

## **Rocky Raccoon 50 mile Trail Race**

**Huntsville, Texas February 6, 2010**

**Race report by Beth Lamie**

### **Why would I do it?**

Late last year, one of my clients from Texas, Tina Buchan told me that she felt that her training for the San Antonio Marathon was going well, and she hoped to parlay that into training for a 50 mile trail race approximately 2 months later. She had done a 50K (31 miles) race put on by the same organization, this looked to be well organized, and she needed a challenge and so her plan began. Not sure how Mike and I entered into the plan, but I usually try to get to Texas at least once a year to see Tina and my other athletes if I can, and I've always wanted to do an ultra, and Mike was looking for something for us to do together. It came early enough in the year, etc., so we decided to give this a shot.

### **Why wouldn't I do it?**

So many reasons ... let's start with, I couldn't figure out how Mike and I would do this "together". He's a faster runner than I am and he's coming off a very good Ironman season, so is in better endurance shape. Then there's the fact that we were getting married a month before this and had a wedding to plan. Finally, there's the fact that nearly 4 years after I was hit by a car on a training ride I am just now feeling in shape enough to pony up several hundred bucks to do a few races and one of them is a "bucket list" race for me – St. Croix Half Iron. I'd like to have a race I could be happy with there, and I didn't want to blow that possibility by just randomly adding races to my schedule that have no bearing on my 'A' race.

So Mike and I came up with a plan. We'd continue to do our regular pre-season training and build our volume as reasonably as our bodies and our schedules could handle. I already have a demanding cycling schedule and was finally getting back to swimming on a somewhat regular basis. The aforementioned wedding planning also tied up a couple of our weekends (in a good way though) so we were limited to a couple of 3-5 hour hikes, weight lifting/strengthening session, a slight increase in weekly running volume, and our Sunday long run. Mike was able to get in one 18 mile run, while my long run was a couple of hours.

We began to call our race plan, "going into the unknown". We knew that we had a decent base of fitness and I had years of trail racing, marathons and triathlon training to call on for experience. I have a very good fuel plan for both of us and Mike is an animal, so we knew that one way or the other, we could cover 50 miles. We came up with a walk/run plan so that it would be a low-stress way to spend the weekend together, get away, lend moral support to Tina in her race, get in a good workout, and see how well we'd adapt to ultra running. Below is my race report.

Mike and I left for Huntsville, Texas (~65 mi. northwest of Houston) on Friday, February 5 and had a very easy flight out of Boston on Southwest. I love flying Southwest, because although they have no better record of on-time flights than any other domestic air carrier, bags fly free (!), they have the cheapest rates for taking bikes, and their service is decent, if no-frills. I also like their frequent flyer policy: after 8 round-trip flights in a 2-year period you get a free ticket to anywhere they fly in the continental US. OK – enough for my Southwest commercial ...

Tina and her training buddy, Christina Cruz, picked us up at the airport mid-day and we were off to Huntsville. We decided to forego early race packet pickup and just check into the hotel. This meant no pre-race meetings, but since they weren't required, and since we were "going into the unknown" anyway, our best bet was to reduce the chaos, get the hotel, shower, unpack, and get everything ready for the next day.

We stayed at the La Torretta Lake Resort and Spa about 20 mins from the race site. It's a brand new property with a beautiful pool, fitness center, restaurants and spa. We got a mini-suite with king-sized bed for \$116/night and we were really happy with how clean and modern everything was. We would soon find that because La Torretta caters to a mostly convention crowd, the weekends are something like The Overlook in the dead of winter ... more about that later.

Mike and I unpacked, showered, napped, and then went for dinner at one of the hotel restaurants. We had tried to be mindful about our pre-race nutrition, which is always a challenge when you are flying in the day before, so we had come prepared with bananas and trail mix and hydrated well with energy drinks and water. It was lucky we had come prepared, because the hotel, which is inaccessible to anything without a car, didn't have any vending machines, the gift shop had only a few folded t-shirts and about a dozen bottled waters, and you had to call room service for ice. Tina and Christina had come with a cooler, which I recommend for race travel anyway, whenever possible.

We got back to the room after an excellent dinner around 8:30, packed a bag for the next day, and got to bed early. Our race was starting at 7 am, but we wanted to be on the road by 5. It was so freeing not to have a bike, wetsuit and other triathlon paraphernalia to worry about, but because we would be on the trail for (we were guessing) 16 hours, we would still need layers of clothes to adapt to the weather as it changed throughout the day, and even though we had heard the aid stations were well stocked, we had our own fuel belts and drink mix, plus Advil, moleskin, eye drops, Chapstick, and Muscle rub®. This was all crammed into a little pouch. In our "special needs" bag, we had compression sleeves, shorts, extra socks and shoes.

Race morning came and we dressed: CWX compression tights, Balega socks and running shoes on the bottom and short sleeved poly-pro, long-sleeved Craft base layer, fleece, knit cap, and gloves on the top. We had our Oakley's on our head and our head lamps strapped around our necks. Breakfast was a pop-tart and half a banana plus a full bottle of water. We headed out at 5 as planned and because the coffee shop at the hotel wasn't open for a couple more hours we stopped at a convenience store for coffee.

We got to the race start by 6 am, picked up our chip and race bag (a sweatshirt, Hammergel, and advertising) and dropped our special needs bag. Mike and I planned to do the whole thing together, so we just had one bag. We drank some Gatorade while waiting for the start, filled our FuelBelt, and tried to stay warm. I went over Tina's race plan with her, we made a plan of where to meet AFTER the race, and made our way towards the back of the start line. We were checking out the garb of our fellow runners (lots of people in gaiters) and Mike said, "It seems funny that we don't know anyone here". He's right. At any triathlon we go to, even when we travel, we always see people we know. Ultra-running is a different "market".

Just as the gun went off and we shuffled off to begin the day, Mike looked towards the spectators and said, "Doesn't that look like Don Callahan?"

"Don!" We made our way over to our friend from Massachusetts. He told us he was there supporting another friend, Ted Philip, who was doing the 100. Nice to see a friendly face. Anyway, after a quick chat, we started out at a brisk walk and before we knew it, we were passing people. The 50-mile course was 3 loops of 16.67 mi each and was rolling and for the most part, fairly wide. Mike and I could fit side-by-side most of the time, and only had to go single file later in the race when there were people in both

directions on the course. Some sections were single track and covered with roots, and there were some sections that were Jeep roads – so quite wide. There were a couple of decent hills, but nothing you had to use your hands to climb. There were several bodies of water we crossed (mostly creeks and streams) and there was a sign as we entered the park that they did indeed have alligators. Sweet. Except for the puddles and muddy sections, you didn't have to wade the creeks. There were long, low wooden bridges covering all of them, so the only way you would have to worry about being alligator food was if you stepped off the bridge or wandered into the lake.

Including the race start, there were 4 aid stations and they had everything: PB&J, chips, Coke, Gatorade, water, oranges, bananas, trail mix, M&Ms, Gummy Bears, pretzels, Oreos, and Tums. They also had plenty of engineered food, for those who don't feel it's a race unless they are eating GU. My nutrition consisted of Coke, water, M&M's and grilled cheese quesadillas: flour tortillas layered with cheddar cheese and cooked on the grill. YUM! At the end of the day, when I needed more salt, I added Fritos to my M&Ms. We had decided to go with what we were craving and that's what it was for me all day. Mike tried everything, including on his estimation a full sleeve of Oreos. (He wanted someone to take a picture for Fitz!) I had a little to eat at each stop, and we filled a large water bottle with coke at each aid station and split that. We both had to pee several times on each loop, so we were well hydrated.

We saw Tina at the halfway point on the first loop and she looked good and then saw her at the race start/start of the second loop and she still looked good. Christina's knee was acting up, so she bagged the 2<sup>nd</sup> loop. We saw Ted once or twice during the second loop (looking great) and Don was always at one of the aid stations with a big welcome cheer. We had come back to transition in ~5 hours and were feeling great. So great, in fact, that we decided to "run" the second loop.

We changed into our shorts, compression sleeves, lighter hats, and stripped off a couple of layers on top. I had short sleeves so brought my gloves with me. We flipped our sunglasses down but kept our headlamps just in case. We started out on an easy run, and decided to run all the downhills and flats, and walk the uphills. Most Ultra-runners come up with a walk/run pattern. I had been training Tina with an 8/7 pattern (8 min walk/7 min run) and it was easy to remember because you'd do that 4 times an hour. On the second loop she did the uphill/downhill plan that we were doing.

This loop went by really well for us and I have to say, I was amazed at how relatively great we felt and that we weren't tired at all. However, I should mention that it wasn't without pain. Of course we hurt. Feet get very tired, quads and IT band burning, and my hamstrings were also tight. No matter what, it's still 50 miles and over 10 hours on your feet, so that's to be expected. Also, remember, my long run had been only two hours and my running volume was no more than 30 miles per week. Mike's was more like 18 miles long and 35-40/week, but not anything extreme. But I think just letting the day come to us, staying on top of our nutrition, and being willing to change the plan to something that was always manageable worked in our favor. I took an Advil every loop, and Mike only took one the whole race.

We took 30 mins off our time for the second loop and decided to stay with that plan for loop 3 so we could take advantage of the daylight. We figured we'd only have 2 more hours before the sun set, and we wanted to make the most of it, knowing that our times would drop dramatically in the dark.

We were moving pretty well and smiling coming into "t2" and we got a huge cheer from the spectators. We quickly changed back into tights, long sleeves, warmer hat and gloves and grabbed a fleece for later. We refilled water bottles, ditched the sunglasses and headed back out. Mike was letting me set the pace and we ran the downs and flats and even some of the ups to take advantage of the sun. About 2 miles from the finish we saw Tina – again looking great and happy to be about to finish. She was concerned about Christina, who had decided to do the 3<sup>rd</sup> loop with her and was 'way back', nursing the bad knee. We high-fived Tina, and pressed on, keeping a lookout for Christina. At the 2<sup>st</sup> aid station, I stopped to

go to the bathroom and Mike filled up on more food and sent Don Callahan off, as he was heading out to support Ted (you are only allowed to have support for the 100 after 60 miles). In the space of 5 mins that this all took, the sun had started to set, and it was getting dark quickly. We ran as long as we could, then flipped on our headlamps and what the .....? Is this all we have for light? A very dim beam of light lit the course about 2 feet in front of us. It was like taping a match to our foreheads. We could see people coming towards us and behind us with brilliant beams of light on their heads and in their hands. Flashlights AND headlamps. A woman with a very bright Halogen on her head came up to us and said, "Oh no! No lights?" To which we replied, "Well ... yes. These are our .....headlamps ...."

Our run pace slowed dramatically, then came to a stop after Mike caught his toe on a root and went down. I had caught my foot a few times too and almost went down, but that sudden wrenching on the back of your foot and the tensing up as you try NOT to fall wasn't good either and I was really starting to worry that one of us would get hurt.

As people came towards us and went by us, we tried very hard to stay on their heels to stay in *their* beam of light. But all we needed to do was catch a rut and we'd be off that beam looking for another. I had gotten quiet and Mike asked why. I told him I was having a conversation with myself and he asked to be let in.

I was thinking that on the one hand, we had only come down to do this to support Tina and to get in a good workout. We had planned to *walk* the whole thing so as not to jeopardize our 'A' races by doing something we weren't trained for. In the process we had learned a lot about the race and about our own general fitness level. It had been a very good day and Tina had had an amazing race (11:26 and 9<sup>th</sup> woman 40-50). But now she was back in transition and probably wanted nothing more than a shower, dinner and bed, and at this pace, it wouldn't be for another hour or more. We were also risking getting hurt – rolling an ankle, twisting a knee – certainly always a risk in a long trail race, but not a risk we wanted to take at this point in the season. *On the other hand*, I had only DNF'd from a race once before (pulmonary embolism) and just because it was hard, was that a reason to quit? This was going much better than I imagined, and if we could figure out a way to get some light we were having a very good race. Putting on that race number is a great way to derail a training season!

All of a sudden Mike stopped and I said, "What's the matter?" He was looking around and said, "We've gone off course". He noticed that there were no longer lights coming toward us from the front and back, but they were going in both directions through the woods, way off to our right. We were on some parallel trail! Decision made. We were about 2.5 miles from the turnaround of loop 3 but decided at the point it was best to find the course and head back. We had about 5 miles to backtrack which we did as quickly and carefully as possible, letting the officials know at the next aid station that we were dropping.

We made it back to the start/finish before 9pm, grabbed our bag and a cup of warm soup and headed to the car where we found Tina and Christina bundled up in sleeping bags. Mike drove back to the resort and although we were not that far, the drive seemed forever. By the time we got out of the car, our muscles had stiffened and we felt like we had just PR'd Boston Marathon. We all said a quick goodnight, showered, downed a full bottle of water and some fish oil caps and went to sleep.

When we woke up the next day, I felt like the Tin Man after a rainstorm. I really wanted a swim, but the only pool was outdoors (25 yd pool, though) and it was only in the low 60's out. No one else was braving it. We walked around the resort, and bumped into no one. We checked out all the empty conference rooms and restaurants and went back to the place we'd had dinner the night before and had brunch. We checked out the very large fitness room (empty except for the woman folding towels), and the pub, which had Mardi Gras decorations and TVs on, but no one in the place. We walked back to the main building and checked out the (empty) piano bar and then went looking for the coffee shop.

Which was closed. Again into the “gift shop” and bought two bottles of water and went back to the room, showered, read, napped, showered again and then met up with the girls to order a pizza from room service(delicious) and watch the Super Bowl.

Our flight was supposed to leave at 11:30 the next day and I’ll spare you the details about the 6+ hour series of delays that had us getting back to Boston at midnight instead of 6pm as planned. That’s not really a new story in traveling these days.

I am so happy we did this race and I would recommend it to anyone who loves trail running, or is ready for a new challenge after trying a marathon, or who just wants a new experience really. Mike and I are ready to do it again, and are already looking for another ultra. Even though the trails will make it slower and somewhat more challenging, I’d much rather hit the dirt than the pavement. [Tejas Trails](#) has several ultras – all of them on trails and all well run.

One final note: I read the entire book “Born To Run” by Christopher McDougall on this trip. As many of you know, I’ve been following his stories on the Tarahumara Indians for several years now and time will tell whether his insights on overbuilt running shoes vs. barefoot or light shoes for running, short stride vs. long stride, and chia seeds with lime will make it to the mainstream. It is a very well-written book, and by coincidence, a female runner who is featured in the book has the record for the 100 mi. at Rocky Raccoon. I recommend this book to anyone who is serious about distance running.

Thanks for reading this report! I know it’s long, but so was the race! Happy trails.....