

Holiday Lake 50k, where to even start? This was possibly the hardest, but as a result, the most rewarding experience of my life. Never in a million years would I have pictured myself running a 50k, but sure enough on the morning of February 11, 2017 at 5:10 am Catherine's alarm went off in the bunk house and I was up and preparing for the 6:30 pre-sunrise race start. I got up, went to the bathroom (for the first time), got changed and met with the rest of the VT Ultra group eating breakfast and joking around in the dining hall. Then I went with Ashley to the bathroom (for the second time). It was now 5:45, I spent the next fifteen minutes zoned out of the conversation and in my own head—headlamp, check; race shoes, check; sunglasses, check; handhelds, check; gu's, check; watch, check—I had everything. At 6:00 Hunter, who was crewing me walked in, alright I was all set, I gave him the run-down of what I would want at each aid station. Then I went to the bathroom (for the third and final time), and headed to the race start. The national anthem was sung and a "let's go Hokies" was chanted, I was on the line with Hannah, Ashley and Jill. It had finally set in that I would be running for the next 4 and a half hours. Then we were off, running, I didn't stop running for the next 32 miles, not even to hike some of the climbs (which I later decided that maybe I should've).

"Don't go out too fast, no faster than 8:30s, stay relaxed..." I thought to myself. We were headed up the road climb, I could see Jordy and Jonathan already in the lead pack, and Hannah told me that it was Amy up in front of us as well. I was in good position, running with Hannah and Ashley as I would for the next two miles. Then we were into the woods, single file, in the dark, trying not to trip (surprisingly I never did). Then we crossed the road and started heading for the stairs, it was probably at mile 2.25, looking up I realized that we were headed the wrong way as I could see headlights of runners who had already gone up the wrong way and were coming back towards us. Alright, back on course, and some of the guys who went the wrong way were periodically passing us, I was still on my goal pace of 8:30 and running with Ashley in front of me and Hannah behind.

Mile 3-- we hit the first major climb of the race, I ran up it and as a result started to separate from my running buddies. Before I knew it I was at the first aid station, taking off my long sleeve and headlamp and picking up a new bottle. And I was gone, knowing I wouldn't see my crew again for 8 miles, ready for a lonely run. It turned out that wasn't the case, within the next mile I came up on Henry (who is also a VT runner) and Mike. We chatted and ran together for the next 10 miles, it was really enjoyable and I didn't even notice I was accidentally diverting from my race plan and dropping 7:30 miles (whoops). At mile 12 I found my crew again and got a cheeseball thrown at my face (thanks Sam). I had no idea where I was in relation to anyone else, I thought I was the 2nd woman, more on that later, and they offered no information, so off I was again with a full bottle and more gels. At mile 14 there was a spot and I saw another woman behind me, it wasn't, Hannah and it wasn't Ashley and I thought Amy was in front of me, "who could this be?" I thought. I figured I'd find out at the turn around.

We hit the lake, I started losing my running companions of Henry and Mike and was solo again. There was first guy on his way back, I was on the lookout for the VT runners, "Go Jordy! Go Jonathan!" I said as I passed. I kept waiting to see how much time Amy had on me, I got to the turn around, 2:09, way faster than the pace I had planned, and still hadn't seen her, and I was so confused. Out of the turnaround I went, there was the other woman who was behind me, I looked at her number and finally realized I was in first, it was Amy behind me. She must have

been in the group that went the wrong way early. Crap, I wasn't supposed to be in first, did I go out too fast? Would I be able to hold on? At the moment I had about a 2 minute lead, "alright," I thought "let's bring it home and kept moving forward". The next mile was probably my favorite, I got to see where everyone else was and cheer on my teammates. Everyone was doing extremely well, it gave me another burst of energy and I kept the pace moving.

The next four miles back to the aid station where I would see my crew flew by, I passed the spot where I could see Amy on the way out and no sign of her. I had put distance on the whole woman's field. I got to mile 20, and only slowed down a little as I grabbed my bottle and gels, I wanted to keep pushing the pace while I was feeling strong. Out of the aid station and up the hill I went, taking a gel in the process. I was just taking it one mile at a time. I got to mile 22, I was in new territory, it was the furthest I had ever run from there on out. Mile 24, another aid station down, just 8 miles to go. This is when my body started to fall apart. My knees, hips and feet HURT. I thought I was going to have to walk the rest of the way. I'm still not sure how I willed myself to keep going. I was actually looking forward to the uphill's at this point because the downs hurt so badly.

Still going, 6 miles to go, only 2 until I got to see my crew again. I was coming up on Jonathan, he offered words of encouragement and I did the same and kept moving forward. I made it, aid station 7, Butch was there with the GoPro and asked me how I felt, I don't think my response is appropriate enough to go in here (if you know what I mean). I got a moving pit stop and changed bottles for the last time and picked up my last gel. These last four miles were the hardest of the whole race. My only 2 miles over 9:00 were in this section and I kept turning around expecting the 2nd place woman to be right there. I got there, 1 mile to go, all downhill pavement (ouch), but I pushed the whole way home. As I rounded the corner and saw the finish, I heard my name and saw 4:18. There was no way I even split that race I thought, but I had. Everyone was cheering, I crossed the finish line, ready to collapse, got hugs from everyone and was informed that I had just run a course record. I am still in disbelief of this, I didn't even know what the time was or that I was on pace for it.

The next minutes were a blur, trying to get water, pictures and my finisher shirt and top 10 backpack. Then was my favorite part, watching Hannah, Ashley and Jill all finish in incredible times and placing 2nd, 3rd and 5th respectively. It was awesome and the rest of VT Ultra killed it as well. It was a crazy awesome weekend and am so happy that I was persuaded into racing!

Laura Sullivan