

# Sunday, February 17, 2019

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## Holiday Lake 50k++ Recap

Yesterday, I endured the most difficult mental and physical challenge of my life. I was not expecting this to be the hardest thing I have ever done, but mother nature decided to put me to the test...

The Saturday morning air was a bit heavy and about 40-45 degrees. There was expected to be some rain late in the morning with a slight temperature drop. Unfortunate, but not a problem. Anyone who runs ultramarathons can certainly handle some rain and slightly chillier temperatures...Right?

The big decision of the morning was deciding whether to wear shorts or leggings. Either be protected from the elements with more coverage but then risk the possibility of becoming hot, sweating, and therefore getting chilled (a big no-no when running a long distance), OR being less protected from the elements with less coverage but then risk the possibility of getting chilled. Wait... Looks like either way I have a good chance of getting chilled. Shorts it was.

Breakfast consisted of an assortment of pastries, doughnuts, granola bars, and juice... A breakfast of champions? What are you even supposed to eat before running 34 miles? Either way, you're going to burn 1-2 pounds, so whatever it is, enjoy it.

Before I knew it, I was standing at the start amongst 198 other runners in the light of our own headlamps. We sung the national anthem and Dr. Horton gave a word of prayer. At this point, nerves are outweighed by excitement, and I'm eager to start. At 6:30 a.m. we were off. The next six hours and forty-three minutes would be quite the challenge.

The first four miles went by incredibly fast. I barely stopped for any aid and kept moving forward. I was glad to know that the aid stations would break up the race in four-mile increments. However, I hadn't known yet how each aid station would seem farther, and farther apart as the race went on...

Miles four to eight also went by quickly. I was making good progress, but also pacing myself. My strategy was to take the first 16.5 miles slower than the second 16.5 miles. "Do you know what you're going to do?" Dr. Horton had told me before the race, "you're going to run the first half too hard." Because of this, I was adamant in following my strategy. I was not going to prove Dr. Horton right by burning myself out.

At the second aid station, I refilled my pack with water. My plan was to re-fill at every other aid station and drink plenty of fluid in between. With the temperature being lower, it's easy to forget to drink. For me (and anyone really) hydration is key. I needed to make sure I was peeing often and that it was 100% CLEAR. No exceptions. I also needed to make sure I was eating enough. If I want to do my best, I need to fuel my body regularly. I had learned from other runners to not let myself get hungry. I love food, so for me this is not hard. I had snacks with me just in case, but for the most part, I would grab food at each aid station.

However, today, my biggest concern would not be water, pace, or food. Today, my biggest concern would be staying warm and dry. Unfortunately, these were two factors that I would have no control over.

Before the race and the first few miles into the race, the weather was fine. It was actually quite nice. Not too hot, not too cold. In fact, I ended up taking my jacket off and stuffing it in my pack within the first three miles. However, by mile five, it was steadily raining. I had two choices: either to keep my water-resistant jacket off to avoid sweating and getting chilled, OR, to put my water-resistant jacket back on to deflect the rain, but then sweating and getting chilled. Unfortunately, either way I was going to get wet and chilled. The temperature continued to drop, so on my jacket went. A wise choice.

For the remaining 28 miles, the temperature fell to 30-35 degrees and the rain turned to ice, alternating between hail and a wintery mix. My fingers became bitterly cold, making it difficult to use my hands for even the simplest of tasks. I had gloves with wool socks over them, but they both became soaking wet, along with everything else.

The terrain was so muddy that it felt like I was in a Spartan race or a Mud Run. Except this one would last much longer. No matter how good the traction was on any shoe, the runners were slipping and sliding everywhere. There was no way around the muddy trail but to go through it. A few times, the mud almost suctioned my shoes off entirely. With the combination of rain, mud, puddles, and a few deep river crossings, my feet remained completely soaked for the entire race. I am grateful to say that I don't have any blisters (shout out to Injinji toe socks, those things are life-savers). However, my feet were COLD. I felt helpless.

The most difficult part of the race for me was between miles 20 and 30. I can confidently say that I have never felt so cold and miserable in my life. I met some people and had conversations along the way, but for the most part, it was just me and my thoughts. This is where the real test of endurance was. My muscles were relatively fatigued, but the running aspect was not what was most difficult. What was most difficult was the fact that I had small ice chunks pelting my skin, and a numbing cold that had penetrated all the way through to my bones. Mentally, this is the most challenging point in any race for me because I have traveled far, but still have a long way to go. I was honestly not sure if my body could handle it. I was becoming spacy, and every fiber in my body was telling me to quit.

This is where I prayed the most. If there is one thing I have learned from ultra-running, it is that I cannot give in to negative thoughts. The mind is a powerful weapon, and I knew that I had to use my thoughts to my advantage, otherwise, I would not make it to the finish. I continuously praised and thanked Jesus out loud. I imagined that Jesus was running next to me. This was comforting. I asked God to warm my hands, feet, and body. In the moment, that was all that mattered. Then, I began thanking God for his warmth and his strength. I also thanked him for the ability to run. There were several times where I fought back tears. Every time I felt my eyes swell and throat tighten, I would take several deep breaths, furrow my brow, and say out loud, "No Brooke, you can do this. You have all the strength you need through Christ."

"You can do more than you think you can. You can do anything if you want it bad enough."

This is what Dr. Horton had said to me. It was repeating in my head. I thought of how he ran the entire 2,144-mile-long Appalachian trail in 52 days. I also thought of how he ran from Los Angeles to New York City, 2,906 miles, in 64 days. I thought to myself that if Dr. Horton can do an ultra a day for 9 weeks straight, then I can run 33.5 miles through freezing rain and hail.

So, how bad did I want it? Well, bad enough to finish. And I did! Each mile got longer, but my willpower got stronger. As I neared the finish, I became more excited and began feeling less cold. I had overcome the hardest part of the race. I kept thinking about how I was going to take a hot shower in the lodge and get a Starbucks coffee on my way home.

Eventually, I came across a sign that said "1 Mile 2 Go!" and I actually said out loud, "Oh Jesus! We have one mile left, Jesus! Praise God!" A wave of emotion came over me and soon enough I had the finish line in view. I could hear Dr. Horton yelling my name. I sprinted across the finish line soaking wet with mud caked all the way up my legs and two wet wool socks flopping around halfway off my hands (it must have been quite the sight). I ran right into Dr. Horton's arms and felt so happy and relieved that I was done.

Overall, the race was cold and miserable. BUT, I wouldn't change a thing. Completing this race has made me a tougher person. I feel like I can now look at any situation I face and say to myself, "If I can run an ultramarathon in freezing rain and hail, then I can do anything."

Brooke Joy