

First time ultra-runner- Holiday Lake 50k  
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I learned about ultra-running just over a year before I actually did it. I didn't believe that I'd ever finish such a huge distance when I learned such races existed, and hardly still when I signed up for the Holiday Lake 50k. I had a nice easy introduction to ultra-running, first hearing a little about it from David Mackanic on the Virginia Tech team, and then coming to the 2013 Promise Land 50k and pacing him and then his brother, and finally pacing his brother for the loop and 6 miles previous to it in the Mountain Masochist 50 miler in November. I *began* running during that year, deciding to run the Marine Corps Marathon with my Dad. It was the first time I really proved to myself that limitations I always accepted to be true were not only self-imposed but completely wrong. Playing lacrosse in high school, I couldn't finish the one 3 mile run of our conditioning season, and now I've run 26 miles all over D.C. That was the first time and ultra-marathon seemed faintly possible.

I knew I was much, much slower than everyone else on the VT team, so I never did training runs with them, a source of nervousness. Still my friends on the team had metrics like "if you can run 8 miles, you can finish Holiday Lake" and "your 12 miles of Masochist were probably harder than all of Holiday Lake," so I constantly had encouragement and fear bouncing around in my head.

Finally Friday the 14<sup>th</sup> dawned and we headed from campus to Appomattox. I was so nervous for the race that I relished in the long drive, happy that I still had the dinner, pre-race briefing, and a night of sleep between me and the start. Those are such enjoyable memories. I really enjoyed bonding with the team and the other first timers we had brought. Some were guaranteed successes, like the tri guys going for their first ultra. Additionally, the other two new girls embraced team training runs right off the bat and had excellent marathon times, so I knew they would be fantastic. I felt I was the only risk to not having a full Hokie finish, so I was praying to not let my team down the next day. David Horton's pre-race talk was hilarious and encouraging, though he addressed the nightmarish conditions on the course. We knew in Blacksburg that there was a ton of snow on the ground, but we didn't know how exactly it would affect the course. Horton told us it was bad, demonstrated by the 1 hour extension he gave to the cut off, but we only found out the variety of ways it could be bad the next day during the run. Horton then came over for a small first-timers talk. He said, "It never always gets worse," "This too shall pass," and countless wisdom on the importance and achievability of finishing.

I didn't sleep well that night due to a combination of anxiety and numb toes. Plus my teammates in the cabin were entertaining even in sleep, with David playing thriller on accident on his phone, and Steve repeatedly slamming some part of his body on my bunk when he got up to go to the bathroom. Once alarms starting going off I missed the luxury I felt at Promise Land as I watched all the runners set off in the dark without me. Time picked up speed hugely from putting on my number to dumping my drop bag minutes before 6:30. It had started to rain. I got in line with the other VT girls a minute before Horton set the runners off, though I was glad to catch most of the pre-race prayer. I found myself continuing it often during the race. We began running toward the rear of the pack and passed many people as I kept pace with the girls. I was with the two fast first-timers Keeley and Hannah and an experienced ultra-runner Kelly, and I felt great about our pace through the first 3 miles. They showed frustration when the whole group paused to walk the small ups, however, while I was glad to be moving slow and keep my breathing down. At one point, Hannah said with amazement that we had already been running for 30 minutes. It felt like maybe 5, confirming that time passes faster than you think in ultras. After about 3 miles however, Keely and Kelly stepped off the slushy single track into the crusted snow to pass a huge pack of people, and I was not inclined to keep up. Hannah stayed back with

me and we kept the same pace until the first aid station. Soon after, however, she asked if I'd like to pass the group in front of us, I agreed, but we got separated by the shifting mass of people trying to stay off the thick snow on the sides. We knew we couldn't get attached to each other, so she gradually gained distance in front of me.

That first part of the race went by quickly, leading up to the creek crossing, which I had never experienced before. I registered that a woman had fallen and was being splinted on the bank, but I just stopped to roll up my tights and get in the water. It felt surprisingly good, and running felt totally fresh so I ran up the hill. There I met John Price, the only person I talked to in the entire race. I experienced in the races I paced that ultra-running was extremely social, but I think the terrible conditions made everyone keep their mouths shut so we wouldn't complain. John was a joy, telling me incredible stories about his races across the U.S. and Great Britain and his lifetime mileage. That company in combination with the rare stretch of road in tire tracks made for an enjoyable mile. I finally ate and drank Gu at mile 8, and came out of the aid station feeling incredible. I had to leave John behind but I was already celebrating finishing the race and running more ultras. Foolish thoughts for a quarter in, but still uplifting and useful. That came just in time for the horrible power line section. It was not fun to look ahead to the endlessly straight section of snowy trail, the kind where your feet slide inward at odd angles with every step and progress feels painfully slow.

This part of the race had little passing, as we all were comfortable to keep in a close line, though we never spoke. This gave me time to assess how I felt at this point: I realized my legs aching and my ankle twinging a bit as I took the time to think about it, but they didn't command my attention as they would on a normal run. This was longer, and I was asking more of myself in every way, so the small things didn't bother me. I like that a lot and it made me feel stronger. I also noticed my breathing was very even and light. This was a success, because I intended to follow Horton's advice to take the first loop easy and not let my breathing get heavy. We trudged through that section and station 3 came up surprisingly fast. The next portion was more similar to the power lines, though a little less straight and frustrating. I relished that the next checkpoint was back at the start, itching to begin the trip back. I began wondering when we would see the front runners again, and realized no matter how close I felt, I would not get to the ½ way point until I saw every VT runner. I became extra glad to see their faces. Guy was way up at the front, followed soon by some of the tri guys, Earp, Jordan Chang, and David. As he passed he said "you can do this," spurring me on for the winding section around the lake.

There were tons of frozen bridges, and I was almost pitched into the lake half a dozen times dodging the oncoming runners. I saw that Hannah had just passed Keeley, and was glad to see they were doing so well. Coming into the half-way point felt strange, and Horton had warned me it would be rough to get myself to go back into the woods. My parents were waiting there too, more reasons not to give up. I was careful not to talk to them too much, keeping my mind on eating something salty, finally drinking some caffeine, and going back in. I got back on to the trail, enjoying the news that I was on track for a 7 hour finish, my goal before the time limit got extended. I ate my snack as I headed back in, and I liked that as long as I was moving forward relentlessly, I was making progress. Previous to this race I would have rejoiced in the opportunity to stop, but the race shifted my focus from my own comfort to accomplishing my goal, and it made me feel capable. I ran through the single track in the woods, as I knew I'd want to walk through some of the slush in the power lines section. Aid station 5 took forever to appear before me, because I remembered the trail out of order and was expecting it too early. I made myself stop counting down. Then the power lines. Conditions had worsened from being trampled by all of us once and the 200 in front of me a second time, and the options were inches of freezing water or thick slushy snow. I passed many people during this section, even as I walked sections, as they suffered injuries or just needed a break from the relentless mud. With about 10 miles left, my right knee twanged

bringing me to a momentary stop. It had never bothered me before, but hurt a lot as I made small descents. I resolved to run until it hurt and then walk for a minute or two, which I repeated for the rest of the race.

Aid station 6 was just as wonderful as it was on the way in, giving me soup and something sweet to eat. A cool thing about ultra-running is how I communicated with my body- I always knew exactly what I needed to eat or drink and when to run or take it easy, which I had never experienced. I got back to the creek crossing, still a fun break from the sludge, and enjoyed the road. Soon I faced the hardest part of the day for me, however. A section I had barely noticed on the way in was now endless winding single track, downhill, filled with about two inches of freezing watery mud. My feet were soon uncomfortably numb and I just wanted to take my shoes off. The constant downhill meant the stream only increased the farther I went, and my knee began to constantly whine. Furthermore, I was alone. Even my marathon I had run with my dad, so this was my first solo long distance experience. Other than the one mile with John Price I had spoken to no one and this part of the race was not only silent, but empty. I was the only person I could see. It seems ridiculous with less than 7 miles left, but that's when Horton's words came in full force. He told me things never always got worse- the mud would go away eventually, even if just for that last half mile of road. The pain in my knee would pass when I got to the finish line. I was glad Horton told us he sometimes wished he would get cut off, as I found myself faintly wishing the same earlier in the race. I was glad to find, however, that if I couldn't run I'd walk, and I'd keep walking until I was told I was too slow to continue- no matter what, I would not choose to stop the race. I also used the time to thank God for what I was doing, for the opportunity to try this and the strength to finish it.

I put my head down and splashed through the mud, finally- FINALLY arriving at the last aid station. 4 miles to go, I had done that a million times. This part of the course was also interesting to see with new eyes, as I saw it for the first time in full light and without companions from my team. It passed by so quickly, and I was thrilled to hear the man at the "one mile to go" point telling us the time- I had 25 minutes before 8 hours. Beating the original cutoff would be a win for me, so I picked up my run the half mile of woods ended quickly and I was so incredibly happy to see the little staircase leading to the road. I stopped my awkward stride for the first time in over 7 hours to actually run, and I loved acutally feeling fast after leaving the slop behind. Cars leaving the race honked for me, the 4-H center came into view, and I began the best feeling sprint of my life as I ran through the finish line at 7 hours, 46 minutes. My whole team had been waiting for (on) me to take the team picture, and Horton jumped in, clearly proud of the huge Hokie showing. It was one of the best moments of my life for sure, obliterating my self-imposed limitations and transforming me into someone that decides to do things and does them. An incredible day splashing around in the mud.