

## The Middle and the Void

Holiday Lake 50K++ number 12 is in the books. The ++ is earned every year with about 2 miles or so of extra running; this year my Garmin 230 measured the course as 33.24 miles. I am not sure how much I trust any GPS device, but I am confident that the extra mileage lives and breathes in the two loops of the course. This year's race was also my 69th ultramarathon. But let's move past the statistics into the real meat of the story.

But is there a story? When I woke up Saturday morning, I felt okay. I did not oversleep, and I experienced none of the "little talks" that sometimes happen before longer races. The drive to Appomattox was also uneventful - no bending of the bumper roadkill or bad weather.

I arrived with time to spare and had no trouble finding a parking spot. I picked up my race number and a few vittles; I was a bit disappointed that David Horton made no comment about the time, etc. He seemed a bit on edge. No problems walking back to my car; no monumental debates over which pair of long pants to wear or whether to take my headphones along.

In fact, I almost felt invisible. I almost wondered if I was really still asleep at home and just dreaming about all this nothingness.

Soon the starting time rolled around, and I headed there. But where was there? I tried visualizing my race goals, but my desire stayed disturbingly noncommittal. Was this wisdom? The race starts, and I am running uphill, downhill, around switchbacks, etc. The first aid station loomed. I asked a volunteer to put my headlamp in my pack; with numb fingers, he struggled with my request. I am sure, with a smile, he was thinking, "Just throw your fancy smancy headlamp in the damn box." So, I thank him for his patience and his time.

The race continued. I ran, and I thought I was paying attention to all the important details: pace, hydration, fuel, etc. But what was really happening was that I kept finding myself in that godforsaken void between groups of runners. This monotony was only broken by the occasional runner who would try to draft off my shoulder during a 50k; I still have to ask, "What is up with that?"

The miles of the first loop drifted by in a kind of fog. Soon, I was next to the lake. I felt super cold during this short stretch. At the time, I thought I was maintaining pace, but in reality I had slowed down by over a minute per mile. I wondered briefly about my plans for the second loop, but those thoughts seemed to drift away with the smoke of my breath. The second loop started with a bit of excitement (or should I say annoyance). I am still amazed at how many runners still do not know the rules of the trail. They are quite simple - no trash, get out of the way, and give the faster, oncoming runner the right of way. Therefore, I experienced a number of sideswipes; I don't feel bad about these collisions at all. I should not have to be the one always stepping up the hill or down close to the water. (Note: thanks to all the runners who did know the rules; others could learn something from you).

But enough of that. I kept moving, not feeling particularly bad - but not so good either. I tried to pick up the pace a bit and was greeted with two old and dear friends - the dead legs and the cramps. I suppose that in my listless running that I was simply not hydrating enough. So, the remainder of the second loop was a interesting collection of shivers, awkward running form, and random cramps.

I wished then that I had brought my music because once again I was in the Void. I was in a strange grey area between panic and motivation. Perhaps there was some consolation in just keeping moving - but that was only upon reflection. I was also surprised that I was not calculating splits in my mind - trying to reach some predetermined time goal. I was not even revisiting the 11 other times I have been on this course, and how I handled the final miles. Again, was this wisdom? hyperthermia? zen?

The race was over. I had my shirt. I had some soda. I walked to my car and started the laborious process of changing out of a mishmash of frozen and sweaty gear. I kept waiting for some type of revelation - had I reached the pinnacle of ultra wisdom? Was I now going to complete every race split between my mortal and astral selves? Or was I just stuck in the middle?

I drove home with some minor detours because of the cramps. At least, the strange contorting of certain muscles attested to the fact that I had just completed an ultra without probably enough hydration in extremely cold temperatures. My afternoon evolved from a warm shower into viewing the Olympic Marathon Trials between bouts of napping.

It might sound weird, but I woke up Sunday morning wondering if I had actually raced on Saturday. Perhaps this is an step into a further stage of enlightenment; perhaps, I had moved beyond the accomplishment of miles.

Most likely, I was just stuck in the Middle, void of any substantial after effects. That is a good thing, right? Nevertheless, this miasma also begs an uncomfortable question: Do I want to remedy this?

Well, that is a debate between me and my computer as I consider the inevitable - To register or not to register, that is the question?