

SLUSH FACTORY: Holiday Lake 2014 by Becky Walters

The classic, crisp February trail for Holiday Lake 50k in the beautiful eastern foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains was blanketed with whitish-gray remains of a foot of two day old snow. Everyone knew that they were in for some crazy times of hard work, slippery slopes, poor footing, frozen toes, and dozens of slushy memories. Runners scurried to the start with rain layers to keep the liquid out and hydration packs to keep the liquid in. We had a mutual understanding of the trial awaiting us, and therefore possessed mindsets that were a little less competitive than normal.

The first half-mile uphill on the road was predictable, people's eyes borrowing the brilliant beams of light from one another's headlamps and starting off quickly with excitement. Then we entered the slush factory, our shoes staying surprisingly unsoaked at first in the still-freezing 32-degree temps. Rain slid off our backs. We climbed short climbs and skied down rolling descents. I embraced every downhill, turning up chunks of snow without cautiously spending precious seconds worrying about slipping.

Our middle-pack group wound through turns like a caterpillar commuting up a snow-textured tree branch. We embraced the presence of runners surrounding us, knowing that their company meant that we were headed the right way and that time would pass steadily in this early first hour. The first of seven aid stations came and went as the elevation leveled out. The slush continued to repel our feet from their central location, as we joked that our feet would slip a cumulative total of 3 additional miles over the course of the day. One step forward, a tenth of a step sideways. Repeat. At any rate, we were halfway to the halfway point of halfway.

We steadily and earnestly attempted to follow in the footsteps of the forerunners, but the elements were ordering our feet to march single file, like treading the road's famous white line at Badwater. Here and now, however, everything was white except for the line we were trying to balance on. It was a beautiful mess. I could imaginatively look down at our path and create a mental chocolate chip ice cream sundae at any point during the first half of the race.

At the foreboding creek crossing, a group gathered. Things were not looking good. As we crossed the knee-deep frigid water, we saw a huddle of men carrying a lady who had fallen and broken her leg. They were willing to forget their previous goals in the pursuit of a greater one: carrying this runner for miles to help and safety. They had wrapped her leg with a splint of thick tree limbs tied down with the knotted shirts of runners who had passed by and shed a layer from their own healthy limbs. We prayed and ran, easily overlooking our own problems for the next four miles.

I opted to count aid stations instead of miles, simplifying my equation from the number 32 to a perfect 7. Mile 12 then became 16 and brought us to the halfway point and much pomp, excitement, and cowbells. I tried to remember to eat and drink as I happily greeted my family, telling them with a smile how awful my situation was. My husband held his phone, comically remarking that he would turn the videographed chronicles of Holiday Lake into a documentary of pain and suffering on the road to triumph. With all of the support, my spirits lifted higher than my feet had all day, and I trotted off with my caffeinated self. Soon, I would be greeted by another spectator shouting laughable encouragement. There were three of us ladies in single file, and the man energetically cheered on our mud-splattered feet by shouting, "Ladies! Beautiful! Graceful! Elegant Runners! Keep on going!" This struck me as hilarious. So I walked. And laughed.

Everything had gone wrong, but I was purely excited to be there, running, being encouraged and cheered for, pushing toward another challenging goal. My time was 45 minutes too slow already at the halfway mark, I missed the check-in, I had a head cold and scratchy throat which I kept naming "allergies," and I was in the wrong shoes since my toddler had hidden the right shoe of my token pair of running sneaks right before we left. So, I had Mr. Left, but where's Mr. Right when you need him? All I had were backups.

So, why did I make the best of it? Why did I admit, "It could be worse," when fellow runners complained about the drudgery? A lot of marvelous reasons, I suppose. Maybe it was the fact that it really could be worse: lightning in summer heat, hours of pouring cold rain, an insurmountable 8000 feet of climbing on steep ascents, jagged rocks taunting us from beneath the formless miry snow, or a solidly

refrozen graveyard of real ice promising more injuries to its victim than today's spineless slush could have vowed. Maybe it was the joy of knowing that I had a garden of beautiful family members and friends praying and cheering me on from their own soil miles away. Maybe it was my handsome number one fan supporting me every slipping step of the way. And then maybe, just maybe, it was the recent inspiring memory of meeting two friendly wounded warriors with missing right legs just the week before my race. How dare I take for granted my abilities that I could gracefully display in an event that I chose to participate in? There truly were no reasons for thoughtless complaints.

The half time party had ended, sending me right back into the woods with cold feet again. I continued past the runners heading to their halfway glory with haste, wary of the possibility of slipping off the trail ledge into the half frozen lake. The second half had brought the debut of that day's display of sunshine, and rays of joy with it. But slush plus sun plus joy equals mud. So the trail had given way to a continuous creek of liquid dirt between its riverbanks of stagnant slush. Sixteen miles of splashing, coming up! The liquid last half could have been indicative of the status of the second stream crossing. I could have sworn it was 5 inches deeper that time. But I did not afford myself anxiety about the continued numbness preventing me from the destiny of my goal.

There had been dozens of learning moments in this ultra. But, when life gives you ice, make mental ice cream. (NOTE: One other benefit of snow is knowing who used which tree in the woods. Everyone gets a unique chance to shine that way.) The hard work was not overwhelming for the runners who had actually trained for the event. A few times, I even wanted to sing, "Walking in a Winter Wonderland." But I feared that my inability to sing would get me disqualified on charges of disturbing the peace.

One of the highlights of my life was the twenty minutes during this race that were spent on a gravel road that had recently been driven on for our profound enjoyment. During these moments, I felt guilty unless I ran hard on the delightfully firm, slushless surface. My feet even stopped worrying me; they warmed slightly, and I no longer feared that I would lose them to frostbite. But you quickly forget the good moments when pain and hunger strike. I reached the slush puddles again and then felt frozen, then full and then hungry...full...hungry...hungryyy...then shaky at times and swore at one point that one neighboring smooth log perfectly resembled a resting dinosaur. My logic escaped me. I wondered if I would finish. But I had joked earlier that we participants were equivalent to fearless Winter Olympians on this day of great outdoor testing and post-solstice undertakings. So, I had to stay true to my prophesy by eating, running, and showing fortitude.

It was interesting how much my feet hurt and my leg muscles did not. This was foreshadowing for my lack of leg soreness in the days following the flexed footfest. I felt like a potentially strong warrior with my feet attached by dental floss. They flopped and dangled from my body, as I was forced to take tiny steps to achieve any stroke of efficiency and surety on the uncertain trail. The unfamiliar shoes and abundance of moisture led to some obese blisters on my swollen feet. I quieted my concern when others exclaimed concern of their own for the feet that they stopped feeling hours ago.

All in all, the event was remarkable. We had great support. Edifying beeps from friends' and spectators' cars boosted my spirits and echoed along with the caffeine in my veins. We had an easier second half, with the splattering mud at least providing a firm foundation beneath its opaque surface. And we had an understandable cutoff. It had all gotten gradually better, slushy problems melting away, as I had made some friends around me from various backgrounds and states. We had cat-lovers, first-timers, girly-girls, city slickers, moms, dads, couples, old folks, young'uns, mismatchers, underdressers, and everything in between. We were all trudging through the same mud puddles. That made it great. That made it doable. I cannot imagine running this distance in these conditions if the fellow middle-packers were not as downright friendly as they were. It's always something about us humans suffering together while taking in the majesty of our vast natural surroundings that changes us. For the better. We see our weakness, but then become stronger as we run hard and run far.