. I grew up in Europe; we eat Nutella

spread for breakfast, the way US kids grow up eating PB&J. Moreover, I associated PB with a certain very unpleasant thing; but I had no other choice. I drank a cup of coke, the easiest way to get calories in if your stomach is not upset, and grabbed 3 squares of PB&J. The first 10-11 miles of the course were uneventful. One runs on a trails part of the Holiday Lake state park. There may be one not that long up and down. The folks I was running with were mainly road runners as they were very careful on the down hills and were taking their time on the up hills but and I was able to pull away from them but they always caught up with me on the flats. I have flats, just for the record. The second AS I did a repeat of the first - drank a cup of coke and took 3 squares of PBJ. Back to the PBJ, I knew that I had no other choice for fueling so I had to figure out how to "enjoy" eating PJB. I must have been so hungry because from the first bite in I fall in love with PBJ. Not that amazing love that I will now start enjoying PJB during normal life, but definitely I would be a PBJ ultra girl.

PBJ rocks during races. I passed the AS where I volunteered last year (since I had planned the VA 2011 trip but broke my leg a week before it). I didn't know what to expect or what the rest of the course will be. It was a great rolling hills single track, with the Holiday Lake on your right. As soon as I had arrived at the AS before the turnaround at the camp, the leaders started coming. Wow, they do walk the hills? There some longish hills and I was very surprised to see them walk. How can they be so fast and still walk the hills? On the way to the turnaround I think I tripped only once and I was feeling great. For some reason, I had even managed not to have pit stop ea hour on the hour as it has happened in the past. However, reaching camp I made the smart decision to "waste" 5 min and walk to the indoor bathroom with the showers and take care of business.

By now I was $\frac{1}{2}$ done and knowing that I don't have to loop but rather go back in reverse made it somehow easier. My cabin mate, Tammy from MD, who had run Rocky Raccoon 50M, the week before Holiday Lake, caught up with me and we were leap frogging for 10 m. It was nice , because that kept me in check with the pace.

It has been impossible for me to run without music or listen to podcast. I contribute that to the fact that my performance was a down slope curve in 2011. The one thing I was ready for Holiday lake was an iPhone full of podcasts. I listened to over 7 Ultrarunner podcasts interviews with the top ultra runners in the country. It was very motivational.

I continued with the PBJ fuel and started passing and dropping folks after mile 21. Amazingly, I was not tired, and I was actually enjoying a tiny push in the pace since there was no reason to continue preserving the pace. Oh, and I did take Aleve may be at mile 16 because of uncomfortable shin splint experience. Not sure if that was the right approach but it made me feel better. I skipped the last AS, that was a bit of mistake, but I had misjudged the distance left to the end. Yet still I was able to pass folks.

The single track and the thought to be done were elating. I pushed a bit more but not enough b/c I finished in 6:50 and I wanted 6:30. Crossing the finish line was mission completed. One down - six more races to go!
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