

## *Running on Ice*

The ultramarathon. What would make a person set their sights on this kind of punishment and make it their goal, their dream? Perhaps it's normal to wonder what's around the 26.2 mile corner once you've done a few marathons. Maybe it's the desire to do what many people can't or simply (and sensibly) don't want to. Whatever the reason, I knew that I wanted to have a go at it, and had been perusing the internet for the perfect ultramarathon. There was a 50K in Georgia, described as a great first-timer's ultra, with a course on a paved railroad bed and almost no elevation change. The website shows pictures of smiling runners in perfect conditions trotting along the course- no doubt on their way to a personal best. This is the ultra for me.

Then I receive an email from my new running friend Jodi, with a link to the "Psycho Wyco Run Toto Run Trail 50K" in Kansas City, Kansas. The course is described as "a rocky, rooty, bridle trail with significant hills." This website shows a motley, sparse group of runners at a start area that includes nothing more than a shed in a frozen field of snow. I give it a passing glance, and think, "Is she kidding?" I'm not even a trail runner, and for my first ultra and I'm going to Kansas City to run with a bunch of self-proclaimed "trail nerds"? No way. I'm heading south.

I went to bed that night with visions of entering the world of ultras in Georgia. Yet somehow the next day I woke up and emailed Jodi that I'd join her for a trip to Kansas. How did this thought transformation occur? I really don't have a clue. Didn't I read the part on the website that says, "Not a good choice for a first ultra"? Or how about the 10 hour time limit? Didn't that send up a huge red flag? Most of the other 50Ks I read about had an 8 hour cut off. Even the cold, hard fact of 15,000 feet of elevation change (7,500 feet of upgrade; 7,500 feet of downgrade) did not penetrate my delusional thinking.

There are times in everyone's life where something different is needed, something to shock the system out of the banality of everyday life and remind you that you are indeed alive and kicking. On a daily basis, this is satisfied to some extent by early morning runs in all kinds of weather, from pouring rain to sub-zero temperatures and snowstorms. About the only thing that will keep me off the roads is ice. The irony of this is almost comical, as I will soon come to find out.

Jodi and I catch our flight out of Newark, and are soon in downtown Kansas City, on our way to a running store to pick up our race packets. There we meet race director Ben Holmes, a very pleasant and low-key guy, who has run several hundred mile events. He says "You're here for the 50K" as a statement, not a question. There is a 10 mile and a 20 mile option, and I wonder what makes me look like an "ultra runner". Now Jodi I can see, she's done mega-distance events, including 50 milers and a few Ironmans for good measure. But me? I had been pretty convinced that the look on my face said something along the lines of, "What have I gotten myself into and- more importantly- how do I get myself out ASAP?"

We check out the T-shirt (very nice) but my first thought is “I wonder if I’ll ever wear it?” (No runner can wear the shirt from a DNF.) We then ask the simple but fatal question, “How’s the trail?” and Ben tells us that it’s icy. A combination of melting and freezing has caused the trail to be “like a luge”. When asked how much of the trail was like this, the matter-of-fact answer is, “Most of it.”

Jodi and I look at each other, and the fact that she looks worried has me thinking that now would be a good time to politely hand back my race bib and schedule a full day at the *Kansas City Day Spa* (which I couldn’t help but notice on the way from the airport.) Somehow, though, I find distorted confidence in the fact that we have “screwed our shoes”, a technique described on the race’s website to give traction on ice. Sheet metal screws are drilled into the soles, pointing up, and the head of the screw supposedly makes the ordinary runner as sure-footed on ice as a Himalayan mountain goat. Obviously, the length of the screw is crucial, so that one does not end up with the screw sticking into the bottom of one’s foot. Little did I know that once on the trail, I would have paid good money to have someone stick me repeatedly with a sharp object to distract me from the lunacy of what I was actually doing.

We find a nice Italian restaurant for dinner. Without hesitation I break my self imposed “no alcohol” rule that I keep leading up to marathons, and we each order a glass of merlot. I’m just getting to know Jodi, but I can now say that she’s the kind of person you’d want with you if, for example, your plane crashes as you’re flying over the Andes. We have a great meal, agree that no matter what happens the next day it’s all good, and make a pact that if either of us dies on the trail the other can use the body for food.

We awake the next morning to find the skies clear and bright. Now, I think, if they just got out there with ice picks and whacked away at that trail all night, this day could still be salvaged. It’s biting cold, 17 degrees, as we make our way to the start area. The sound of power drills is not one I am accustomed to hearing at the start of a race, but this soon becomes commonplace as runners get their shoes “screwed”. The sounds are closer to the garage area at the Daytona 500 rather than an ultra marathon.

As 8:00 draws near, the runners gather, and RD Ben stands atop a ladder to give our race day instructions, which boils down basically to “Don’t fall.” and we are set free with a simple, “Go!!” We set off across a frozen field, through a parking lot and turn into the woods. I’m prepared for the worst, and am pleasantly surprised to find the trail quite runnable, with patches of easily avoidable snow and ice. Within a mile, however, the reality with which I will become painfully familiar begins to reveal itself. The trail narrows, and steep inclines and declines become the norm. Adding to the fun are rocks, fallen trees, and ice. Lots and lots of ice. Those without the screwed shoes are slipping, and most everyone is often forced to a slow jog or walk.

At the first aid station, many runners stop to have volunteers screw their shoes. Right after the aid station is a section of the trail known as “The Wyandotte Triangle”, a series

of switchbacks zigzagging down and back up a ravine. Being in the back of the pack, I'm looking down on what appears to be an Easter egg hunt on the grounds of the Beryl, Alaska Psychiatric hospital, with runners criss-crossing back and forth through the frozen trees. It's my first chance to see Jodi since the start, and I yell out to her; however with Jazz on her iPod she doesn't hear me. I'm concerned, since at the start she found that the screw tips were coming through the soles of her running shoes. I don't see evidence of blood on the ice (yet) so I figure all is well.

The trail just seems to get worse, at times resembling a mountain river, but frozen solid. Portions are so steep that it's necessary to pull myself up by tree branches, or simply crawl on all fours. I'm reminded of the words on the back of the race T-shirt, *It's Kansas. How tough could it be?*, and the irony that I said *exactly* that last week when telling someone back home in New Jersey about the event. At the top of one particularly steep section, there is a little sign stuck in the frozen ground stating, "That razzle-frazzin' Ben Holmes", a reminder of the brains behind the race course. An attempt at humor, but I'm not laughing.

A small section of the course is on a paved park road, which of course is a steep upgrade. Trotting up this hill, I see a volunteer getting out of a truck to refill a cooler of Gatorade at an unmanned aid station. Having almost no idea how much ground I've covered, I ask him what mile this is. I'm told it is mile 5.7. I look at my watch. One hour, thirty five minutes. Now I can't do the exact math in my head, but you don't have to be Steven Hawking to know that I was going really, *really* slow. I begin to realize that I may not make the cut off for the second loop (7 hours) otherwise I will not be allowed to continue.

During this event, I went through stages, and the idea that I had flown to Kansas for a 20 mile training run on ice put me instantly into the Anger Stage. This helps carry me to the fully stocked aid station at mile 8, which was supported by wonderful volunteers and what I now refer to as "magic soup". Homemade chicken noodle. Black bean. Served from steaming cauldrons by volunteers who treated me as though I was a top contender. Two miles later I'm back at the start/finish area with my first loop in 3 hours, 15 minutes. I verify the 7 hour cut off for loop number two as I gulp down another cup of soup. As I head off for my second 10 miles, I feel energized. The sun has warmed things up to a balmy 24 degrees, and the tangible goal has done its job and given me something to focus upon.

The second loop actually seems to go by quickly, and parts of the icy trail had been exposed to the sun and softened a bit, making it possible to get better footing. I'm done with the second loop in 3 hours, 5 minutes, for a total of 6 hours 20 minutes. Knowing that I'm well under the cutoff time is a mental boost. I stop briefly to re-tie my shoes and for some much-needed fluid and calories. Staying still for even a moment in the cold, my muscles start tightening up, and the thought of going back out for another three-plus hours seems like torture. Knowing I am most likely the last runner on the trail is not helping my psyche either. Out loud, I start repeating, "Don't think, just run. Don't think, just run," over and over. People around me give me that *concerned* look.

Heading out for the third loop feels, in a word, lonely. The start/finish area is full of those who had finished either the 10 or 20 mile option, and even some who had done the entire 50K. Many were proudly displaying their medals, looking relaxed and warm, laughing as they told their war stories. Some had packed up their cars and were heading out on the park road, passing me as I made my way to the trail head. One guy stuck his hand out the window and gave me “thumbs up”. I’ve run the NY marathon with 2 million people cheering me on, but that little gesture was one I’ll never forget.

As I turned onto the trail for the third and final loop, I remembered a couple of women that I ran with earlier who said that they were going for the 50k. This made me feel a bit better, knowing that there were runners behind me. This feeling was short-lived, however, as I discovered at the aid station that they had dropped out after 20 miles. “So I’m last.” I say flatly to one of the volunteers. “Nope! You’re first for next year!” is the bright reply- a kind attempt to lift my spirits. I’m about to enter the Wyandotte Triangle for the third time. Now, as runners, we’ve all had our moments of wondering “why am I doing this?”, but running back and forth on a maze of ice by myself in the middle of the Kansas wilderness brings things to a new level. At the next aid station, feeling punchy while taking my salt pills, I say to a volunteer, “Time for my psych meds!” His Steven Wright-esque reply- “Don’t take ‘em. You’ll stop running.” A nice touch, that they get comedians to man their aid stations.

I head out for the remaining 8 miles, and notice that the sun is disappearing through the trees. It’s so quiet, only the crunching of my screwed shoes on the ice and snow. Suddenly the silence is shattered by the sound of something moving *very* fast through the woods. I’m on a section of the trail that runs high on a ridge, and looking down I see two animals careening through the trees. Are they deer? Dogs? Wild boar ready to have me as an afternoon snack? This can’t be a hallucination, I think; I’ve heard that only happens on hundred milers. Whatever they were, they don’t appear interested in me and are soon out of sight. But somehow I find a hint of turnover in my dead legs. Note to self: trying to outrun wild animals possible replacement for track workouts.

Then, it happens; a hallucination. I see a man leaning against a car up ahead where the trail crosses a road. The hallucination is putting on running shoes and smiling at me. Wouldn’t you know it? Even my hallucinations are runners. But at least it seems friendly. “I’m going to run in the last 6 miles with you”, my hallucination says. I begin to think that this may be an angel, like the one that pulled Jimmy Stewart out of the freezing water in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. “Don’t stop”, says the angel, “I’ll catch up to you as soon as I get my shoes on.” I continue on, and after 10 minutes or so I begin to think that my angel changed his mind after a few strides on this frozen excuse of a trail. Then, I hear footsteps coming up behind me, and soon I’m running side by side with Ron (my angel has a name.)

Ron tells me he was at the last aid station, and that I was indeed the last 50k runner. He took it upon himself to accompany me to the finish. Whatever the driving force behind his decision, whether it was pity, concern, or obligation- I simply don’t care at this point. Having someone with me is an instant mental boost and made the finish line seem closer.

Turns out Ron is an experienced ultra marathoner, and the remaining miles tick by as he shares some of his experiences. I tell him that this is my first event beyond 26.2, and my first trail race of any distance. Ron then tells me that doing this event today, with the terrain and the ice, is the equivalent of doing a “normal” 50 mile race. “Oh, yeah”, he says, “If you do this, you can do a 50 miler.”

After a grand total of 9 hours and 15 minutes, the finish line is in sight. Seeing those numbers on the clock gives me a sense of accomplishment quite different from any other race. As runners, we strive to see the time on the finish line clock *diminish*. However, today it’s the fact that it took me so darn *long* that causes that feeling of satisfaction. Even the fact that I am the last finisher adds to the sense of having endured and persisted beyond what I thought I could do. Pushing past limitations, discovering your true capabilities- this must be what makes people come back and do these things, even after saying with iron-clad conviction, “I’ll *never* do that again”. It’s what makes Ron’s statement to me on the trail become reality, as six months later I completed my first 50 miler, the Pacific Crest Trail Ultramarathon.

But beyond the lessons we take to the next race, ultramarathoning can provide an education in getting through the rough, icy patches of life as well. A few months after the PCT 50 miler, I found myself drawing from what I learned on the trail as I entered a different kind of endurance test. In November 2007, I was diagnosed with breast cancer for the second time in my life, and the next several months brought a steady onslaught of medical tests and surgeries. Managing through this difficult time, I found that I had (and needed) a tool box full of effective strategies: take it one step at a time; focus on the here and now; visualize success; don’t think too much; find humor wherever you can; have faith; don’t stop moving (no matter how slowly); take a deep breath.

And keep an eye out for angels on your path.