

Grasslands 50 mile ultra – 3/24/07 – Joe Galioto

On Saturday I ran the Grasslands 50 mile ultra in Decatur, TX. It was a last-minute decision to participate and I am glad that I did as it was a very well organized event held within the LBJ Grasslands National Park; they also had a half and full marathon as well. According to the organizers, the races were designed to introduce runners to the trails of the LBJ National Grasslands and to reflect the spirit of trail running.

The theme for the day was “challenge me” and it was served up in many flavors such as darkness, terrain, weather, course & navigation, wind, and loneliness – though not necessarily in that order and to varying degrees throughout the day.

- Darkness. The race started at 7am and it was dark – so dark, in fact, that I couldn’t see my wrist watch. Many people wore headlamps and/or carried flashlights, but there were a few other city-slickers like me that had neither. I’m not one to panic and today would be no different; I stayed at the very back of the pack and ran with a few people who had headlamps until it got bright, approximately 2 miles later.

- Terrain. They tell you to prepare for some stream crossing, mud, sand, and underbrush. Due to the dry weather, there were no streams or mud but there was sand. So much so they should rename the event to something like, “A day at the beach.” For the most part the footing was very stable; however there were quite a few extended sections where you were running in 6-inch deep sand. Then there’s the issue of cow-pies. Bev warned me about these. While I didn’t see any grazing cattle, the hundreds of cow-pies were a constant reminder that we were in nature. I managed to avoid all of these – good thing otherwise my sneakers were staying in Texas. I did see a snake in the underbrush and quite a few shotgun shells, but thankfully, none of the coyotes, bobcats, red fox or alligators that the Park’s website lists as being present – it all added to the great experience.

- Weather. The weather really affected me. At approximately 8am it was 62 degrees and 81% humidity. It was cloudy and overcast and the forecast was to remain cloudy. By the time I finished the first lap, I was very warm and removed my hat; I also left my sunglasses in my drop-bag. Naturally, midway through my second lap, the sun broke through and really took its toll on me. The sun reflecting off the sand was bothering my eyes and I could feel my face starting to sunburn, despite my using sunscreen. As the day went on, the humidity dropped to 65% but the temperature kept going up to 79 degrees. When I finished the second lap (mile 25), I felt really drained. I picked up my sunglasses again and grabbed a second water bottle, which I had all the subsequent aid stations fill with ice and water – so I could pour it over my head!

- Course & Navigation. The course, which is referred to as a cloverleaf, consisted of four separate loops, with each starting and finishing in the same location. The first and third loops were approximately 15 miles and the second and fourth loops were approximately 10 miles each. The total elevation gain/loss was 4073 feet. Navigating was a matter of following painted horseshoes nailed to trees and/or colored ribbons dangling from

branches. I had no problem with this, though I did stop to assist two marathoners who needed to decide “left or right” and also saw a few others running in the opposite direction because they missed a turn. Each loop had multiple aid stations providing the usual ultra-fare, and one offered flasks of Yaegermeister and brandy! When I saw this I thought it belonged to the cowboys who manned the station, but they said more than a few runners took swigs. Unfortunately for my psyche, those runners were ahead of me.

- Wind. The wind was two-faced. On the one hand, it was refreshing, providing some relief from the heat. On the other hand, 22mph cross and headwinds are not fun to run in – and, damn it, they never became tailwinds!

- Loneliness. Approximately 50 runners started the 50 miler and 45 finished. After I separated from my head-lamped friends, I was passed by four runners throughout the day (at miles 6 and 27 and two more at mile 33). Other than these, a few runners from the half and marathon whose path I intersected somewhere along the course, and three runners whom I passed at around mile 42, I never saw another runner on the course. I estimate that I ran approximately 45 miles completely on my own – just my MP3 and me!

So how did I do? I survived! I finished in 11:03, running the first half in 5:10 and the second in 5:53. According to my GPS, I was in motion for all but 13 minutes, using that time to work my way through aid stations and drop-bag locations. Additional positives for me included success with my all-liquid food plan, overcoming a too fast first loop in which my enthusiasm got the better of me, and toughening out the other rough sections.

Overall, I had a great time. The organizers did a great job ensuring our comfort throughout the race and afterwards with real Texas barbeque steak sandwiches. And, best of all, I wasn't sore the next day.