

## Bull Run Run 2016

BRR – also known as Brrrrr. What a way to end the week. I started off last Sunday shivering before the start of the Cherry Blossom, as heavy winds whipped us around. It was so bad, they didn't post mile markers or clocks along the course, for fear of them flying away and littering the otherwise spotless Potomac, or something like that. At least it's dry, I reasoned to another runner. No such luck this Saturday, as heavy rain started fifteen minutes before the race. During the course of the day, we would encounter off and on rain, sleet, fleeting flurries, a random thunderclap, and varying gusts of wind, with warming calms in between. My worst chafing came from putting my gloves on and taking them off so many times. Oh well. Nothing to it but to do it.

Bull Run Run is a fifty mile trail run in Clifton Virginia. And by trail run, I mean real trails. No offense JFK, but a dozen miles on the Appalachian Trail, followed by a marathon on the flat C&O, with the balance on roads, makes for a nice race, but I'm not sure it should count as a pure trail run. That's not to say that one is better than the other; I'm not a trail snob. I just want to give credit where it's due. VHTRC (Virginia Happy Trails Running Club) puts on a great event on some nice trails at Bull Run Run (even though I was cursing those same trails very recently).

A month ago, I ran a great 20 miles followed by a not so great last 10k in my most recent marathon. At BRR, I ran a very satisfying 44 miles followed by a not so great last 10k (+/-). If only I could find a 20 mile marathon or a 44 mile 50, I'd be set. Who needs the last 10k anyway? In college, the few times I circled the track for 25 laps were supremely disappointing as well. In those instances, my only contribution to the sport was to be the necessary filler of the final position (someone always has to finish last).

I was not last this time around, and ran a respectable 8:47:37 to finish just inside the top 10% (of the 265 finishers, I was 26<sup>th</sup>). I should have run at least 10 seconds faster, but more on that later. First, the swag! Bull Run Run hooks you up! When I showed up to pick up my bib on Friday night, they gave me my Bull Run Run socks, then offered me a folding sport chair. I thought it was a joke, but they insisted that I take the chair. Then, I was just confused – was I supposed to borrow this chair for the pre-race briefing, then bring it back? Was this to stow my bag at the start / bag drop / finish, then to return? It wasn't until I got home that I realized that this was a logoed keepsake. Very cool, VHTRC.

The pre-race briefing was brief, and relayed much of the same information previously sent in emails leading up to the event. Follow the blue ribbons. Don't litter. Wear your number on the front. I probably could have foregone the preamble, but it was nice to learn exactly where the race started (especially in daylight, since it would still be dark on race morning), figure out the bathroom situation (four stalls, I believe – not the 100s of portapots from my most recent road races), and eat a pre-race pasta meal (an extra \$10, but good food). I was also glad to have received the chair the night before, as I didn't want to have to carry it around on race morning. Ironically, in one departure from the online recommendations, one of the race officials (Tom) recommended that we bring a change of shoes because the first leg of the course was definitely going to be muddy. As it turned out, with the heavy rains, there would be no point in changing shoes, because we would be a muddy mess all day anyway. (The website basically tells you that you're going to get your feet wet on both ends of the run, so no reason to fight it). The extra shoes did come in handy afterwards though.

Saturday morning, my alarm went off at 4:30 a.m., and I stretched that to 4:45 before finally rising. At 5, I forced Sai out of bed, as she planned to drop me off. We left around 5:15, and were at the start before six. I was lucky to be early to the bathroom line, and was ready to go with plenty of time to spare before the start of the run. Other than the miserable weather forecast for the day, everything was working out fine.

I geared up with shorts, short sleeve shirt, arm sleeves (I'm trying these out for Comrades), a light jacket, cap and gloves, with a handheld water bottle and pockets laden with gels, waffles, and fruit snack packs. I also had a waist pack with more food and another water bottle that I thought I might don at the bag drop, but since it turned out to be soaking wet at that point (not to mention unfashionable), I took its contents (more gels and a power bar) and left the fanny pack behind.

I ended up ingesting one of the three waffles, one of the three gels, one of the two fruit snack packs, and none of the power bar. It was a combination of my being overpacked and the aid stations being overstocked.

The race starts promptly at 6:30 with a little loop around a big field to spread the field of runners before entering a narrower trail. Climbing a minor hill on this first loop, I thought that my legs felt way too tired for the first mile of a fifty mile run. The sensation passed as we went downhill to the creek, where we turned right and ran upstream for the next eight miles or so. I had gone out comfortably (not aggressively, believe it or not), and found myself in a congestion-free stretch, where the few people passing or being passed were never a problem to accommodate.

Listening to the conversations during these runs is way too intimidating. Although VHTRC discourages headphones, especially during the early stretch of the race when people want to pass, and even though I never wear them anyway, I can see how they might come in handy, so you wouldn't have to hear of the impressive exploits of those around you. "I've run this, this and this." "I used to have the age group record for that course." "I've done this race \_\_\_# of times." "I'm getting ready for this \_\_\_ insane race..." People should just wear their running resumes on the backs of their shirts. Having only attempted, and failed miserably in the attempt, one hundred miler, I felt like I should have worn a scarlet L on the front of my cap. But this was only a fifty miler, and my fourth 50 (not counting the one where I dropped out of a loop race after getting hopelessly lost in the dark on the first loop), so I felt like I had enough running chops to continue in their good company.

The first aid station took forever to reach at mile 7.2. There, I ate a half banana, refilled my water bottle, and continued on. There is a turnaround at 9.4 miles, so shortly after the aid station, I started to see the leaders heading back. I quickly lost count of the people in front of me, not because there were too many, but because I preferred to concentrate on not falling. We backtracked on the trail for a slightly different loop to the start, where we would have our one chance for accessing our drop bags at mile 16.6, before heading in the opposite direction. Shortly before this third aid station (the second being the first stop revisited), I caught up to a train of four guys and fell in with them for a few minutes, until impatience got the better of me and I passed them by, telling them that I'd see them again soon. Foreshadowing!

Throughout the run, I'd try to remind myself of the message imparted to me by a more seasoned runner (you know, one of those guys with the long resume on the back of his shirt) before my first 50 miler –

“If you don’t feel like you’re going too slow, then you’re probably going too fast.” I’d recall this mantra, then replace it with one of my own – “Fuck that”. Didn’t Prefontaine say something like “Go hard or go home”? Or maybe that was Peter North. Regardless, smart races are for smarter people than me. It’s no fun to feel like you’re going too slow.

After the sodden stop at 16.6 miles, I recognized the futility in the shoe change (and didn’t feel like wasting the time or effort), raided the aforementioned fanny pack, grabbed a slice of quesadilla, a cookie, and a brownie bite (breakfast of champions, right there) and took off as if I was being chased by three hundred other runners. The group of four previously passed caught up at the aid stop, and I headed out with a couple of them. Around this time, it started raining heavily again (it had stopped sometime in the first hour), and the temperature seemed to suddenly drop 10 degrees. There was also a loud clap of thunder. In other words, the weather gods were throwing everything at us at once to remind us that we had just missed our chance to drop out and find warm shelter. Since Sai was not slated to pick me until around 4:30 p.m., I had no option anyway. From here, we were heading left at the creek, outbound to the Doo Loop turnaround, before returning to home base. One of the co-conspirators told me that he was ten minutes off his pace from the year before, when he’d run 7:40. We checked out of the roughly 1/3<sup>rd</sup> station at around two hours, forty minutes, so we were theoretically on pace for 8 hours, assuming even running (which makes no sense on a varying trail course anyway, but good luck trying not to crunch numbers while running for hours on end). I ran along, munching a dry quesadilla and holding a wet cookie and a conversation with Danny, who had run the race a couple times previously. As we passed a couple of soccer fields, we laughed at the poor kids forced to play in such crappy weather.

I figured I’d follow him for as long as I could hold on. He sported a multisport resume from some crazy bike rides in addition to having run a lot faster than me over this distance. At the next aid station, Danny sprinted past. Still full from my quesadilla, cookie, brownie combo, and with a water bottle still close to full, I gave chase, despite one of the aid station attendants reminding me that I didn’t need to follow his lead. As I was steps beyond the station, her words rang true, but I am too stubborn and did not turn back. I still felt plenty fresh and had ample food supplies pocketed, so I wasn’t worried about this lapse in judgment. Still, I should have taken the hint that maybe the guy was just tired of my company.

Before the next stop, another runner from earlier passed us back. Welcome back, I greeted him. We must be destined to run together today, was Andrew’s response. Prophetic. He and I would trade positions back and forth for the next twenty miles. We were also chased by Danny and the top female, Amy, up until the infamous Doo Loop, a 5k section at the 50k mark where the trail becomes much harder to follow. Why is it infamous? Andrew and I were both new to the event, so we had no idea. Afterwards, I still don’t know. Other than a lot of twists and turns, it wasn’t any worse than other parts of the course, and was in fact a lot dryer, which was nice. However, Danny didn’t enjoy it and fell off pace, while Amy found it extremely motivating, because as soon as we neared its completion, she took off and left the rest of us in her dust (she went on to win the women’s race, nearly two hours after her husband won the men’s race).

I still felt good throughout this stretch of the run, though from time to time, my knees would ache a bit. At the forty mile aid station, I joked with the attendees that only 10 miles to go would be no problem. A couple miles later, I still felt that confident. Then, the wheels came off as I approached that

extraneous 10k to go. Andrew complimented my uphill prowess, as I was still running most of the inclines (only walking when too steep or too long), while he was cruising more smoothly on the downs. Because of these disparate styles, we continued to trade positions until a little before the last aid station, when I stepped aside to let him go on ahead. Though I didn't really "let" him go; I had no choice in the matter. From that point to the end, my legs did not want to cooperate anymore. I got 7.5 good hours out of them, so I shouldn't complain, but it's my story, so I'll cry if I want to.

At the 45 mile aid station, I requested anything that would help the next 5 miles go better. One piece of advice was to just run through it to end it quicker (easier said than done). Another offering: a condom. Apparently there was an inside joke or a side bet among the aid station crew about getting someone to take a condom (unused) from them. I told them I would not wear it, but agreed to pocket it, figuring it couldn't hurt. It was better than the alternative birth control pills they were also peddling.

Regrettably, while I was prepared for safe sex with a wood nymph (though she never appeared, and I would never do such a thing), I was woefully unprepared for the elongated stretch back to the start. How did the backtrack grow so much longer in just a few hours? Amy had long since disappeared. Andrew was by now gone. New faces I hadn't seen since this morning reappeared from behind to quickly leave me in their mud (too wet to be dusty). The same mud that I should have been accustomed to by now suddenly seemed so much more slippery, clingy, heavy, disheartening. Runner after runner cruised by me on their way to the finish, while I felt stuck in the mud. I passed the soccer fields that I swore were just steps away from the final destination, only to learn that I was still not that close to the end yet. Visual reminders from the outbound direction told me that I had been here before, but I still had no real bearings on what that meant in terms of actual distance remaining. During this stretch, Danny caught me again, as I was slowly picking my way over a rocky stretch (I am a terrible, cautious rock runner). He assured me that we were nearing the end.

Finally, I crossed a familiar field that I knew meant that I really was close, so I kicked it in (for what it's worth, a kick at that stage is hardly more than a trot at any other point) all the way to the Bull Run Run banner. There, I stopped my watch and started walking towards the post-finish area, where people were yelling at me to run through the finish. I thought I just did! For some reason, they position a welcoming banner approximately 50 yards before the finishing chute and timing mat. It's most likely to give a better photo opportunity, of people triumphantly coming home to a great accomplishment, whereas the finish line photos would often show people stopping their watches. Well, I guess I ruined that faux finish line photo by stopping my watch prematurely. I re-started my run for the last few steps, apologizing to the disappointed crowd (who couldn't have cared less) that I mistook the banner for the actual finish.

The last 12 miles took me approximately 2 hours 26 minutes (over 12 minutes per mile). The last 5 took approximately 1 hour 11 minutes (over 14 minutes per mile). Five miles should never take that long (unless it's the day after running fifty miles). In my fourth 50 miler, I ran my slowest, though all have been within a 32 minute range. The flub at the end meant that my time now rounded up to 8:48 rather than down to 8:47, but no matter. I was still elated to be done.

Afterwards, I picked up a nice long sleeve technical tee shirt (gray for team north runners, blue for team south – my loyalties still lie with the union), and chatted with some of the volunteers that helped put on

this event. One of the guys I had run with (for a short time) at Old Dominion told me that he was getting ready for Massanutten, a rocky 100 miler. More power to him. Fifty miles over a few stretches of rocks was more than enough for me. Another asked if I'd do BRR again... While I refused to commit to such a thing at that time, I'm already thinking about it. Hats off to VHTRC for a great event, even if it is six miles too long!