

This weekend I ran the Holiday Lake 50K++ (HL50K) which consisted of roughly 32-33 miles of trails in Virginia near the Lynchburg area. This wasn't my first ultra marathon, having run the Terrapin Mountain 50K, Promise Land 50K, and Mountain Masochist 50M in 2012. All of these races make up the Lynchburg Ultra Series. And they are within the much larger Beast Series that tacks on the Grindstone 100M and Hellgate 100K. Last year I missed out on Holiday Lake because I ran the Black Mountain Marathon and did not complete the series. It looks like I'll fall short again this year, since I'm running my first 100M at the Umstead Endurance Run at the beginning of April (two weeks after Terrapin, three before PL). There was a group of us from the Raleigh-Durham area that was running this race; Daren, Elaine, and Todd were experience with ultra marathons, while Michelle, Maria, and Mitzi were running their firsts.

Todd and I had carpooled up Friday afternoon, arriving just before the pre-race dinner. Michelle and Maria got there earlier and saved us spots in a lodge, luckily with heat. We picked up our packets, dropped off our luggage, and returned to the dining hall to eat. It was a simple array of salad and pasta, my choice being the lasagna. I caught up with the rest of the gang. The girls were a little nervous, but excited. After a while, Dr. Horton gave a comprehensive pre-race briefing. Dr. Horton is great to listen to and has his own quirky motivation. He tells you the race is tough, that you're gonna suffer; you'll want to give up, "But don't! Finish!" We're all there together, sharing in the experience. You can tell from the audience that there is tremendous camaraderie and community. Trail races in general have an amazing advantage over road races in that they are a group effort, and Dr. Horton always brings out the best in the runners (and the volunteers!).

After some giveaways and promotions (of some interesting-sounding books), we break for the night. Dr. Horton met with the first-timers to provide some how-tos. I listened briefly, but eventually turned in for the night.

SIDEBAR: There's always the pre-race race plan, and then the actual race plan. This race was suppose to just be a nice change from the local trails but to avoid racing too hard so that I would get back to training for Umstead in two months. I didn't think I would take longer than 5:30, but I didn't want to finish faster than 5:00.

I got up sometime between 5:00 and 5:30 after a fitful night sleep. For some this predicts doom, but I shrugged it off, got dressed, and headed to the dining hall to check in. The girls were up, and I joined them to eat and chitchat before running. I had about a cup and a half of coffee; I'm not ritualistic about drinking coffee, but I enjoyed it for its warming feeling.

We started promptly a 6:30am, predawn, so it was dark and I was wearing my headlamp. This first spat was on the pavement heading out of the camp. The field was crowded, but not mob-ish like a lot of big road races. There was a bottleneck heading off road. I try to be patient to begin with, but shortly I started calling out "on your left" and move my way up. Several people were courageously running sans lamp, and I was eager to pick my way across the ground and forward.

The terrain for most of the race was very similar. It's not quite bridal trail, not quite single track. I think Dr. Horton describes it as a jeep trail, whereas I would say "ATV." I've never run at Holiday Lake. However, I began notice it was very similar to other VA state Parks I've run on, where you have a mildly—rugged, not-very-technical trail that parallels a paved road.

I was running just fine, at this point yo-yoing with several runners. This early in the race, it's impossible to tell who is on pace or who will blow up (myself included). Given that, I was worried about going too fast, but also letting some competitive nature creep in. I was also getting hot. A couple of hundred yards from the first aid station, I took off my light windbreaker and stuffed it in the back pocket of my UltrAspire Spry (threw my headlamp back there too). At Masochist, I wasted a lot of time doing the same thing with a Nathan pack outer bungee cord, and this went much faster. I felt much cooler, but by fumbling with the jacket, I probably grabbed less food at the aid station that I should've.

The next section included similar terrain, with a deep stream crossing and more mud. And at aid station 2 IT happened. Another runner (seemed like a LU student) asked the aid station volunteer how many people had come through. The response? 95. My immediate thoughts? “That’s too many.” I won’t say I greatly sped up, but I forgot all thoughts about taking it easy. I was anxious to start reeling runners in. And this was really where I started to find my rhythm. Through this sections, past aid station three, I just tried to manage that rhythm and keep it steady. The yo-yoing gradually tapered off. To be honest, I never know it it’s because my pace increases or theirs slows down.

Once we started skirting the lake, I started seeing the returning runners. After the first several, I lost those outlandish illusions of a grandeur top 10 finish, and continued to work on bringing runners in. My strong points were on some of the climbs, following the advice to walk [/climb] with a purpose. Closer to the turn around point I saw some familiar faces particularly close competitors that I mysteriously became very anxious to catch (as a NC State grad, I was putting the VT ultra runners in the cross hairs). At the turn around I was surprised and glad to see Rush, who I’d met at some of the previous races and some local Fat Ass races. After a strong first loop, I was ready to focus again on control, but we both looked at my 2:21 split and Rush says, “You can totally break five hours. You could probably negative split.” Well. OK. I was hedging any bets, but coming through every subsequent section, I was mentally doing the math and trying to gauge my fatigue.

Not too long after turning around I crossed paths and encouraging words with Daren, followed by Todd. A little bit later Mitzi went by, all smiles. Farther along, Maria, Michelle, and Elaine were all together, climbing a steep hill while I was descending. I was really starting to feel the fatigue sometime after aid station three on the return. I was pretty sure my pace was solid, but the visual contact with runners ahead was less frequent. I also think since I had started to watch the clock; even some of the few walking sections were making me nervous despite trying to remind myself, I didn’t NEED to nor SHOULD I being trying to race this (negative split, damn it!). I also misjudged the stream crossing on the return section. For some reason, I thought it was between three and two. When I passed aid station two, I sort of forgot about it. So when I DID cross it, I was slightly demoralized about having heavy, wet shoes again.

Those last few miles I did relent a little and let myself walk some of the smaller humps (not really hills), content with my situations and wanting to have a little reserve for the very end (for what good it would do). I figured I would likely even split, or go slightly over 4:42. Like most races, the last section is a gradual (or steep!) downhill, and I felt much better after passing the 1-mile-to-go mark (Rush was also just driving past and shouted some encouragement). The pavement wasn’t much good on the feet, but excellent for striding out a little farther. Past the cones, I ran strong through the finish in 4:36:44! Definite negative split! Dr. Horton was there like he is for every runner and shook my hand, though mangled the name (It’s ok! Everyone does it! (It’s just like Duran Duran)).

I waited around for the rest of the gang to finish. Maintaining their order, Daren came through followed very closely by Todd and then Mitzi. Much later we saw Michelle and Maria, while after struggling with stomach issues, Elaine rounded us out.

Everyone blasts me for feeling “bittersweet” about this race. I loved claiming a 4:36 finish and 29th place. But I know I still have a first 100 miler coming up, and I’m not taking a standard recovery period, which puts me in an injury-prone zone. I’ve kept the weekly mileage lower, but not low, and next week it will back to the grind. Also, everyone is keyed up for the rest of the series. I would LOVE to join them, but have to be content with plugging my ears. Though the whole series is not the books, I’m considering going for the Grindstone 100M and Hellgate 100K this year with an eye on the whole Beast Series next year. Half of it is too accomplish something amazing. Half of it is that this is such an inspiring and support group of runners, and I always leave these races anxious to see everyone again.