

Suzanne Wheeler

When I found this race through UltraSignup.com I posted in the Annapolis Striders FB group to see if anyone had run it. Tom DeKornfeld had great things to say about the race (gentle and fast course, pine needle covered trails and Spanish moss). The race did not disappoint. Especially for those runners wanting a 50K trail personal record, I highly recommend it. But PRs aside, a well-run and scenic race worth adding to your calendar.

Also worth noting, although I did not stay at the host hotel, the Virginia Beach Resort Hotel and Conference Center, my brief experience there was very good. When I pulled in for packet pick-up a hotel employee came into the outer parking lot to let me know there was ample parking in the garage and gave me simple directions to the packet pick-up; once inside, I was searching for the restroom (having just driven from Annapolis) and another hotel employee walked me directly to the nearest one.

So, my race journey...

Woefully undertrained, I decided to go ahead and take a stab at this trail ultra put on by the Tidewater Striders in Virginia Beach at First Landing State Park. Every race is an exercise in managing expectations, but particularly when one is feeling unprepared. I should have completed four-and-a-half months of intense training, often running a painful 10-miler the day after a 16, 18, or 20 mile run, with a marathon three weeks before the 50K. Training pretty much fell apart as my days these past several months were filled with boat shopping and then moving aboard. I think I managed a few 14-milers (sometimes with a 10-miler the next day), a couple of 16s, an 18, and a 20. I had a terrible cold leading up to the NCR Trail Marathon I had hoped to run, and had to pass on it. But in recent weeks I had had some very good runs, having re-found what I love and need from running: my alone time, my meditative time, a space to let my mind wander, work through problems, and try to let go my troubles.

With a cut-off time of 8.5 hours, I mostly set my goal as coming in under the deadline, but my primary goal was to finish in around 6.5 hours. (I had a great playlist lasting 7.5 hours.) The race was very well-organized, volunteers were friendly and encouraging, and the course was well-marked and quite beautiful. With a field of 300 runners, the race is the perfect size. The first few miles runners were bunched up, but by the first aid station 5 miles in, the field has spread out and I generally saw the same folks as we leap-frogged each other along the course. The course wound through woods, bogs, and wetlands, and had us running on packed dirt, leaves, pine needles, wooden footbridges, and sand. I was grateful to have worn my Dirty Girl Gaiters that kept the sand out of my shoes! The Spanish Moss hanging from the trees in various sections of the course was just gorgeous. Some sections of the trails had many tree roots to trip on, often hidden beneath the leaves covering the trail; although I had a few trips and twists, I never fell. There are only slight rolling hills, none long, so it was a great opportunity for me to be able to enjoy a trail race without angering my knees with steep hills and hiking.

As I began running, just kept going, and then reached the first aid station 5 miles in, I managed to make two important commitments that got me through the race with a time I can be pleased with and feeling that I finished strong, not beaten down. First, I decided I would not walk one inch of the race. I stopped at every aid station, used the porta-potty, stretched, ate PB&Js and potato chips, drank lots of Mountain

Dew (a/k/a ultrarunner fuel). But as soon as I left the aid station, I was back to running. I may have shuffled along slowly at times, but I never walked. Second, I decided I would not stop except at aid stations. Stopping and walking often seem like a needed and logical respite for sore legs, (and were it a very hilly course would be a necessity for me), but they allow the pain in one's legs to flow up into one's mind and undermine the necessary resolve to keep going. My Achilles tendons were burning, one knee was getting cranky, soles of my feet were begging for squishy insoles. But despite those protestations, I knew deep down, and repeatedly told myself (yes, often mumbling aloud) that "your legs know what to do, just let them go; stop thinking about it and just let them do the work." Distance running surely benefits from training and strong legs, but in the end, it is a mental sport. Until one is there, it is hard to imagine how difficult it is to control one's mind in the face of pain and exhaustion, but that is the true challenge to the sport: the ability to turn off one's mind, let it trust in the auto-pilot, and just let one's legs "go."

I finished in 6:40:27, sprinting in the last little stretch. An average pace of 12:53 per mile. And while I was, of course, sore the next couple of days, I was already going down the stairs forward (not backward) the day after the race! Undertrained, did not carb-load or hydrate as much as I should have in the days before the race, but a personal record for 50K (by 2.5 hours), and feeling good.