

I first heard of the Holiday Lake 50k from one Sami Wells, who was working for us at Rockfiush Camp and Retreat Center this summer. I pushed the thought to the back of my mind until I found myself reading Christopher McDougall's *Born to Run*, by behest of my mom, an avid runner. The book is a phenomenal account of the Tarahumara people and of running in general, and I took it as a personal challenge. The 50k was three months away when I decided to enter my name, and in what was maybe a move made during too much excitement after too much reading during too much plane riding, I decided to sign up for a Tough Mudder event the day following the race in Georgia as well. I figured, if these people I am reading about could push themselves to such great lengths (there were stories about the Badwater foot race, a 135-mile run through Death Valley in the middle of the summer), then I certainly could to. I would not let the fact that by that point the farthest I had run at any one time was only 7 miles. And heck, each event gave out t-shirts to all the finishers. There's not much I won't do for a t-shirt.

The next three months passed quickly, and as the date grew nearer the taunts/worried doubts of my family/friends/coworkers grew more frequent. For me, however, the goal of the weekend changed from a personal challenge to a desire to present a testament that the bodies that God has blessed with are far tougher than we give them credit for, and these temples that we have been loaned by Him are capable of some extraordinary feats.

So, the weekend of the race drew near, and I did my best to scour the Internet and my running friends to find the way to best prepare. In my mind I had a goal time of finishing in 6 hours, but as the event grew closer I began to think that I would be lucky just to finish within the 8 hour time limit. I rested and I ate and I prayed and I ate some more, and finally the race day arrived. I didn't sleep much the night before and made it to check in about 2 minutes before it closed. My inexperience was immediately noticeable as I started to stretch and quickly realized I was the only one. I cracked a few jokes with my family (wife, parents, and in-laws, all who are more than amazing and came to experience the race with me) to try to break the ice and then 6:30 came and went and we were on our way.

I can't say my performance was exactly awe-inspiring; I tripped over a root and fell on my face within the first two miles (and would again after about 30 miles). But I ran the course – this day was not a race for me, it was a test of endurance – and I was encouraged by my fellow runners and the phenomenal people who staffed the rest areas. Their smiling faces and servant hearts gave me an energy boost every four miles that was truly needed.

The only time I came close to breaking was at the final aid station before the finish line. The previous four miles had been brutal in their seemingly endless straight line distance, that at the time I truly believed must have been lengthened since the morning. I was hurting with four miles left. I had just run more than a marathon and far more than double the distance I had ever previously run. Once again, Praise God for the aid station workers and my family. They gave me the words of encouragement I needed to hear, and I knew that I could not let them down at that moment, even though they would never say those words to me. I gave them a silent nod (I did not have energy for words at the time) and began down the next hill, my mom (who stepped in to pace me) matching me step for step.

The course was truly beautiful overall, and I had the great opportunity to be paced the final 12 miles by my mom. I did my best to thank God throughout the race, both for the strength He was giving me and for the opportunity I had to compete. I count it as a great honor to have run with all others who took part in this day, whether it be runners or supporters or the timekeepers.

I ran the race hard and I finished in just over 5 hours and 51 minutes, beating my goal time. I left with my t-shirt and a stiffness in my legs I had never known. I had just completed 33 miles, and while my time was not record-breaking, it served as a powerful example of God's grace and strength in my life.

And through the whole thing, I had only fallen twice.

**Braxton Leich**

