

Run and Howl

Wildlife watched from the woods as Full Moon 50K racers had a grueling night race and party

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PERRYVILLE - By 6 p.m., it's misting and near 90 degrees at Camp Ouachita, a Girl Scout retreat 45 miles west of Little Rock. SUVs, hybrids and sporty hatchbacks line the shoulder of the road a quarter of a mile back. Doors swing open and people step out, dressed in shorts and sneakers. They join the other ultramarathon pilgrims walking along Arkansas 324. Some of them greet each other with shoulder-claps and hugs.

Welcome to Full Moon 50K. If you're here, you've probably completed a marathon - or a dozen. You may have even tackled the Arkansas Traveler (100 miles and 18 to 30 grueling hours of trail). But according to race director Susy Phillips, many people choose Full Moon for their first ultra. So at 31 miles, these people will be running farther than they ever have. In the dark. In the woods. On a rocky trail with snakes, bears and what's that? Thunder?

The pilgrims are greeted with music - "Push it! Push it real good," Salt-N-Pepa urge. Nine runners - the early starts - turn directly onto the highway. In about a mile, they'll enter the woods and traverse a gravel trail the width of a single car. For another three miles there will be a sharp incline. Then they'll come to orange water coolers on wooden pallets. The road will level, they'll run four more miles, and they'll hit the first of two staffed aid stations. They'll give their bib numbers to a volunteer from the ham radio safety team, and the 25K folks will head back. But those people who just dipped out of sight, they're in it for the long haul.

PRE-RACE PREENING

In the camp yard, tension cuts humidity. There are about 200 people. Some sit in collapsible chairs, helping themselves to Gatorade from coolers. Mostly, they mill about nervously. Hayden Hess, 25, an artist from Rogers, bounces on his toes. "I've been dancing and sporadically singing stupid songs all day. I'm just ready to do it, see what my training is going to get me," he says.

He skipped the marathon step (what director Phillips calls "the gateway drug"), going directly from a 25K to this 50K. "I thought the 15K was going to be a challenge, and I got through with that ... I thought the 25K was going to be a challenge, and I got done with that and had a little more left in me," he says.

A year ago, when he first began taking his dog on walks, he estimates that he was eating about 5,000 calories a day in junk food. "I got tired of my walks being long, so I started running to make it shorter," he says. Then he changed his diet to vegetables and raw foods and slowly increased his mileage to 9 a day. He feels amazing now.

But it's the camaraderie among trail runners that truly attracts Hess to ultras. In the lodge, a huge room where runners wait for waivers and safety pins, there are probably 200 more people. They crowd the restroom sinks, filling plastic pouches that will zip into "camel packs" worn on their backs, with flexible tubes for sipping.

Olivia Jared, 14, is the youngest participant. She'll run/walk the 25K. (Betty Williams, the oldest, is 76.) Olivia is mostly nervous about spiders. "Because there's tarantulas and stuff out there," she says, shuddering.

It's nearing 7 p.m. Everyone gathers in front of a black and green inflatable arch. "The water is for drinking only. There's a lot of water out there, but not if you're showering in it," Phillips shouts through a megaphone. "If you forget to do everything else, please give the radio people your number ... and wish my mom a happy birthday! Every one

of you will see her at the 25K aid station. Sing to her. Do a dance. She's an only child! She loves that crap!"

Phillips, 34, would make a fantastic coach. She bounces rather than walks, spurts sarcasm and encouragement in the same breath, and emphasizes everything with sweeping gestures. "Remember, this is a birthday party!" she exclaims.

Full Moon was started as a 60K fun run by Charley Peyton in 1992. But the terrain is tough, and the race proved practically impossible to finish. So in 1994, when his wife Lou turned 50, Peyton changed Full Moon to a 50K and declared it a birthday party. In the following years - back when there were 80 runners instead of 300 - he served cake at the finish.

AND THEY'RE OFF

At 7 p.m. the Full Mooners are off, the first few rows sprinting up the drive, the mid-rows jogging easily, and the last, strolling. The weather holds, the group clears the first hill, and in the yard, a dozen people call for Phillips. "Susy, the kids want to go swimming. Where can I get a drink? Where are we going with these chairs?" they chime.

"We'll start serving food at 10," Phillips tells a sight-impaired volunteer, one of 11 people from World Services for the Blind. They came to help with registration and set up the post-run chili dog banquet. (The race raised more than \$5,000 for the educational nonprofit where Phillips works as a volunteer coordinator.)

At the moment, Phillips needs to figure out who registered but didn't start, so that in the wee hours of morning, she'll know if people who haven't crossed the finish line are home in their beds or lost in the woods.

On the trail, the runners spread out. For some, there's nothing but the beam of a single headlamp and the looming shapes of trees. You place one foot in front of the other and think about avoiding ruts and whether that strange lump on the trail is a rock or a coiled copperhead.

At first you hear distinct sounds - crickets, frogs and whippoorwills - until everything blends into a monotonous roar. If you happen to turn your head, directing your beam at the woods, glittering eyes return the light. Only white flour marks the trail, sprinkled in the shape of arrows at forks. There are sporadic cars. Their headlights are blinding, and they hog the space, so that you nearly stumble into pits lining the trail. Then there is a truck bearing two volunteers and lots of glow sticks. Every eighth of a mile, they tie a glow stick to a branch.

This happens now because, when Phillips tried to do it earlier, she drove her Subaru station wagon into a rut and punctured a tire. Chris Woodward, a C-130 pilot and hapless volunteer, put a "doughnut" on the Subaru and is now driving the truck, which belongs to another volunteer.

Around 10 p.m., he shifts the truck into neutral rather than park and hops out to tie a glow stick. The truck keeps rolling forward until its tire lodges in a ditch. Then the truck won't roll at all, not even with plenty of gas. Communication is spotty on the trail, so about 8 miles in, at the 25K turnaround station, volunteers will learn of this from runners.

GREETINGS FROM THE TURNAROUND

"Did you see the truck in the ditch?" runners ask, as they shovel cookies, chips, peanut butter sandwiches and sliced fruit into their mouths, stash power gels, shoot Mountain Dew like liquor and fill their packs with ice. The station - ablaze with propane lanterns and a Golden Corral-worthy buffet - is a welcome distraction from coiled copperheads.

Jayne Sturgeon, Phillips' wife and captain of the first aid station, checks her phone. There is no missed call or text explaining the marooned truck. The radio volunteers operate from a pickup with a miniature Eiffel Tower in its bed. But even they can't figure out the ditch thing, although they do announce that a runner is down with cramps, waiting on a sag-wagon lift to the lodge. (The sag-wagon is actually a sedan. It rescues injured runners and 50K-ers who haven't made the second aid station by midnight.)

Some stories from previous races become legend. One drunken driver crashed into a tree just off-trail. According to a volunteer, that driver is actually running in this year's race. Another time, an amorous couple were startled by headlamps as runners peered into their car window. And one year, two runners missed a turn and ran miles in the wrong direction. Phillips was still searching hours after the race ended. The next year, she instated the glow-stick policy. Now there will be the truck in the ditch.

Phillips' mother, Elaine Gimblet, 66, has co-manned the station with Sturgeon since 2008, when Phillips took over as race director. Gimblet's hair is teased and her makeup is prom queen perfect, despite the fact that she's wearing neon green running shorts and a hot-pink tank that reads "Marathon Madness." She chugs what looks like a tallboy but is actually canned coffee, cheers for every approaching runner and accepts sweaty birthday hugs from those who remember.

After a slew of 25Kers, things slow at the aid station. Occasional flashes light up the trees, prompting someone to ask, "Is there a storm plan?" The storm plan is to hold runners at aid stations and shuttle them down the trail in the sag-wagon. There are 337 runners. This is a daunting prospect.

Sturgeon gets a terse text: "Stuck truck is saved!" She later learns that a park ranger and volunteers managed to hook the truck to a jeep and tow it. Caleb Ault, the first 50K runner on the return leg, shows up at 11:10. Gimblet scoops ice, shoves a cup in his hand, and he's gone.

Twenty-minutes later, other 50K-ers trickle in. They've run 23 miles, and they're in bad shape. Some of them can barely stumble, much less run. They double over as volunteers fill their water-bottles, moaning about blisters and gut-aches. Their faces are ringed with salt. You wonder why they do it. They wonder why they do it.

Gimblet instinctively knows what each runner needs - if the runner just wants to be on the way, if the runner could use a few moments of levity, a joke and conversation, or if rock salt or pickle juice will best cure a stomach problem. That's because she has 30 marathons and ten 50Ks under her belt, and she's training for her first 50-miler. "When you're young, you feel like you have to run faster. But then you're old and you can't run faster, so you feel like you have to run longer," she says, punctuating this with a raspy belly laugh. (For Gimblet, all laughs are belly laughs.)

HOME COURT

At the lodge, people are coming back through that inflatable arch. It's about 2 a.m., and Phillips ignores the blood smeared across her knee, from where she tackle-hugged a returning runner and they both tumbled.

A meaty odor permeates, as runners stretch and clink beer bottles to Pink's "Raise Your Glass," served hot and loud over the P.A., and one unfortunate runner digs through the chili-dog trash for his keys.

Someone mentions Phillips' knee and she says, "There's this one man, Greg Bourns, and the first year he did this, he fell in a ditch. Really jacked up his face and leg."

Just then, a man approaches, fresh scabs forming on his face, elbows and knees. Phillips takes him in, stunned. "Greg! You did it again?"

"Same place," he says with resignation.

At 3:25 a.m., Phillips receives an email from a runner on course, 2.5 miles from the finish. The woman is tired and asks for the sag-wagon. Phillips decides this runner will regret the decision later and ignores the email. Instead, she checks a list and announces that only three people are "unaccounted for," meaning they didn't check in with radio. But Jesse Garrett is making her anxious.

Garrett, 29, has completed other ultras, but in three attempts, he has never finished Full Moon before the 8-hour clock ran out. Everyone is sure that this is his year. When he finishes, Sturgeon and Phillips plan to present Garrett with a special plaque they made. It has a tile moon and spells out, "Jesse is awesome." Kristen Garrett has a one-horned plush toy ready, since her husband calls this race his unicorn, the one he can never catch. "He's the guy that there's going to be eight people crying at the finish," Phillips said earlier.

Now she says, "Oh my God, oh my God, we have seven freaking minutes. Come on, Jesse." At 7 hours, 54 minutes and 19 seconds, he finally shows, lifting his arms to brush the finish tarp with his fingertips, as excited bodies swarm upon him.

Five minutes and 41 seconds later, at exactly 4 a.m., four people tackle the inflatable arch. It topples with a resounding smack. Happy finish, Jesse Garrett, and happy 21st birthday, Full Moon. Happy coming-of-age.