

My Holiday Lake 50km Experience February 11, 2012 by Ragan Petrie

“Which ones are broken?” I ask.

“#6, #7 and #8,” she replies.

My heart sinks as reality sets in. “Can I see them on the x-ray?”

“Sure. Come over here...”

The doc walks me over to a big computer screen showing the black and white image of the three broken ribs on the left side of my chest. My husband looks worried and seems to be suppressing a squeamish look (or maybe it was hunger... he too had put in a long run earlier in the day, we still had not had dinner, and it was closing on 8pm).

The doc looks me in the eye and says “you will be very sore (she pauses)... for ‘quite a while’.”

Such is the end to my day this past Saturday, Feb 11, a day that started out so lovely and hopeful in the quiet, early dawn in the central Virginia forest around Holiday Lake. I had been traveling to cities a lot for work the past two months and was looking forward to running on dirt and hanging out in nature for several hours. Indeed, as I think about it, the number of days I spent out of town (or the country) far surpassed those at home in the month of January. I was tired. My energy was low, and some stomach bug from my recent trip to Peru refused to leave my body despite my persistent (and polite) requests (“please, please go away!”). The bug was robbing me of nutrients, and my weight was lower than normal.

The HL course favors those who like to run and run and run, without being bothered with pesky hills that might slow one down. It is a mix of mellow trails and fire roads. Very runnable (if you have energy ;). The course is well marked, the aid stations stocked with ultra food and friendly volunteers, and David Horton enthusiastically shows up at the early aid stations to cheer you (or cajole you) on. And, he is at the finish line to congratulate every runner as they end their day’s journey. It is a lovely race, especially for first-timers to the ultra scene and speedsters who want to run and run and run, without being bothered with pesky hills.

Some days are just not your day. Saturday was not mine. In addition to low energy, I had forgotten to bring my watch. Not just my GPS watch but any watch. So, I was running “blind” all day. Some runners love this sensation; turns out that I am not one of them. I didn’t know where I was or how long I had been running. I relied on other runners (“yo, where are we?!??”) and the Fitbit device on my waistband (it said I took some 50,000 steps during the race and covered 33.8 miles.... Not bad for a device my 75-year old mom uses to see how far she walks). After some time of running in a haze, I got some reasonable information on where I was and the time. I realized I was moving far slower than normal but just could not get my body to pick it up. My mantra became “at the aid station, eat and drink.” I did that at a few aid stations, and finally, I started to get more energy. About a half a mile before the last aid station, I started feeling great. How wonderful. I was flying along the trail, thinking about finishing up the race and what hot sandwich I would order at Sheetz on the drive back. All my daydreaming came to an abrupt end when I tripped and came crashing down to the ground.

The moment I fell, I knew I had done something seriously wrong. The pain on my left side was sharp and I immediately started to cry like a little girl. (Same thing happened when I fell and broke my collarbone many years back. The pain from a broken bone is distinct and intense. You don’t forget it.). A very nice woman (Ashley?) helped me to the aid station. I had to reassess. A volunteer told me there was nothing I could do if I broke a rib and if I had punctured my lung I would not be able to breath. I was breathing, so I decided I would finish the race. I headed down the trail, tried to run and felt the intense pain from taking deep breaths. I considered going back to the aid station and dropping out, but I realized that I could slow down, take shallow breaths and keep moving. I figured I could walk the last 4.3 miles if need be.

I do not have much of a memory of the last few miles. I guess they were pretty. I was just happy to see the lake. I figured the finish line would be close. I crossed the finish line in 4:51 and asked Horton if he had medical help.

Many other runners had finished or would finish soon with PR's and big smiles on their faces. I was happy for them.

Fast forward to later that evening... I ask the doc if I can still run. She says yes. My husband protests ("but, won't she make it worse?!"). Apparently not! A big concern with broken ribs (after making sure your lung has not collapsed due to a puncture wound) is catching pneumonia. Breathing is **very** painful with broken ribs. Shallow breaths are less painful. But, deep breaths are needed to cleanse the lungs and keep pneumonia at bay. Therein lies the problem. Every hour or so now, I have to remember to breath DEEPLY. Fortunately, running requires this ☺.

Sunday's attempt at a run turned into a wheezing walk in the cold winter air. I decided a better idea would be to get to know all the exercise machinery at my warm, climate-controlled gym. Hello stationary bike. Running will return...soon...with a little more patience.

Holiday Lake... I'll be back to test your trails sometime soon, under better circumstances I am sure.

Thanks to Horton and all the volunteers that came out to make the race possible.