

Written by: Doug Fernandez , April 12, 2012

My first Ultra- The 2012 Holiday Lake 50K ++

Over two months ago, on thanksgiving week-end 2011, I started writing my Paris marathon 2012 training plan. I decided to throw in there, in the middle of the training schedule, an extra loooong run, longer even than the marathon distance itself, which I thought would psychologically shorten the 26.2 miles. So I thought about the Holiday lake 50K ++, which some friends suggested as being runnable and an easy ultra, (if there is such a thing as an easy ultra).

For almost two months I was hesitant about giving it a try, since I figured, all I was going to get from it, was a sore body, and a hip injury (which I am prone to get), that would set me back a couple of weeks of good training. So I decided instead, to run the Willis River 35K Trail Run back in January, and see how it would go. That run was a muddy, lost in the woods, obstacle course, with a lot of blow downs, which I managed to win, and which gave me a huge confidence boost, and made me decide to run David Horton's HL 50K ++, the two plus meaning that the race is actually a couple of miles longer than an accurately measured 50K (~31 miles), although I was told that the course was in fact closer to 34 miles.

Anyways, two weeks before the race, I started educating myself through blogs on the internet, and previous year's race reports, about what to wear, the do's and don'ts, as I had no clue about what I was getting myself into. It wasn't the trail running that I was unfamiliar with, after all, I grew up and spent my younger years running dirt roads and stony trails with my first friends, chasing rabbits to death, and herding goats in *Altagracia*, which is a remote village in a rugged, hot and arid region of western Venezuela. It wasn't the mental toughness required to run an ultra that I lacked, because I know, that the dangerous part of running for me personally, is that I can literally run myself to death, before my mind quits and tells me to stop. I was more concerned about an accident or injury, or not being able to conquer the distance within a time which I would feel proud of.

After analyzing past results for this particular 50K ++ race, I concluded that 4 hours (~7:10 min/mile), was a reasonable and nice round number, that I'd shoot for, and which would put me well within the top 10, and was a pace that I was quite capable of sustaining, provided I didn't bonk or break a leg. I was also told that I was being way too ambitious for my first ultra.

Four days before the race, we all received the final e-mail from Dr. David Horton, which contained the latest weather forecast for race day (low 16, high 42), and a general briefing, of what to do the night before at the 4-H center. Also, an excel sheet attachment with the runners numerical seeding. I was given, to my surprise, # 11, which wasn't bad for a 52 year old ultra-marathon rookie, that nobody in the regional ultra community knew, except of course, for some Richmond Road Runners Club folks who know me well. I thought he was going to give me a bib in the 300's instead. He also said on the e-mail, "See if you can beat the number you were seeded". That's when I thought, well, wouldn't be nice if I placed in the top 5, and beat that seeding number.

Because I had a long work day, and a long drive, I regret that I was not able to attend the pre-race meal, or the pre-race talk, to the first timers on Friday night. I chose to drive straight to my hotel room in Appomattox and checked in at about 9:00 PM the night before, with a wakeup call at 4:00 AM. I don't think I was able to get more than 4 hours sleep the whole night, as I was so tense and nervous thinking about the race that I had ahead, a few hours later.

First thing I did when I woke up, was eat the rest of the Chinese fried rice that I ate the night before (I think that was a bad idea), then I had a bagel with Nutella spread on it, and a coke. I put my cold weather running gear on, as I was expecting temperatures in the teens, windy, and snowing. It was actually in the 30's and relatively nice. I drove 15 miles to the HL site. When I got to the 4-H center, I picked-up my number and had another cinnamon raisin bagel with orange juice.

I took a couple of trips to the bathroom, did my final checks, and then walked to the starting line. I kind of checked around the runners, and sort of guesstimated, judging based on their athletic built and age, and what gear they wore, who was experienced doing this, and who was a novice like me. I saw people wearing all kinds of fancy trail shoes, and felt very humbled wearing my worn out plain running shoes which I had logged over 400 miles on them, but decided to wear them, instead of my newer pair , since we were running soft trails and getting our feet wet while we crossed creeks anyways. One thing that I wisely invested in, was a nice pair of smart wool socks, which I think helped me a lot, keeping my feet dry and warm.

The national anthem was bashfully sung by everybody, as no one individual dared to sing the Star Spangled Banner alone, as David Horton asked for someone with a singing talent to do it. At approximately 6:30 AM, while still dark, we were off.

I tried to stay in the top 5 for the first two miles. As I heard the other guys effortlessly carry on a conversation, while they warmed up some, and before they dropped the hammer later on. At that point, I already knew who three of them were, Kalib Wilkinson, a 2:20 marathoner, who bonked last year on the last mile, and took 3rd, Matt Woods, who held the course record and was the 100K national champion, and Shaun Pope, from OH, who had won several 50Ks before. I figured these

were the runners to beat, and I wasn't going to be the one who even attempted to do that. On the 2nd mile I watched two of the runners in front of me, trip and fall hard on the ground. None of us had a flash light, and couldn't watch our footing in the darkness, so I decided, to pick up my feet and go slower, before I was going to be the next one to kiss the dirt. The first 4 miles before aid station 1, the trails were hillier and rougher than I thought they were going to be, and I thought to myself, I hope that the next 29 miles won't be like this. As I approached Aid station 1, we already had daylight, I heard some Richmond folks yelled "Dougy ! ", which felt good and encouraging. I came to a complete stop, and took my time to drink something, as I had planned to do in every aid station, since I had read from previous runners reports, that the most common problem they had was bonking and running out fuel at the later stages of the race.

After the first aid station, the trails got flatter and more runnable, which was a relief, and enabled me to settle into a nice and comfortable 7 minute pace. The lead 4 runners slowly started to pull away, as I thought they would, but I stuck to my plan, while I still kept sight of the last one in front of me. So far I was alone in 5th place, feeling good aerobically, but my hands were already sweating, and I was already overheating with the heavy long sleeve under armour top that I was wearing. So, I pulled my gloves off and put them in my pockets, and unzipped my jacket to cool off. As I approached and crossed the big creek, and got my feet wet, I knew that the next aid station wasn't too far ahead. At the 2nd aid station, I came to a complete stop again, pulled one of my GU's out of my pocket, and flushed it down my throat with a couple of Mountain Dew cups.

The next section, from the 2nd aid station to the 3rd aid station, the trails still felt flat, nice and runnable. So far, everything was good, still in 5th place, and same procedure on the 3rd aid station, a GU and some water or soda.

On the last section before we got back to the 4-H center, and the end of the first loop, at about 16.6 miles, things changed dramatically. The trails got harder and wilder, although the lake view was amazing. I don't like very steep down-hills or up-hills. Somewhere along this section, I started feeling the dreaded lower back and hip pains that I have been suffering from for the last 2 years. I was just hoping it wouldn't get so bad to the point that I had to quit the race, in order to prevent further damage. I slowed down considerably, so I would keep the pain manageable. All kinds of negative thoughts came to my mind. Two young runners flew by me as they were chatting and seemed to be having a great time, while I was feeling like I was doomed. Before I went down the wooden steps and over the dam, I saw the lead runner, Kalib Wilkinson, on his way back, and looking strong and swift. I counted a total of seven runners before I got to the turn-around. So I was in 8th place, still in the top 10th, but aspirations to even finish the race slowly vanishing.

As I came to the turnaround point, Dr. Horton said "you are in 8th place, right where you are supposed to be", which I don't know whether he was being sarcastic or not, as he probably thought, a guy over 50 had no business being in the top 10 at that point. My time for the first loop was about 1:56 hrs., still under a projected 4 hr. goal. I went to the bag area, put away my gloves, my sweaty head band, and went back, counter clockwise, and started the 2nd loop. Somehow, I totally missed that last aid station, and did not drink or ingested anything for 8+ miles, which added to my worries. As I ran by other folks coming in the opposite direction, they would say things such as "looking good" or "looking strong". I definitely did not feel good or strong then, so they must have been lying to me. There was one uphill on this section that was so steep, that I decided to hike it, instead of trying to run it and waste precious energy on it. I figured the time lost wasn't going to be that much anyways. My lower back and hip was still hurting a lot, but one positive thing about it, is that it wasn't getting any worse. Finally the course started getting gentler and flatter, before I got to the aid station at about 21 miles. I took my sweet time to drink plenty of liquids, which included mountain dew, water, a GU and two orange wedges. I still had something like a half marathon ahead of me, before the race would be over. If I could keep myself focused, well hydrated and fueled, top 10 and a 4 hour finish was still well within reach. I also had ahead of me, a distance which was uncharted territory for me, but at least I knew, that for the next 8 miles to the last aid station, the course would be much easier and flatter. At about 23 miles, I could see the two runners ahead of me, that had passed me before I finished my 1st loop. I could tell that two of them were in trouble. This may sound like *schadenfreude*, but is not, all of a sudden I felt re-energized, and did not waste any time to pass them, then came the next one, and stayed with him for about three miles, and exchanged some small conversation with him, which up until that point I hadn't done yet. I was feeling great, my average pace was back at about 7 min/mile, and then came the big creek again. This time the icy water actually felt great on my feet.

Finally, I reached the last aid station before the finish, took my last sips of mountain dew, a GU, and off I went. I had a little over 4 miles to go, I could handle that, I was very fatigued at that point, but I wasn't cramping, or hadn't bonked yet. I knew that the course would get difficult for the next three miles, as it winds up and down around the lake, but I was in 4th place, motivated and determined to keep it there. As I finished climbing that last hill, hiking it, I was caught up by another runner, later I found out his name is Jason, and he gave me a few words of encouragement, and I started running again. Then I read something spray painted on the ground with orange letters, "1 Mile to Go". That felt like a sudden rush of energy, and I started accelerating, because I knew that the last ½ mile was a downhill, so I gave everything I had left. At last , I saw the big Holiday Lake 50K banner and the finish line, and the clock 3:57. Yes, I did it, and I felt extremely happy and proud about it.

I thought I wasn't going to be able to walk today after running over 33 miles yesterday, however, I feel just fine, must be the difference of running on dirt, as opposed to paved roads. I have been having an insatiable appetite for the last 24 hours, must be the 5,000 calories that I burned yesterday.

Congratulations to all runners who participated in this race yesterday, and thanks to all the volunteers, race director, Dr. David Horton and staff, for making this great event possible.