

Stories Issue

The ultra season is winding down for the Ontario crowd with the last race, Vulture Bait, on the horizon (October 14th in London). ITT and Haliburton – both technically challenging courses – have come and gone as well as our last 24 hour track race in Ottawa. I always manage to hear some great stories that seep out of these events but can never retell them in the same entertaining style as they are originally told. This issue is about your stories.

First up is Charlotte Vasarhelyi – adventure racer/100 miler/Team Canada 24 hour gal - writing about her experiences at a 24 hour trail race she did in Virginia earlier this year. For anyone that is looking to push beyond the 50 mile distance, this is a great read as it reminds us of what the body is capable of even in the face of injury. The second story is by local Torontonion and “born again” running man, Dave Johnson. It wasn’t until Dave’s retirement that he discovered he can not only run, but he can also give the younger folks a really good run for their money. Below is his account of the Comrades marathon that he ran this past summer.

One of the most interesting aspects of a running community is the characters that run these races. I think running, and especially ultra running, gives us the opportunity to grow as individuals amidst the support and camaraderie of our peers. Each of these stories is so vastly different yet both are enjoyable. For those who know either Charlotte or Dave, you can imagine how their faces and bodies animate the story as if you were hearing it first hand. I think each of us can weave a fantastic tale about our latest run or adventure. We just need the audience to make it worthwhile. On that note, think about sharing your story in the next NUTSO...ousernews@sympatico.ca!

24 Hour Adventure Trail Race

Event web site: <http://www.athletic-equation.com/24HourATR.htm>

Location: Prince William Forest, Traingle, Virginia

Race Report by Charlotte Vasarhelyi

Going into this race, I had run one previous 24 hour, which was the World 24 Hours Challenge in Taiwan earlier this year, as part of the Canadian 24 Hour Ultra Running

Team. I have completed a few 100 milers in the past two years and enjoy that distance very much. I have been ultra running and adventure racing since 2003, but been doing a combination of running, backpacking, and multi-sport racing for over a decade. I especially enjoy technical, single track trail, so when I read about a 24 hour race being held on trail in Virginia I jumped at the opportunity to try it.

The week of the race I unfortunately got a pinched nerve in my upper back due to work. I tried dealing with it before the race, and was determined to run through it as I had trained for months in preparation for this race, and was hoping to better my distance of 105 miles for the 24 hour time. However, I really wasn't sure what to expect because of this problem.

Four of us drove down to Virginia for this event: Peter Dobos, adventure racing partner and fellow Team Running Free athlete and I would be running, and Jamie Follas and Lori Trichilo came to help with driving and pacing. Lori is a massage therapist from Acton and we were hoping to utilize her in that respect as well. This was to be Pete's first 24 hour event, and second ever ultra, as I sort of talked him into trying the race.

The four of us hiked the first few miles of the course after arriving at the forest, and I quickly realised that it wouldn't be easy to break 105 miles in 24 hours on this course. I actually made the comment that any runner logging 100 miles or more on this course would probably win. Little did I know how true that comment would be.

After a hearty pre-race dinner there was a draw prize raffle. The organisers had loads of great draw prizes, and every single runner walked away with something. There was an awesome Asics technical t-shirt and swag included in the race packets as well. After the dinner and raffle, we set our alarms and bedded down in the on-site cabins (included in the race entry), hoping for some good sleep before the 0700 start.

The morning was unseasonably cold for Virginia, as the mercury hovered just above the freezing mark. However, it quickly warmed up and the afternoon was sunny and hot, with a nice breeze. The forest was beautiful and green, and much of the trail ran alongside the south branch of Quantico Creek. The terrain was rolling hills, with some steep but fairly short climbs and descents. Most of the trail was run-able, but there were some muddy and rooty/rocky technical sections to keep us on our toes. The course was an 8 mile loop with a welcome aid station at mile 4 with water, Gatorade, and some light snacks. The start/finish zone had tons of food and drink, washrooms, showers, and a large cabin with a roaring fire. Runners' distances would be recorded upon completing either the 8 mile loop, or making it to the 4 mile aid station. Any distance covered beyond these two points on a runners' last loop would not be counted.

For the first 6 loops (48 miles) I felt very good and was running strong, clocking a time of about 9.5 hours. Shortly after that time, I began feeling a sharp pain on the side of my left knee, and not having many injuries in the past I wasn't sure what it was. Lori checked things out and informed me that it was my IT band acting up, and was probably due to bad biomechanics as I was running slightly crooked due to my back problem.

Lori joined me at the 56 mile point for the next couple of loops as a pacer. At this point I was still able to do a combination of running and fast trekking, but my lap times were getting slower. Her company on the trail helped a lot and we had fun. Jamie joined me from the 72 mile mark and stayed with me for the remainder of the race. I slowed markedly after this point and the pain from my IT band was excruciating. My leg gave out at times, and I fell on numerous occasions. Jamie was great keeping my spirits up with jokes and stories despite the pain, and we had a great time on the trails. He gave me some Motrin for the pain which helped a lot, and I was able to run some once it kicked in. Coming in finishing the 10th loop (80 miles) I was becoming hypothermic as the night was cold, and I was walking a lot. There were a lot of other runners in the cabin enjoying the roaring fire, and I joined them to warm up and had some crackers to stave off the nausea that I began experiencing once I sat down. I wanted to limit my time at the station, and the race directors and other runners were very helpful and encouraging to get me moving quickly out of the aid station to start the 11th loop.

I saw Pete on the course on a few occasions in the middle of the night soaking in the freezing cold water to try and help with sore legs and cramping. He apparently spent a few minutes doing this starting on loop 5 as a strategy to help him move forward throughout the race. Near the end of the race when I was on my 12th loop and he was finishing his 10th we were both moving slowly, but he looked to be suffering badly. We successfully completed the race with the help of Jamie, Lori, and countless others on the course, with Pete logging 80 miles, and myself 92 miles. Given the circumstances I was very happy with the distance, and I ended up 2nd woman, 3rd overall in the race. I was really proud to see Pete finish 80 miles, a great accomplishment for a first time 24 hour runner. My pre-race comment on the trails ended up being correct. Only one runner logged over 100 miles, and that was the first place male, who ran 104 miles. The first place woman, and 2nd runner overall completed 96 miles.

Once I stopped running, I was happy that the pain from my IT band subsided, and because I wasn't able to run hard for the better part of half the race, my legs felt great. Pete on the other hand, was completely incapable of sitting or walking after the race, and was downing pain killers to the maximum dosage. I had to chuckle as I'd been in his shoes before and knew what he was going through.

The 24 hour adventure trail run was an amazing experience. The race directors did an awesome job putting on a great event, and it was evident from the way they interacted with the runners and their attention to detail, that they were both experienced long distance ultra runners themselves. Both Scott and Alex (race directors) were out on the course throughout the day and night making sure that the runners were okay, and that everything ran smoothly. The volunteers and runners were extremely friendly and helpful before, during and after the race. So, if you are looking for a race to mark on your calendar, and want a challenge, head to Virginia for the 24 Hour Adventure Trail run being held in April in 2007.

COMRADES
JUNE 16, 2006
Race Report by David Johnson

When the decision was made in 2005 to do Comrades 2006, it seemed a good idea. We had all winter to train and prepare. Now in Durban, South Africa on June 15, 2006, Iris Cooper has suffered through a flu-plagued spring, Jeff Cooper is just coming off medication from heart surgery in April and I am staring at a swollen left foot. Comrades is tomorrow! At least my wife Joyce, not a runner, will enjoy the day as a spectator. We add to the challenge of the day by walking one kilometre from our hotel to the City Hall start line at 5:00 am. Elites in corral A; I am in corral C; there are 6 corrals. There are about 500 international runners included in the field of 10,000 males and 2,000 females.

BOOM! The starting canon has jolted us into action and all the nearby birds as well. It is 5:30am. What pace to set for a 87.5 km run? My brother-in-law, Jan, who lives outside of Durban had taken Iris, Jeff and I on a tour of the course. We knew it climbs 900m to Pietermaritzburg. In between think one long roller coaster ride, up and down, all on paved roads. I decided to stay with corral C runners, those with a "C" on their bib, at about a 6 minute per km pace. Jeff and Iris were a bit more conservative. First goal for all of us was to finish while second goal was to come under 10 hours.

Comrades has been run every year since its inception in 1921, with the exception of the war years 1941 – 1945, to honour those who served in WW1. It is open to anyone who lives on the planet provided a not too difficult qualifying time is met. The excellent exposition contained food, gear and numerous photos and reports reflecting its storied history. For example, photos depicted race marshals blocking runners mere yards from the finish because the 12 hour Comrade time limit. What a heartbreak!

And so we are off, uphill out of Durban with thousands of people cheering us on so early in the morning. It is about 10C as the sun starts to show and, except for what feels like a thick pad under my left fore foot, everything is going well. At 16 km the spectators shout "here comes the BUS". It is the 9 hour BUS, actually the pace bunny as we know it. There are 200 runners in this BUS and I am consumed within it. The water tables every mile are great, manned by many enthusiastic volunteers with handy water bags, energade, coke, bananas and more - but when the BUS arrives it is chaotic. At some tables athletic volunteers lob water bags to runners with pinpoint accuracy. Up we go in this suburban area past thousands of cheering spectators, up 137m on 1.5 km Cowies Hill, up 3 km long Fields Hill and up 150m on 2.5 km Botha's Hill. Ouch! Not yet to half way and people are already walking these hills. The half way point is marked with a great arch, invigorating music, scenic views from the hills and the "Wall of Honour," dedicated to all the runners who have conquered the route. It also brings us to Inchanga, rising 150m over 2.5 km.

Unexpectedly I put my foot on top of an elevated road reflector but I slide off with no damage done. Jeff on the other hand has the same experience and is not as lucky - he hits the pavement. Just another trial. However, we are all buoyed by conversations with South African runners who identify us as international runners because of our blue bibs.

At one time checkpoint the announcer asks me to identify my country. When I announce “CANADA” everyone wonders how cold it must be. In fact the Canadian summer is several degrees hotter than this South African winter.

At 60 km, Cato Ridge, I meet up with my wife and some family, have photos taken and hurriedly get back in line with the BUS (i.e. the pace bunny). At 70 km the BUS walks up some hilly sections, a very brisk walk. At the 75 km water station the BUS motors on but I am still in the station dog tired, hoping the bananas and water will perk me up. Now I and other stragglers who missed the BUS, walk the big hills over the last several kilometres including the heartbreak hill “Polly Shortts”, a 133m climb over two km with nearly 8 km yet to the finish. We all wished to throttle those who said Polly Shortts was the end. Three nasty smaller hills loomed yet ahead and the temperature was now nearly about 20C in mid afternoon.

We finished! A spectacular finishing area in a stadium complete with large cheering crowds. Iris 9:53, Jeff 9:52, me 9:08. We hit both our goals. And we finished with nine times Comrades winner Bruce Fordyce who came in at 9:41. Congratulations all round from our waiting cheering section and on to the International Tent for some recuperative food including stew, cake, beer and more conversation and congratulations. The winners both Russian, Oleg Kharitonov 5:35 and Elena Nurgalieva 6:09 had not waited for us but several of the 9500 finishers were recovering with us. Apparently, Elena pocketed R1.8million (\$300,000) in cash and gold as a result of winning plus various incentives. We left only with great memories and some photos.

On our return to Durban, from a distance we saw the real struggle – 500 souls hanging on with the 12 hour BUS with less than one hour from the finish. Those dropped from this BUS would be guillotined and would not realize their dreams of finishing in 2006. Maybe next year!

It was great, we enjoyed it but it was a tough climb. However, take heart, next year is easy since the course reverses and goes down 900 m from Pietermaritzburg to Durban.

Note:

The start is apparently something not to be missed. The organizers play “Chariot’s of Fire” before the gun goes off. Iris describes it as, “such an incredible, unforgettable moment.” She also describes the goose bumps that appeared when the song played. But that’s not the only draw of Comrades. Apparently all the runners are so friendly and helpful – especially the very experienced runners with twenty or more Comrades races under their belt. These folk loved sharing their experiences and were more than willing to give some helpful advice to the newbies.