

Little Talks
Christopher Calfee

Holiday Lake 2014 has been called a snowfest, nightmare, epic event, and possibly even a joy. It has always been touted as a great first ultramarathon, a bit longer than advertised, and a growing event amongst ultras in Virginia. Holiday Lake has been many things for me: mud, snow, slow, fast, faster, and just finish. As I prepared for this year's event, I was perhaps the most realistic I have ever been for an ultra.

Every runner knows what it feels like to have a bad race, bad training, injuries, and a loss of motivation. Life is not fair; therefore it dealt me all of these in the span of one year. As I approached 2014, I realized that running was going to take on a new meaning for me. An injury to my meniscus and continued side effects from Coumadin have changed my racing perspective. I am neither happy nor sad about it, but it is a tough pill to swallow. Well, enough of that.

The real story was that the 2014 Holiday Lake 50k+ was going to be my 10th finish of the event. It was supposed to have been last year, but some blood issues kept me away on race day. I know I can finish a 50k with minimal training. I know I can gut my way through most races. I was not really worried.

But I should have been. I was choosing to ignore the issues I faced during December's Kepler Challenge in Te Anau, New Zealand. I had spent more than a week in New Zealand on an educational trip visiting Lord of the Rings sites and teaching my English students from abroad. I had also run as much as possible each day – trying to tackle every mountain track or circuit around scenic lakes that I could. I finished this 60k, but it took everything I had. I truly suffered from simply not being prepared for the altitude, the climbing, and the descents.

Again, I should have been. Three days before Holiday Lake I fell while running on a snowy trail – bruised knee, bloody shin, and injured wrist. Earlier in the week, I had developed flu like symptoms after getting sick during an 8k race in the cold. On race day, I awoke to a headache, swollen knee, rain, and what I like to call the little talks.

The little talks range from faint whispers to raging screams. The first was – Wait a few more minutes in bed and make sure you are not sick. It was the faintest of whispers with the comforting tone of a concerned friend. The second was – What are you doing? You are still going? These came from my dog as I took her outside. She was somehow speaking in my wife's voice.

The little talks faded and took refuge in the weather. As I left Chesterfield County and entered Amelia County, the rain went from a light drizzle to a roaring downpour. The talks returned with a staccato of subtle suggestions – If you turn around now, you'll be back in bed in 15 minutes. You know that you hate racing in a cold rain. We understand, but it is not too late to turn around; you could still be back in bed by 6:30. You know that you are still sick. I can hear your knee talking to me; it says that it is not ready for hours of sliding around in the snow. Oh, did I forget to tell you – you forgot your iPod.

I arrived at Holiday Lake in plenty of time. Dr. Horton would not have any reason to scoff at a late arrival. I trudged through the rain and waited. No more little talks. No more thoughts except that I was going to finish. But I was lying to myself. I did not want to just finish. This new found pace of running just does not sit well with me – especially when I am being entirely honest with my competitive spirit and my "spoiled" career of running as many miles as I want at any pace that I want. I know that I am subconsciously and silently whining about this.

I headed back into the rain, made my way to the start, and waited for the race to begin. As I ran up the road, I felt okay. As I entered the snowy trail, I was not worried. However, I soon rediscovered how much I hate running in slushy snow. I resolved to just keep plugging along. Everything was going to be okay.

The little talks returned in earnest. How does it feel to have another runner pass you? Are you sure you can't go just a bit faster. Perhaps you are just weak. Would you please find a better line through this muck – I am tired of slipping and sloshing. What mile are we on? Maybe, we can just go home after one loop – call it a training run.

This insanity continued until just before the turnaround. The little talks had become medium pleadings. Did you see who that was? Has he ever been in front of you? Don't blame anything else for this, you are just getting soft.

I reached the 4H camp, drank some soda, ate a bit of candy, and resolved to quieten the ridiculous voices. But I had to find a way to shut off the rebukes, the rebuttals, and the ridicule.

I decided to reminisce. I would need to stay as distracted as possible since I really do truly hate running in slush. Before I faded into nostalgia, I came up with a plan to run where ever my feet landed, to not skirt the edges of puddles, to ignore the inevitable frigid feet, and to make sure that I ate and drank smartly.

I drifted into my past. I started a ridiculous process of trying to recall every race I had run since 1986. This lasted about an hour, but I abandoned the memories since I soon discovered the little talks were denying the existence of many of my remembered races. I then decided to try to focus on the adventures I have had as a runner. I recalled pushing an old lady's car off some train tracks as a train approached, the sleepy bear at Hell Gate, the browbeating gnome from my college time trials, and finding a dead body in the woods in Georgia. Okay, I did not like where this was going, but what could I do?

Please keep in mind that I was not really suffering. I was not in pain except for the occasional twinge from my knee or the ever present stiff existence of my legs. I was not depleted or on the verge of any type of bonk. Maybe, I was being a bit of a baby, but I was so tired of dealing with the little talks.

I tried for a while to do what I call yoga running. My running practice for the day would be to run thoughtless, stay present in the moment, and make my intention just finishing. Damn! Who am I kidding! That lasted about 15 minutes. There was no meditative state or place of bliss to be found in the snowfest. I moved out of zen into attacking the run. I ran through every puddle, tried to catch up to every runner I saw ahead of me, force myself to run and not walk no matter how slippery the snow was, and even say over and over again, "Run, Run, Run."

I got about an hour out of that strategy. I finally landed on a story. Here's the gist of it. On a training run in college, I decided to run through the tunnel into Kentucky. As I ran along the train tracks, a train approached. As it slowed down in a turn, I decided to leap for the handle. I was a cross country newbie and my fellow runners had talked about this epic run where they hitched a train, jumped off a bridge, and then ran their way back to campus. I was on the train; I was on top of a coal car. I thought all was good until a conductor starting chasing me. I was in my own spy movie. Later than sooner, I leaped into space and slammed hard into the water below. Simply put, I nearly drowned. I picked up a trail on the other side of the water; I actually knew where I was since I had run up to this trail (from the opposite direction) with my buddies. I headed for home. Well, long story short, I got lost, stumbled upon a hidden marijuana field, fled for my life, danced a wicked dance with barbed wire, and finally made it back to campus.

I emerged from my memories with a smile on my face. I had another story in mind – my victory at Grandfather Mountain. Then reality set in. I went to pass a runner ahead of me, but as soon as I got clear, he sped up to pull back in front. Then he slowed back down. This went on a couple of more times. Finally, I surged past him and took off with a renewed sense of pace (fueled by pure anger).

I slipped, fell, cut my knee (not enough for best blood), and face planted in the snow. In my disorientation, the little talks made their counter attack. Do you know what your watch says? You might as well walk these last few miles. What time did you say you were going to get home? Maybe this should be your last ultra? Better yet, why don't you just "train" and never race.

I could not make them go away. I endured their comments. The little talks made a final play as I came down the hill to the finish line. What are you doing? Don't run next to this guy? Punk him now or do you just not have it today? Take a look at that big clock? Have you ever seen those numbers that high before?

Luckily, the race ended, and the little talks subsided to a disgruntled mumbling. I shook Dr. Horton's hand, gathered my swag, grabbed some food, and headed to my car. Honestly, I just wanted to go home. Beyond the mental fatigue, I was exhausted. As I stripped out of my wet, sweaty, muddy, and nasty clothes (in the car by the way), I realized how good I felt about the day despite the insane voices and less than ideal conditions. There will be other ultras this year and for years to come. There will be many more Holiday Lake adventures. Part of the joy of longer races is the plethora of experiences they bring. The little talks had never been so loud as they were in this race. But, I am okay with that. I much rather have the voices than the silence of just giving up.

Embrace the miles, fellow runners.