

My First Ultra

By Jamie Darling

Dr. Horton's nicknames are usually not flattering, but they are usually true to an extent. Last semester in the advanced running class I was nicknamed "Bouncy Girl" for my poor running technique. This semester as his assistant I have been known as "The One" who makes all the mistakes in his email and spreadsheets. And after the 2010 Promise Land debriefing the runners got to match my face to my name as Dr. Horton dragged me onto a bench to announce this fact. (Not that it wasn't true, of course.) The week before my first ultra I was much more worried about getting the numbers, names and emails correct and putting the alphabetical and numerical list neatly formatted on to cardstock paper (while updating the last minute drop and adds) than actually running. Running was no pressure at all especially compared to trying to do my part at the race!

The night before Promise Land no one got much sleep but I knew it was okay. Sitting in Dr. Horton's office I had the advantage of getting many tips on training and racing from the legend himself. It was my first ultra, but I was fortunate enough to be coming at it with the advantage of a lot more knowledge and second hand experience than many other first time ultra runners.

I woke up at 4 am, 30 minutes before the wake up call, to the sound of pouring rain outside the tent. I couldn't help but laugh and think that this was going to be miserable. But by the time 4:30 am rolled around the rain had stopped and the temperature was perfect. I grabbed a small cup of black coffee and some breakfast first thing, even though all I could think about was starting the race. I waited at the start with the rest of the Liberty students and before I knew it, 5:30 had rolled around and we were jogging on a pavement road in a pack of around 300 runners in the dark.

I stayed right behind some of the faster Liberty boys and knew by the second mile I was making a mistake. I shouldn't be breathing this hard at the start. Dr. Horton apparently knew it too as he drove past towards the first aid station and yelled, "You're going too fast girl!" So, I put my pride aside and let the boys leave me in the dust. I kept reminding myself I had over 30 miles to go and I had to run my race.

I fell into an easy pace and the runners started to space out by the end of the 3rd mile. I power walked the hills, jogged the flats and ran the down hills. Most of the first section was uphill and I felt pretty strong and tried to hold back but I was pretty sure I still was going too fast.

I ran alone much of the first 10 miles on trails, talking with runners as we played "leap frog" (passing a runner and then getting passed) as I tended to do better power walking uphill and speeding downhill than running the flats. I flew down the first downhill section and after that I knew I had overdone it. I knew I was "running stupid" as I was passing a lot of more experienced runners. I joked with them telling them to "wave at me as you pass me crawling up Apple Orchard Falls". Apple Orchard Falls was the toughest section at mile 22. I did the training runs so I knew it was coming... stairs and stairs and more stairs!

As I passed the 2nd aid station I saw Dr. Horton, the only time I saw him during the race. The first thing he said was "Woah!" And I wasn't sure if it was because I was red or salty or because he was just surprised to see me. Then he clarified, "5th woman! Are you eating and drinking enough?" I told him I was. I filled my pack with more water and electrolytes, took a salt pill, grabbed 1/2 sandwich out of my pack and was off. Dr. Horton couldn't resist a yelling a final bit of advice as I ran off. "That was too much time at the aid station!"

By the time I hit the next aid station much later, I was feeling ok but starting to hit a wall. I felt my pace slow way down in the next section. I watched as a lot of runners passed me. Even though I'm very competitive, I tried to let it go because they were men. I told myself to only race the women. I moved to the side, power walking as I heard someone running the uphill behind me. I was surprised to see a woman older than me running up the hill with no signs of fatigue. What a hit to the ego! I resolved to keep up with her. We hit a technical downhill and I followed (trying not to stay too close). This mountain-woman-ultra-champ sped down these hills, dodging rocks and roots at lightning speed. I kept up but the whole time I was praying that I wouldn't twist an ankle or break a leg. About a mile later, scared for my life, out of breath, and muscles burning, I realized I needed to slow down. So reluctantly, I let her go and watched her pass about 7 guys right ahead of us. I was well aware this put me the 6th woman but I hoped I would find someone in the next 15 miles. I just knew it wouldn't be this woman!

I talked with more runners the next few miles at an easy pace, as I still wasn't feeling great. I worried that it was going to be a tough second half! I needed to take a bathroom break so I ducked behind some trees. Much to my dismay I watched another woman pass. But I was glad I stopped and off I ran and ran into a never-ending section.

The section before the aid station at the bottom of Apple Orchard falls was my toughest section. It was a mental and physical low, because I was tired and knew the toughest climb was yet to come. I should have been able to go much faster on this soft grassy downhill trail with little technical sections and uphill, but instead I ran slow and watched a few men pass me. Finally, the aid station came and I filled my pack with Gatorade and grabbed the best tasting recess peanut butter cups I've ever had in my life as I walked up towards the falls. I decided to walk every single step, even the flats (oh wait, what flats?). I saw the first stair and started counting. I was so proud I remembered to count the stairs. But then I forgot to keep counting at stair #12. I think I only missed about 7 million.

I knew this was the section you either pass runners or get passed. The sugar from the Gatorade started to kick in and I remembered what Dr. Horton says "It never always get worse." And I started feeling better. Actually, I started feeling great. I power hiked those hills and before I knew it I was passing people every few minutes. I passed one woman going up the falls and at the aid station I felt like a new woman. I knew the rest was mainly downhill and my attitude lifted. My muscles hurt a lot, but my energy level was high. I started down, passing a few men and a woman. The last 6 miles flew by and before I knew it I was turning the corner and looking at the finish line. Seeing friends holding up signs and Dr. Horton's surprised face was enough to make me smile all the way in. A big Dr. Horton hug, seeing around 6:25 on the clock and realizing I was the 5th woman finisher were all awesome experiences. Best of all was telling a shocked Dr. Horton as I picked up my monotrail prize bag.

Walking the next day was difficult and every muscle hurt but it was all worth it. I realized all the work that goes into an ultra is worth it for the amazing experience all the runners have. I learned second winds do exist, you need to run your pace, and you really can do more than you think you can. My first ultra was amazing and it certainly won't be my last.