

## 2014 Holiday Lake 50K

“The Epic Snow Year”

Jamie Swyers

I felt good coming into Holiday Lake this year. Sure, I hadn't been logging a ton of miles, but I was running strong and the training I did was decent quality. I had went out to the course 4 times leading up to the race. Each time I ran progressively faster until two weeks out I ran my personal best loop. I was excited to see what I could do and I had a great feeling about a PR.... That was until the “great snow apocalypse” of 2014.

I may be from the north originally, but I have very minimal snow running experience. This fairly naïve mindset kept me from getting too anxious about the conditions, even after a treacherous 3 hour “run” up Sharp Top mountain Thursday afternoon. I figure the flat Holiday Lake course wouldn't be that bad and the snow would melt a good deal before the race.

I didn't get nervous until Friday night, long after everyone had eaten the pre-race dinner and listened to Dr. Horton's pre-race brief. Todd Thomas and Jeremy Ramsey came in from running a loop to check out markings and make some fresh tracks. It took them 3 hours and 45 minutes. They looked annihilated and even though they spent time fixing markings and didn't bring food or much water, these are not slow folks. These are the fast guys and they suffered on one loop. Horton gave them a “SHHHH” as they walked in (starving, exhausted and glad it was over) so they wouldn't freak everyone out. One loop... It hit me then that I was in for an adventure in the morning.

We started right on time up the paved road in the dark, ready to see what we would find on the trail. We were greeted with snow, a bit icy on top but fluffy underneath. Enough of a post-hole to make every step feel exactly (As Horton would say) 1.3675 times as hard. The first 4 miles felt good, but I could feel my muscles burning a lot more than I would normally feel this early in the race. The next four miles were still fairly fun, working hard (later to discover TOO hard) and finding mud puddles that were knee deep. I ran through the bone chilling “stream crossing” and my legs felt like they were being stabbed with the cold. Hitting the road was the best part because tire tracks had created lanes that were smooth and easy running. Running on normal ground felt so effortless after slogging through the snow for seven miles.

Jeremy and Todd told us the previous night that the powerline section was the toughest part. It was true. The snow was deep and the ground underneath is already uneven. I could feel my ankles, knees and hips start to hurt from the instability of the joints. I was also using stabilizing muscle I don't typically use running trying to stay balanced, upright and even.

I got a chance to meet and run with Holly Bugin around the lake at the end of the first loop. She was the first seed woman and she told me it was silly Horton seeded her so high since she just had a baby (she went on to win... completely amazing!!!). We didn't see the first few men until I was 1.5 miles away from the turn around point, which is much later than I expected. I waited to see women and I didn't as those in front of me were going by the courts when I hit the halfway. Horton told me I was 2 minutes off the first woman but I needed to fill my pack and a few women came in right after me. From what I could tell, there was a large group of us all very tight.

I had fun running back around the lake, cheering on other runners and looking forward to what I thought would be a much easier loop, with a nice easy path to run on. But as the race went on I found this wasn't the case.

Hitting mile 20 I felt like I should have been done but I had 12.5 more miles to go. Sophie Speidel caught me and I chatted a bit, trying to take my mind off the fact that my legs may or may not have been falling off. I told her that this was a "Sophie-toughness" race because I always see her running consistently strong start to finish. I couldn't hang long because we hit the powerline section again, and it was harder for me than the first time. I think 2 more women passed me and I was frustrated as my right ankle was experiencing stabbing pain from turning in to the nice little cambered mud trench that had developed. There was no flat ground. Every step torqued my joints. I put my head down and kept moving, telling myself everyone else was suffering through the very same thing.

Not too long after I had a chance to run with Alexis Thomas when she caught me. We had fun chatting and I really did feel better running with her for a bit. We were light hearted about the horrible conditions and joked about not even caring about the silly backpack (top 10 women's award). Alexis ran through the aid station and I stopped to eat a few pretzels and walk for a little. There were 6 women that came in together and 2 that had just went through. It was still pretty close at that point, but the wheels were falling off for me. I can always tell when that happens because I just don't care.

After I crossed the stream a mile later I didn't start running again. I was bonking, and hard. I thought back to what I had eaten. I was eating as normal for a race, a gel every 50 minutes and sometimes a pretzel here and there, but it was not enough today. Not enough with the added intensity of the snow and mud. I had to get out of it so I took everything out of my pack and ate it walking. One thing at a time... one gel, another gel, a bag of chomps, and the last gel. I kept walking. Everything hurt. But about 10 minutes later the calorie-sugar magic kicked in and I could run again. I wasn't fast and I wasn't strong, but I wasn't walking.

I felt like it took years to get to the last aid station. My body hurt and I mentally had had enough of the snow and slosh and trying to stay balanced while my knees and ankles kept slipping in. When I finally reached the aid station I was practically in tears and asked Sam Dangc for some of the sugar free gummy bears (read: severe laxative) he had promised so I could DNF. I was kidding, but I also wanted it to be over so badly. Todd Thomas yelled at me to leave immediately because I was 9<sup>th</sup> women and I needed to run it in. I didn't even get anything to eat besides a couple pretzels, but I left a bit energized from that crew. I can't thank Sam, Todd, Frank and Blake enough for their support. I truly was at my lowest point and they pulled me out of it.

For the first time in all the 50K trail races I have done, I put in my head phones and sought some music motivation. Fun final miles of a race activity: listen for motivational statements in unlikely songs. "Get Lucky" came on and I actually listened to the bridge: "We've come too far.... To give up... who we are". Somehow I did this for every song and it was pretty fun. I started smiling again. I ended up passing a few people in the last four miles, which was fairly shocking.

And before I knew it, I was running down the road to the finish and saw 6:18:12 on the clock. Horton yelled "8<sup>th</sup> woman!!" gave me a hug and told me I did well but I got smoked at the end. (Fact) I got my top 10 backpack (which I decided was worth it) and a nice white finishers shirt. While I can't say I had "fun" the whole race, I have never been more proud of a personal worst time nor have I ever made this many memories at Holiday Lake.