

Seashore Nature Trail 50K
Race Report
2009 December 19
Personal Race experience by David McCluskie

Background:

I've been interested in ultra-marathons for a few years, but they always seemed out of reach. An ultra-marathon is any running race that's longer than a marathon (which is 26.2 miles). They usually come in nice round numbers 50K (31 miles), 50 miles, 100K and 100 miles.

I stumbled across the Seashore Nature Trail 50K while browsing around and was excited to see that unlike most ultras, which tend to be in very scenic but mountainous places, this one was First Landing State Park in Virginia Beach, and was pretty flat. I asked about possible training strategies from "Toad" who runs the local interval sessions for the track club and has run many marathons and ultras himself. He said "just run it". I thought about it, did some long runs to make sure I was up to it, and signed up with no expectations other than to have fun and finish.

Short version:

I ran the 50K in 4:56:57. That's about a 9:34 min/miles average pace for the 31 miles. It was about 40 degrees, rainy and windy. The trails were very muddy and there was an ankle deep, ice-cold "river crossing". I had an absolute blast.

Long version:

The week before the race the weather report was for 4 days of sun, culminating in a sunny race day in the mid 40's. That's about ideal weather for running. Unfortunately, that changed to low 40's, 20mph sustained winds, 40mph gusts and rain with possible sleet in the evening. This is the same day that gave the DC area a foot and a half of snow.

The day before the race, the race director emailed us to say that they had considered cancelling the race due to weather, but had chosen to go on with a few modifications. No longer would we do two 15-mile loops. We would now do three 10-mile loops, and part of that loop would be on a road (the trail was underwater). There's a half-mile run to the trail at the beginning, and back again when you've completed your loops for those of you doing the math.

I woke up early, applied a half stick of Body Glide to my feet, crotch, and anything else that might chafe, ate some oatmeal and drove down to

Virginia Beach. Once there I picked up my race number and shirt. I was shivering uncontrollably. The wind was just cutting through me, even with a windbreaker on. This made me a bit anxious about what I was going to wear. I already had 3 layers: long sleeve Under-Armor, IceBreaker merino wool, and a long-sleeve fleece cycling jersey (has nice pockets in the back). On top of that I wore a light-weight shell that's waterproof and windproof. Both the jersey and shell have full zippers so I could regulate temperature as I went. I wore my favorite running socks, Balegas. I only have one pair. They're too expensive, but they're really comfortable! I wore tights and shorts over them for wind protection, plus fleece gloves and a wool hat, then a cap on top to shield my glasses from the rain.

Fortunately, once the race got going and we were in the trees, the wind was a non-issue. I warmed up quickly and we were soon on the trail. The trail was unfortunately very wet; as in standing water wet. Staying to the side to keep your feet dry lasted about 30 seconds. Any low areas, and there were a lot of them, were pure mud usually covered in an inch or two of water. This would only get worse as the day went on.

The trail goes on about 3 miles where everyone turned onto an actual road. There is an aide station at that transition with water, Gatorade, cookies, M&Ms, sandwiches, cola, etc. I thought the road would be a relief, but it just felt hard on my feet. The road goes on about 2 miles until we reach a turn around. I called out our number and they mark it down to make sure everyone does the whole loop 3 times. There was a little water on the road but it was off to the side and there was plenty of room to run dry.

I ran back down the road, through the aide station, and then 3 more miles of trail back to the start (minus the half mile of road bit) which is the other turn around. This area has more food and our drop bags. We could prepare a drop bag if we wanted. I had, safely in zip lock bags, extra socks, gloves, tights, shirt, hats, pretty much a complete change of clothes, plus food and prepared mixes of Gatorade in case the stuff on the course was too strong/weak. I never used my drop bag as it turns out. Changing into dry socks would have felt nice until I stood up and started running in the mud again.

I had picked up a running partner on the second half of the first loop, and we stuck together for the trail section of the second loop. His Garmin was clocking us at a 9:30 pace. That was faster than I thought given the conditions.

For the second loop I was less concerned about mud. I wasn't going to get any wetter (I thought). The standing water was cold, but my shoes shed it quickly and my feet were never cold more than a minute. Starting the second loop I felt pretty good. I had no pains, my breathing was very easy and though I felt a little hungry, I wasn't feeling weak. I took a peanut butter and jelly sandwich (well a 1/4 sandwich - they were cut up) and/or cookie every time I passed an aid station, and ate it plus downed a cup of their Gatorade on the run. I carried my own Gatorade as well, and sipped on that throughout, refilling each of my two bottles once.

Once again I was looking forward to the road section. The mud was getting worse and I nearly got a shoe sucked off my foot in a deep section of mud. The road was no comfort though. As I neared the turn around the small area of water completely covered the road; about 30-40 meters was underwater, ankle deep. I ran through, high stepping. It was very cold. Running out the other side my feet were completely numb. It took 5 minutes to feel them again and just as they were getting warm, it was time to run back through the water. On the plus side, my shoes weren't as muddy. I've read about some ultras in the mountains or woods that have river crossings, so this seemed rather fitting.

The run back to the start was about the same this lap. Having the little sections of road and trail helped break it up and keep the distance from feeling overwhelming. The mud kept the trail interesting (lest you fall in it!). I frequently had a huge grin on my face, splashing through the mud and running through the woods.

As I started my third lap I was still feeling pretty good. I would be running solo for the entire lap. I was too far back from the folks in front of me, and folks were equally back behind me -- out of sight. I ran smack through every last puddle with no regard to mud. I figured I wasn't going to get any more wet at this point, especially with another trip through the "river crossing".

The trail section went fine and as I approached the water-covered road area some folks said there was a trail to the right. And a good thing there was! The water was now covering close to 60-70 meters of road and was knee deep. I saw some folks wading through it. I took the trail. I managed to snag my foot on a thorny vine and fall over hard, landing on my shoulder, but was uninjured. Another runner making their way through the trail asked if I was ok and I said "Yes, and I'm glad I didn't fall in that water!" To compensate for avoiding the water, it began to rain in earnest and got quite chilly.

The turn around was uneventful and I thanked the ladies tracking numbers and told them not to take it personally, but I wouldn't be back to see them anymore today. I took the trail again on the way back to bypass the water and informed other approaching runners of the option (though it wasn't a formal one).

I hit the trail and knew I only had 3-4 miles to go. I ran strong, but was starting to feel it. My legs began to ache and I knew I was losing some speed. I probably looked like a drunk running through some of the longer muddy sections. I was staggering, sliding, and running sideways trying to keep myself upright.

I had been doing the math and figured I could break 5 hours if I was able to maintain a 10 min/mile pace for the rest of the course. This was very motivating for me. I was barely able to maintain that pace at this point and had to concentrate to keep my form. The top of my feet up by the ankle had begun to ache; a new one for me. I think it was all the mud and having to push off from a different angle than normal.

The end seemed to take forever to reach, but I finally passed the aide station and could run through onto the asphalt road; half a mile to the finish. I maintained pace and past a pair of folks. Crossing the line was a great feeling. My calf almost cramped up as I slowed to a stop and I felt instantly cold. The area was not sheltered from the wind and it cut through me. All my clothes are soaking from mud, rain and sweat at this point.

I accepted my finishers medal and removed my race number, then walked back up the course the half mile to the aide station to pick up my drop bag. It was pretty chilly walking back but I didn't feel like running. Fortunately a fellow was there with a golf cart and was shuttling supplies back and forth. I hitched a ride with him on the way back.

I shivered my way to my car, grabbed another bag I had prepared with dry clothes and high tailed it to the bathroom to change. There was a shower and I was able to wash off my shoes and remove the caked on mud that went all the way up the back of my tights. My feet were covered in silt that had made its way through the now-brown socks. Dry clothes felt great!

I'm pleased to say I had no foot issues: no lost toe nails, no bruises, no blisters, and no chafing anywhere. It was clearly worth half a stick of Body Glide!

As I type this the morning after, I'm only stiff and sore from the waist down.

I'll be hobbling around a bit today and tomorrow. Despite the wind and rain, mud and water, I had a good time. In fact, I think the race would have been rather dull and mentally challenging had it been perfect weather and a dry trail.

I'm quite pleased with my time and bit surprised that I was able to run the whole thing, only walking through the aide stations. I had planned on doing a run/walk combo (run 9 minutes, walk 1) but wanted to run the first half of loop 1 (all 5 miles) to see what the course looked like and to warm up. From there, I just never got around to walking.

Race reults are posted here:

<http://www.tidewaterstriders.com/results09/seashore50k09.txt>

There wasn't the typical age group break down. Just <40, 40-50, 50+. In the mens <40 I was 16/53, and 34/148 overall. (For the record, 248 people signed up. I'm not sure how many started.)

I'll send a link when pictures are posted. I hope they provide a good impression of the course.

- Dave McCluskie, Ultra-marathoner (Toad's addition: My emphasis. Good prose Dave. Thanks)