

'So, like, is Holiday Lake your favorite race?' He was a Liberty student I had run with for a stretch who had proudly just completed his first ultra.

'Holiday Lake is my least favorite race,' I replied deadpan. 'Trust me, this is the toughest. It's fast and long and boring. On the bright side, everything you do from now on will be better.'

He looked incredulous.

'Promise Land. Trust me.'

~ ~ ~

Holiday Lake 50k++

Holiday Lake, VA

February 14, 2015

[Results](#)

Holiday Lake fell on Valentines Day this year, and Love Was in the Air. Boots was my Valentines date for the weekend, as my Valentines gift to Aaron was to let him spend his Saturday napping, knitting, and squeezing the kitty instead of waking up at 4am to help me clean puke out of my hair and take shit from Horton about his ugly chops. Pretty sure that was Aaron's best Valentines Day gift ever.

I had an explicit goal for HL2015: Redemption. I had run [HL in 2012](#) and it had been Ugly. After leading the whole race, I had vomited four times at the last aid station ended up crawling across the line in 3rd place. Bethany passing me right at the finish line had been particularly tough to stomach. I'll never forget the appalled look of Matty Woods, who had been training with me on the track, and knew just how far south things must have gone for me not to be able to hold Bethany off. After the run, Matt had given me his shirt to warm up in, even though I was streaked with vomit, and nursed me back to life with hot tea. A kindness I haven't forgotten.

I can't exactly say that I was physically geared up for Holiday Lake this year. Lately I've been on the losing side of injuries. And who is ever well trained for an off-season race like HL? But mentally I was honed in. I've come a long way since 2012, and even though I still am plagued by stomach problems and vomiting at ultra-length distances (see my ['Pussies Fly Together'](#) post for the description of my little pukefest at my first 50 miler at Bull Run). But I've had glimmers of what I can do over long distances

when my stomach holds, like my CR at Highland Sky, and I sometimes re-read my ['Keeping it in the Pants'](#) post from that day to remind myself that, contrary to some people's impressions, I'm not an inherently short-distance runner, and my legs are happy to cover an awfully long distance if my stomach will allow it.

Boots was a splendid Valentines date, and we had a merry ride down to Lynchburg and arrived at the Holiday Lake 4-H Center in good spirits, even on 4 hours of sleep. When I'd done HL in 2012 we'd arrived at the race after it had already started and it was total chaos, so it was especially nice to enjoy a full half-hour to check in, go to the bathroom, and catch up with folks. I was happy to see Mark and Phillip, Aaron's friends from Reston, whose intended long Valentines weekend together had apparently been scuttled by Phillip's wife Marcie, who for some reason objected to the plan (women!). I was also happy to see John Andersen again, newly anointed VHTRC Rookie of the Year. I have not forgotten our adventure at [Catherine's Fat Ass](#), where John had selected to run his first ultra on an awfully tough run through the Massanuttnans on a day that happened to be a miserably hot 98F. In case we weren't uncomfortable enough, Neal G kicked a hornet' nest and we all got badly stung. It was the kind of day that could have been bloody miserable, had it not been for John's infectious newbie enthusiasm.

The race started in the dark. I didn't carry a light, which served as a good natural check on my speed, and there were many ponytails bobbing ahead of me going into the first aid station. Even though I'm not a morning person, there is something serene about passing by the lake that first time during the sunrise, and feeling the darkness slowly lift over those opening miles.

Running downhill with abandon has been my signature since I was 14. I'm pretty sure the only reason Andrish was willing to put off his beloved laundry routine and run with me all those years was because we had so much fun running down the trails in Rock Creek Park. So what has really killed me about my recent spat of injuries has been what it's done to my ability to run down hills. Whether it's my hamstring acting up or or my foot or my wobbly ankle, I've been tentatively pussyfooting down the hills in training for the past couple years, draining all the fun out of running.

But in the last month I've been really working on loosening and strengthening my left ankle, stabilizing my hips and core, and starting to feel a little life come back into my downhill descents. The first real descent of HL comes at mile 6. I can't remember the last time I really let loose on a downhill. Maybe last April at Bull Run? I don't care how the rest of the race went, it was all worth it just to fly down that one hill. It didn't fit with my race plan to not take the lead until at least the second half of the race, as I passed at least 8 people including Bethany, who was leading the women's race at the time. But if my ankle is holding, my hamstring isn't complaining, and my IT bands are quiet, my self-restraint goes out the window on the downhills.

Flying down the hill had shot my adrenaline high. But I made sure to reel it as soon as we crossed the icy creek at the bottom of the hill, and intentionally plodded. I could hear Bethany talking to other runners behind me, and I was kind of kicking myself for taking the lead well before I had intended, but I figured as long as I ran real relaxed and easy it couldn't do much harm.

Some time after the third aid station I felt an urge to pee. Seemed like a perfect way to make up for my error in taking the lead too soon, and I peeled off into the woods. It was a cold day and I was wearing long tights, which always make it pain in the ass for a girl to pee. But I've gotten over being self-conscious on trail runs -- when you gotta go, you gotta go. But when I squatted to pee it was very bad news: nothing came out. I just had this massive bloated feeling of needing to get something to exit out of at least one of the orifices, but nothing was budging. I had drunk from my bladder a couple times and eaten some peanut butter crackers and gummies, nothing that should have irritated. Bethany ran on past, and I scurried out from the bushes after her. She also stopped to pee and we found ourselves running together. My stomach was uncomfortable, and I decided that the best thing for the time being was to settle in behind her and see if things would calm down if I ceased eating or drinking for a bit.

I had heard stories about Bethany from Aaron -- the bubbly blonde girl who was Horton's protege from Liberty University. And of course I remembered Bethany from the end of HL the last time I ran it. We chatted about running and life and such. She reminded me that Aaron had once saved her at Hellgate when her corneas had frozen, guiding her for hours to an aid station.

At one point she asked me, 'So you're a faster road runner type?'

'I don't know what kind of runner I am anymore,' I conceded. 'I guess I'm an out-to-pasture-been-running-competitively-for-20-years-doesn't-care-anymore-just-don't-want-to-puke-anymore-and-run-fast-and-long-in-the-woods runner.'

She told me how she started running after gaining some pounds as a college kid and got hooked into Horton's running course. I agreed that people who don't run competitively on their school teams tend to have longer life spans.

We agreed on a lot of points: the awesomeness of Promise Land, the wretchedness of the Road Across the Sky at Highland Sky, and, we both conceded, how lifeless the Holiday Lake course is, with its boring roads through woods that have been flattened through timber-harvesting. We came through the halfway point together in 2:10. My stomach was going in waves, periods where it felt okay, followed by long waves of serious discomfort where I felt like I needed to dash off and scratch some leaves. But chatting with Bethany made the discomfort much more tolerable, and I fought off the urges to go so that I could continue running with her. I also wanted to make sure that if I did take the time to stop that something would actually deliver this time.

One of the nice parts of the out-and-back is that we get to see all the friendly faces on the way back. There were lots of VHTRC folk on the course -- WH Tom, Rob C., Sara D., Toni A., and of course Dear Bootsies! Such a good boost of positive energy at a time when I was in discomfort.

The pain was building, and I realized I was going to have to make a pitstop. When the crowds coming in the other direction finally thinned out I made my move. But no relief; nothing would come out. I couldn't eat, I couldn't drink, I would end up going the whole race feeling that way, with the problem slithering up my system into nausea.

But it was tolerable as long as I was running along with Bethany. So I caught up to her again after my failed pitstop and we ran together up to the next aid station, where Horton reprimanded us that "This is a race, ladies!" We knew that he would be irritated with us running together. We laughed out how very pissed he'd be if we crossed the finish line holding hands. I had told Bethany flat-out that I wasn't racing. That I had stopped eating and drinking, that my stomach wasn't right, and that I was happy to just run with her all the way to the finish. Furthermore, Bethany was wearing a watch, and we reasoned that we were both running much faster together than we would have run apart. So what could be wrong with that?

Especially since the second half of Holiday Lake is so dull. Those long road sections that were just tolerable on the way out now seemed interminable. All the ugly things you hadn't really noticed on the first loop become apparent. The clear-cut sections of what used to be forest. The frozen ruddy mud bits that hurt to run on. Running alone it's very easy to get negative in these barren stretches, but we clipped along together.

The nausea was becoming intense. I tried to focus on slowing my breathing, steadying my stride, nothing jerky, everything calm. No unnecessary movements. My legs were totally fine, but I could feel my internal system writhing, and I couldn't carry conversation anymore. So we ran together mostly in silence. But we were clipping along, at one point doing 7:30 miles. As lousy as I was feeling, I at least had the solace of knowing that at any given moment of the second loop I was feeling a heckuva lot better than I had in 2012. I can recall exactly where I had started really gagging in 2012, at the first aid station after the turn-around, and the stretches where I started making little mini vomits into my mouth, prior to the big explosion of projectile vomit that came at mile 29. So no matter how bad it was, it was better than 2012, and at least I had that going for me~

So it was with a bit of pride that I trotted past the final aid station puke-free. I smiled to myself recalling those poor Liberty students who'd watched me puke my guts out and tried to bring me a chair and a towel, both of which I had to refuse so I could try to retain the lead I'd held for 25+ miles. I thought gleefully about how pissed Horton would be when Bethany and I crossed the line together. It would be such a girly thing to do on Valentines Day.

My nausea was intensifying, but I was still able to run with Bethany at a good pace. But just before mile 30 there is a short hill that is steep enough to walk. As soon as I let my pace slow to a walk I had a mini vomit-gag deep in my throat. My head started spinning and I got seriously worried. Moments later I released a gorgeous neon yellow spew of vomit into the air. No hands on knees. Full airborne arc. I've begun to start to grade my vomits on their characteristics of color and arch and volume. This one was a 9. As John A. would later remind me, it didn't have quite same beauty as the vomit I did while running Willis River, where I managed to not even break stride and let the vomit just spew down my front. But this one I was already walking, so not quite so dramatic.

Bethany heard me vomit behind her, but kept up a strong pace. I felt surprisingly good after the spew, a little dizzy and disoriented, but nothing like the crippling blow of past vomits. We trotted together around the little grassy point by the lake, the same spot where Leah D. had passed me in 2012, and headed back along the creek. There were just a couple miles left to go, and I buckled down to get 'er done. I hadn't really eaten or drunk for hours now, and I knew after the vomit that the depletion would be setting in. But there was so little left to go, just a climb through the woods and the half-mile descent down the road.

I didn't realize it at the time, but Bethany had at this point calculated from her watch that we by some miracle were on course record-breaking pace. I had been in Fat-Ass mode for hours now, understanding that I wasn't going to have the bouncy [Women's Half Marathon](#)-esque race I had hoped for, but that I could be happy with a solid training run where I managed an unruly stomach gracefully. I also liked the fact that Bethany and I had teamed up. Fast women are relatively sparse compared to the men, and typically run alone, so it's unusual to have the chance to have fast women running together. As anyone who's witnessed a Women's Half knows, I am perfectly capable of turning up the competitiveness when appropriate. But I also pride myself on knowing when to turn the nozzle down -- whether it's at our weekly WUS runs, or at a fatass event, or just a regular old training run. Aaron is a shining model in this regard, and I've tried to take note.

Looking back on it, I wish Bethany had just told me what was about to take place. I had no idea a CR was in the cards, and I was just pleased to be still running steadily post-puke. If she had told me that she wanted to pick it up, that a CR was on the line, I might have been willing to dig deeper, understanding what was at stake. It's hard to know in retrospect how much more I had in me, I was pretty out of it at the time. But we'd been running together for hours now, and I might have found another gear if she had directly asked me to. At Bull Run I walked through 8 agonizing miles where I no doubt would have quit had it not been for our women's WUS team, which needed me to finish. Or if the sickness had totally blown me out and I didn't think I could do it, I would have just told her to go ahead and go for it and that would have been that.

Instead, I spent the last stretch swimming in confusion. Bethany blasted up the last hill, and it wasn't clear to me whether she was officially ditching me for the last stretch, or whether she was just going ahead

temporarily. Maybe the idea of finishing with me was less appealing now that she knew how sick I really was.

I finished the race with a furrowed brow. I just didn't know what to make of it. Horton exclaimed with great enthusiasm as I finished that I too had slipped under the course record. It now made sense why Bethany had taken off in the end in pursuit of the CR. I just wish I'd been clued in. But overall I'm glad Bethany got her course record, and that I rode out a day where things didn't go my way gracefully.

I had no Matty Woods to nurse me back to health at the finish. But that was okay this time, as I was in far better shape at the finish than in 2012. I poured my own hot tea and apple juice and doused myself down in the hot shower, which is the saving grace of HL.

The way the race had ended was not ideal. But from a larger perspective, I had to be satisfied that I had managed to run just 20 seconds off the course record (it turned out that Horton was mistaken and I was a bit over) on a day where I felt lousy. I had barely drunk any liquid during the race (my camelback was still nearly full when I finished and I hadn't stopped at any aid stations). It was many bottles of powerade and cups of tea and apple juice before I could manage a pee after the race.

I was feeling a bit sore hanging around at the finish line, dwelling and feeling a bit sorry for myself, and for the life of me unable to figure out what the Crozet Racing Team was all about. I guess I should tell Keith that the WUSSies can't race anymore until we have an official team of carefully selected members and spiffy jackets to advertise elite status.

So I took a long walk up the hill to greet other WUSSies coming in. A loose dog ran up barking and snarling at my heels. I had blisters on the bottoms of both feet. But all the clouds lifted when dear Bootsies popped out of the woods having a grand ole time of it. She'd had a rough HL last year in the snow, so I was delighted to see how great she was feeling. Tom and Sara also came down the hill in great spirits. Holiday Lake isn't the most glorious course, but it's fun to be a part of a big event with a lot of history where a lot of people are running an ultra for the first time. It's also a great mid-winter test of fitness with excellent volunteers, impeccable course markings, and with a wide diversity of runners who I wouldn't typically race with – like Mark and Phillip.

I was in a much better mood hanging out with the WUSSies, getting some bbq to eat, and sitting for what must have been hours talking. Because by the time we went back outside to leave, the place had entirely cleared out. We cheered on the last finisher, and then Boots and I made the drive back to DC. Even though it would have been nice to have Aaron around to help me when I was feeling sick after the race and cheer me up after a rough day, I was glad to have time to just hang out with Boots and catch up on life. All the stuff you don't talk about when boys are around~

The second half of my Valentines Day present to Aaron was a promise to come home in a good mood. He had seen online that Bethany had won the race, and was prepared for a less-than-happy marmot. But I made good on my promise, and saw the silver lining. Because even though my race had not gone as planned, I had my downhill running back, I had pep and strength in my legs even when my stomach was ailing, and on a day when I had faded out of a racing mentality, was totally dehydrated and depleted and just trying to keep the contents of my stomach in, I still had run a fast time on that course. We ran a really solid second half, only 3 minutes slower than our first half, really a remarkably steady pace even as I ailed. I'll be back to HL, hopefully next year, to give it another go. And sometimes the final result is a poor indication of what was achieved. For me, calm in the face of discomfort, holding course even after regurgitation, these are important things to have in my toolbox. It may be a while before I have a clear stomach day at the races, but in the meantime I can learn ways to run through.