

Turkey Swamp 50K - 07 - My First Ultra

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I have run twelve marathons over the years (starting in 1981) so I figured it was time to try an Ultra. Of course, I succumbed to peer pressure this year when Joe G and Colin suggested we enter the JFK 50-miler in November, and my entry was cinched when Doug said he was interested. So now that we have a foursome scheduled for that race in the fall – I better get training.

Now Joe, who has run many ultras before, says “no big deal”, just train like you are running a marathon. Sounded reasonable. And Colin, well everyone knows he is famous for his weekly 25 mile schedule. That is 25 miles over several runs, not just one. BUT when you look at the Internet training sites, most of them speak of high weekly mileage and a long training run in the vicinity of 30 to 40 miles (for a 50 mile race). UGH.

So I began boosting up my weekly mileage and have been doing from 40 to 45 miles per week since May. I wanted a long run of 20 miles. But as most of you know, it has been a really hot and muggy summer so far, and when I got to 12 or 13 miles in a training run I kind of petered out. Oooooo. How will I ever be able to run 50 miles??? I figured I'd better force a long run: maybe I could try a 50K (only 31 miles) before November. Thus the concept of entering the Turkey Swamp 50K here in New Jersey. This year it was scheduled for August 12th.

The deadline for entering was August 4th, and I held my application all through the month of July saying, no, it is just too hot and muggy; I haven't been able to do enough long runs; I will faint along the course in the heat. Yes, I came up with every excuse (some of them the standard ones) as to why I shouldn't enter this race. The main problem, as I saw it, was the heat. And I really hadn't done enough long runs. But by August 4th deadline, the long term weather forecast was for rain, a dramatic drop in temperature to the 70 degree range, so I posted my entry form.

I also figured my 40 mpw base training was more than I had ever done before so it would be now or never. I wasn't sure I would have the fortitude to reach that training mileage level again so I'd better give the race a whack, now.

Joe G told me about the Turkey Swamp 50K. It is held in Freehold (close enough) and combines four races in one – a 10 miler, 20 miler, 25K and a 50K. The only problem is the temperature. And on race day, it was projected to reach the mid-80s. But Joe remembered that the course is mostly shaded, a big plus to my thinking. So I put on my positive-thinking cap and it was off to Freehold.

I got up at 4:30 (yes, am, in the morning), walked the dog, had breakfast and left my house at 6:15 am (who does this on a Sunday morning???). Had linguine the night before and even a little more that was left over the morning of the run. Of course, I took the motorcycle to Freehold, my Dad's 1971 BMW with no windshield so it was

rather cool along the road. I figured that was good, nice and cool for the run. Got to the Turkey Swamp Park in plenty of time, got my number, and started to prepare mentally (will I be able to finish?). There were about 250 people there, I would guess, for all four races. At 8:30am, starting time, there were still people registering, so the race actually began at about 8:45.

Most runners looked like your run-of-the-mill joggers. Some strange ones though. One fella ran in leather pants, leather vest and leather hat. All ages and many (maybe about a third) women. Although it was against the rules, many wore an MP3 player.

The race is run partly on a dirt road, nice and wide about 20 feet, and then it meanders through the Turkey Swamp woods. Just a trail, marked with painted arrows (red and white) with dangerous stumps/roots/outcroppings marked with white flour. It was narrow in most places, wide enough really for a single runner but also just wide enough so you could pass. I got passed quite a bit, hearing “on your left” so I would move to the right. There was a short open field section though which we ran along the edge/tree line so there was enough shade.

The plan for the 50K was to run this loop 13 times, each loop being just under 2.4 miles. Turns out, however, that each loop was 2.6 miles so you ran it only 12 times. Doesn't sound like much of a difference, but when you've completed 11 loops and they tell you only one more, it is like getting a birthday present. Mentally. The 20 mile run was 8 loops, so my three compadres from the Somerset Runners group actually ran 20.7 miles; now do you think that was fair?

So each time I ran the loop, I would say that's 4 down, 7 to go. Et cetera. It's interesting to pace yourself according to loops, rather than miles passed like I would do in a marathon. By the third loop, however, I was saying “I can't do this! (\$#%^&*)”. I should have entered the 20 miler. What am I doing? I will not be able to finish. How embarrassing.” Then of course, it got worse – I fell, tripped on a protruding tree root. Didn't get hurt and everyone around me said “Are you all right, sir?” It was the “sir” that hurt more! Nothing like getting on in years with a lot of grey hair. I fell again twice more later in the race.

It's amazing how much dirt from the trail accumulates on your running shoes. The outside of mine got caked with a fine dust, sticking because the shoes got wet from running in the grass field. Bits of wood and vegetation and small pebbles got into the shoes so I'd have to stop every so often to clean out the big chunks. I will consider a pair of gaiters for the next trail race to prevent debris from getting into the shoe.

But you know, something keeps you going. You slow down a bit but you just keep going. Mostly running, some walking. You slow down at the rest stops to have at first just a sip of water or Gatorade. Then later on you walk a bit more at the rest stops to have a cup of water, one of Gatorade, even one of de-fizzled cola.

Eventually you didn't drink the water but poured it on your head and back. That felt good.

I saw John, Frank and Simon from the Somerset Runners at the race. They were in the 20 miler. It was good to see familiar faces, and thanks to John for getting my running bag from the motorcycle and bringing it to the running trail. I should have pre-positioned it on the trail but didn't know any better (although Joe G suggested I do that) so I could get to it during the run. I ended up changing outfits (new shorts and especially fresh shoes and socks) after the 8th loop (around mile 20). Boy that felt great.

So all in all, I was very glad to have finished. My time was about what I expected, 5-1/2 hours, since I normally run a 4-1/2 hour marathon. I know, gotta work on speeding that up. I was running and walking toward the end. The heat was not a factor as most of the course was shaded and the temperature (mid-80's)/humidity were not that bad. Running a trail, with its tree roots and outcroppings, is much different from a smooth road. You have to lift your feet more. By my last fall at mile 23 (or so), I re-focused to say "my only goal is not to fall any more".

I guess from here it is on to continued training runs, probably staying at the 40-45 mpw (I don't know, maybe increasing it a bit) level, definitely more longer runs, probably some trail running, and on to the JFK 50-miler in November. Hate to admit it, but yes, a slow 50-miler in November. And maybe we'll throw in the Ramapo Madness 50K here in New Jersey in October. After all, it's the journey that counts, not the destination. And of course, stay injury free!