

Holiday Lake 50K+
February 11, 2017
Race Report by Robin O. Grossman

This is my first race report, so indulge me a little exploration of how I got to this point.

In the fall of 1998, I was 24 years old and had recently met Eric Grossman. I have a distinct memory of watching him hobble down the hallway in the University of Louisville Department of Education where I was beginning my Master's degree and Eric was pursuing his Doctorate in Education. I came to learn that what had hobbled him was running 50 plus miles in the mountains of Virginia, during a race called the Mountain Masochist. This was a whole new world to me. Later I would come to understand what a stacked race he had been part of. He placed 9th among legends like Courtney Campbell, Eric Clifton, Ian Torrence, and Scott Jurek. This was my introduction to ultra running, which would become such a significant part of our lives together, with David Horton squarely at the center of the adventures ahead.

Over the course of the next 17 years, I became an observer of the sport and part of the ultra community as I crewed for Eric during races throughout the country. I loved crewing for Eric, dragging our kids along, camping out at races, hurrying up to get to aid stations so that we could wait for Eric to arrive, nearly always at the front of the pack. At the finish lines, I would watch curiously as the women arrived. The fast women amazed me, but the middle and back of the pack women amazed me too as I sought to understand how they could do it and why they were running for 6, 12, 24 hours or more. At some point I began running, always sure to remind others how slow I was, but nevertheless, getting out there and running. Coming from a background of gymnastics and yoga, I considered myself an athlete, but struggled to feel that I was a runner.

I still haven't quite figured out what launched me to the current stage of my running, but in the summer of 2016, I got an itch to run an ultra. I completed the Cloudsplitter 50k in Elkhorn City, KY, in October 2016 and by the time winter rolled around, visions of completing the Lynchburg Ultra Series began floating around in my head. This past Saturday, I finished Holiday Lake 50K+. The race was largely run in my mind as it became my main barrier to enjoying the race. Here is a recollection of some of the mental gymnastics I did during the race:

“Are you having fun yet?” Jenny Nichols asked me about 9 miles into the race. “Fun? Umm, not really.” My mind immediately goes to wondering if this is supposed to be fun, “lighthearted pleasure” as defined by Merriam Webster. I was ticking off miles, watching my pace, doing the math for my total elapsed time if I maintained said pace, etc. I wasn't having fun, but I was doing the work. As I approached the half way point in about 2 hours 50 minutes, I was pleased with my effort, but beginning to realize that I hadn't eaten enough and wasn't sure if I could maintain the same pace for a sub-6 hour finish. I began the second loop and quickly realized that it was going to be much tougher than the first.

“Run fast. Run free.” “It never always gets worse.” These were my next words of encouragement. This time they came from Sophie Speidel whom I saw as I was coming through mile 20 or 24. Sophie called out as I came by and I expressed frustration that I had slowed down so much. Contemplating her words, it occurred to me that I never run fast so that wasn't going to happen and I had only every really run free just a few times in my life. Once was during a 12 mile run in the mountains of Glacier National Park as Eric and I crested the Continental Divide passing by exquisite alpine lakes and wildflowers. Now THAT was a sense of freedom. This was more just getting the job done. The scenery wasn't particularly interesting and the scenery of the mind wasn't helping me out much either. Thinking about the quote “It never always gets worse,” made me realize it wasn't really bad. I wasn't in any pain and had no GI problems. I was just slow. At what point do I embrace that and accept and appreciate where I am?

“Good job.” “Am I doing a good job?” This time, about 26 miles in, Michael Dunlop passed me and offered words of encouragement, “Good job.” I asked him if I was doing a good job, because I was just walking. He graciously slowed to my pace and walked alongside me for a bit, imparting some of his wisdom gained over years of running. He shared with me the 4 C's of ultra-running: Caffeine, Calories, Conversation, and Counting. I wasn't doing too well on my calorie intake and had only taken in a little bit of caffeine. I was accustomed to counting as I often find myself counting backwards from 59 to zero in time to my breathing. Conversation had eluded me. For some reason, I had thought I needed to get through this on my own, focusing on my work, running my own pace, keeping my thoughts to myself. Michael taught me that having a conversation with someone during the race can make it fun, can help you take your mind off the task at hand, and offer a diversion as the miles go by. I began to run again, this time in front of Michael, as we chatted about our families and our teenage sons who will be exploring college in the near future. This was truly the highlight of my race. I really appreciate Michael's willingness to support me and show me how to make this a better experience.

“Suck it up buttercup,” read the poster as I was leaving the last aid station with four miles to go. How appropriate. I really had no reason to complain; nothing was wrong. I was out here to explore fatigue, wasn't I? That poster gave me a bit of a chuckle as I left the aid station with grateful handfuls of M&M's and grapes the aid station workers had stuffed in my hands as they shooed me out of the station. This was my favorite aid station experience of the day. Three of them, one young gal and two men, gave me their attention, forced me to eat some calories, and hurried me along to get the job done.



Here I am at the finish line with super woman Jenny Nichols and super man David Horton. I finished the race in 6 hours and 36 minutes, well over my goal of six hours, but I finished. It wasn't that long ago that I said I'd never run an ultra and here I am having just finished my second one with such loving supports by me.

“This was a great training run for Terrapin,” Jenny reminded me. Yes, indeed. I'm writing this race report four days post race and am still intrigued by how I experienced the day out there at Holiday Lake. I've got 4.5 weeks until Terrapin Mountain. It's time to get my mental training on and get some more weekly miles in. Who knows what I'll learn about myself during that run, but

I'm willing to get out there and see what the landscape of the mind and the mountain offers up to me on Saturday, March 18, 2017. Here's to another opportunity to explore what my body and mind can do.