

Ohlone 50K First-Timer Report
by Sarah Lavender Smith
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I decided to write a report on last Sunday's Ohlone Wilderness 50K Trail Run because I want to document the hardest thing I've ever done. It was much harder than the one other 50K I ran before, and in many respects harder than both experiences with labor and delivery. I don't want to forget the details, yet I quickly began to feel them slipping away, because as with childbirth, once the baby is out and you're celebrating, the feelings of desperation disappear, the drawn-out hours and climbs compress into a more abstract notion of "a long time" and some "killer hills," and the whole thing seems deceptively more manageable in hindsight than it felt at the time. This is both encouraging and delusional—encouraging insofar as I and the other runners who celebrated at the post-race barbecue proved our resiliency; and delusional in that it makes us think that maybe it wasn't so bad (even as a LifeFlight copter buzzed overhead to pick up two runners, one of whom remained in the ICU two days later). Hence we start making plans for next year and strategizing to shave off minutes here and there. Note to self: If I find myself contemplating going out on that course again, don't downplay or romanticize the challenge.

It wasn't only the course and heat that made the day difficult for me; I also was confronting the reality that I'm still new to this distance. For the many veteran ultrarunners out there who run much longer distances, six or seven hours on their feet is not that big of a deal, but to me, it's huge. Three weeks earlier, I ran the Big Sur Marathon in 3:21, and as I was struggling there around the 3-hour mark, I imagined having to double the time on my feet for the upcoming Ohlone 50K. The thought was ominous, given my fatigue and self-doubt while pushing the final 5K of Big Sur. But then I considered those who quadruple six hours to complete 100-milers, and that kept my self-pity in check. For additional perspective, consider that Big Sur is considered a "hard" and "hilly" 26.2 miles with "slow times." Ohlone, which has an elevation gain of 7800' and total descent of 7440', takes those terms to an entirely different level. For example, if I were to maintain my average Big Sur pace of 7:41 per mile at Ohlone, then I'd finish Ohlone's 31 miles around 4 hours flat. But that extrapolation is irrelevant as well as impossible because the two courses are as different as, say, renting a four-wheeled bicycle surrey to pedal your family down a paved beach path in Santa Barbara versus riding a mountain bike over Imogene Pass from Ouray to Telluride. The top male runners in the Ohlone 50K normally finish just under 5 hours, and the top females around 5:20 – 5:30. To break 6 hours is a big deal. The one other 50K I've done, I ran in 4:55, so I hoped to finish Ohlone in 6, or at least 6:30. But that was before the heat wave hit earlier in the week.

Ohlone starts in Fremont and runs through the Sunol Wilderness to Lake Del Valle in South Livermore. Days before the race, the Bay Area experienced temperatures in the mid 90s in SF and Oakland, and 100 in Livermore. It was supposed to cool off, relatively speaking, by race day, which likely meant high 80s bayside in Fremont, mid to high 90s in Livermore. During last week's heat wave, I went on two midday training runs to acclimate. They were a grim reality check, because I felt extremely wiped out after those 4- and 8-mile runs in the 90-something-degree heat even though I ran much slower than

normal. But those hot runs were probably the smartest thing I did to prepare for the race, because they succeeded in shifting my mindset. Afterward, I told myself: I cannot think of Ohlone as “a race,” I must think of it as a day-long expedition to endure; I will not view it as “a run” but rather as “a fast-paced hike with runnable spots”; and, most importantly, I will not be out there to compete, only to finish. Forget about a time of 6 hours or 6:30 or whatever—to finish at any time is the point.

We started in the foothills of Fremont off 680, not far from Mission San Jose and my old office. I went there with Adam and Jennifer Ray (Morgan and the kids would meet us at the finish). The start was uneventful—just a lot of people slathering on sunscreen and gulping water in preparation. The course is limited to about 150 runners so the crowd wasn’t too big. We started at 8 a.m. and climbed immediately and drastically to the 2500’ summit of Mission Peak. I had a plan from the beginning, which I stuck to, of taking a packet of GU every half hour, an electrolyte tablet and bites of solid food every hour, as much water from my hydration pack as I could drink, and 2 to 3 cups of sports drink at each aid station.

In the early miles, the course deviates from the wide and groomed fire road that’s the Ohlone Wilderness Trail onto a rutted single-track through cow pastures, down and away from the peak, and then back up again. (At several points, the race course detours from the actual Ohlone Trail to add enough distance to make it a 50K and to access water.) It’s about 4.5 miles up to the summit, and then the course drops all the way back down to Sunol (mile 9). I felt strong but ran conservatively all the way to the peak, walking many uphill stretches that were too steep to run and pausing only briefly to take in the panoramic view of the bay. I could enjoy the view another time; at the summit, I needed to pay attention to the rocky portion that posed countless tripping hazards! Then I picked up speed and felt like I was flying down the backside. This is the most enjoyable portion of the whole race—“enjoy it while you can,” I told myself—and I ran quite fast into the Sunol aid station, feeling warm and winded but more energized than tired.

At this point it’s wise to try to mentally trick yourself into wiping the slate clean, pretending you didn’t just run over Mission Peak, because Sunol marks the start of a grueling 10-mile climb to the 3500’ summit of Rose Peak. I turned on my iPod in “shuffle” mode, thankful that the random assortment of songs all seemed relevant and inspiring. Mostly I was grateful I had run this 10-mile stretch on a training run 6 weeks prior. Here, the Ohlone Trail cuts through one of the most remote, pristine areas in the greater East Bay, a swath of grassy hillsides and hidden canyons dotted with oak trees—meaning that it’s quite exposed, with virtually no shade. Away from the bay and in the valley, the late-morning heat turned on full blast and reminded me of driving from Barstow to Needles in August without air conditioning. When I reached the aid station at mile 12.5, I knew one of the volunteers, Molly Jones, and shamelessly asked her to sponge me off and rub sunscreen on my shoulders and legs so I could focus on drinking and resting, which she kindly did and for which I was extremely grateful! I spent a minute or two there, forcing down trail mix and sports drink, and left feeling refreshed. While runners all around me were slowing noticeably and looking grim, I was feeling pretty strong, all things considered. I jogged and power-hiked up the switchbacks, passing several people, and began to feel the kind of loopy high that usually spells trouble (what goes up must come down), but I relished the intensity and beauty of the moment. At one point, feeling particularly driven and emotional (perhaps feverish?), I almost

started crying over some lyrics in the Marc Cohen song “Miles Away,” which is about how we all have to go through things with deeper meaning that we can’t fully appreciate in the moment but will later on. He sings, *I know there’s gonna be a lesson somewhere/I’m gonna think a lot about it later/Right now I’m miles away* I know it sounds corny, but that’s how much of the middle third of the race went.

I got another boost at the 15-mile aid station when Ann Trason¹, who was volunteering there, gave me a big dose of encouragement and congratulations for braving the course. She told me, “There’s a great hill going out of here, you’re gonna love it!” Only she would say that. It turned out to be a single-track trail that was like a dirt version of a playground slide going up four or five stories. When it widened again into a fire road, the steady switchbacks resumed, winding up toward a ridge that still wasn’t Rose Peak; the summit remained far off in the distance, another canyon away.

It was around here that I caught up to a guy in orange shorts whom I immediately recognized as Adam—but at first I couldn’t believe it was really him. Adam normally runs much faster than me, near the front and always too far ahead to be in my sight during races, but there he was, staggering and looking the worst I’ve ever seen him (which is saying a lot since I’ve known him over 20 years!). He had run a PR at a 50-mile race the previous weekend and had a taxing week of travel, and the rigors of the past week on top of the torture of today’s heat and terrain apparently conspired within him to create a system meltdown. “C’mon, Adam,” I said, waving my hand in a “follow me” gesture, trying to get him back to walking steadily by treating him normally and ignoring his distress. “No,” he said, grimacing and waving his arms to push me back, “go, go!” It was as though he had the plague and was uttering dying words, “Run away before you catch it!” I’m laughing as I type this because we laughed about it afterward, but at the time I was deeply worried about him—yet I trusted that if he really needed assistance, he would have asked for and accepted help, so I respected his desire to be left alone. (Afterward, when he looked normal again at the finish line, he joked about shattering his PW or “personal worst” for the 50K. He explained that after he saw me, he found some shade under a tree and took a short nap, woke up, and felt like he could walk and run again.)

Finally I reached the final ascent to Rose Peak (around mile 19). Here the course loops over and around the summit, so you can catch a glimpse of runners in the lead who are finishing the loop and heading back down the main trail. When I saw a top female runner, Suzie Lister, powering down the loop as I was heading up—meaning she was about 10 minutes ahead of me—I figured I must be doing pretty well and/or she was having a slower-than-usual time this year due to the heat. I had guessed (correctly, as it turns out) that she would place third while the bionic Beth Vitalis and Caren Spore—both past winners of the Ohlone 50K—dueled much farther ahead with the lead male runners. I hadn’t seen any other female runners ahead of me. The gap between Suzie and me would widen, however, in part because I made the dumbest mistake of the day right there on the summit.

Earlier, the race organizers had lectured us to get a plastic bracelet on Rose Peak. It seems that some cheaters in years past hadn’t actually gone all the way to the top, so now they give out bracelets at the summit that you have to wear or be disqualified. For

¹ Mom and Dad and anyone else who might not know: Ann Trason is a legendary runner who holds world ultrarunning records. She happens to live near our old house so I got to know her a bit in the ’90s.

whatever reason, upon hearing this, I formed a mental image of an older fellow in a folding chair who would stand up to hand out bracelets and give high-fives to runners as they crested the majestic peak. I pictured him very clearly: a man with a canvas fedora and a white mustache and beard, sort of a cross between Indiana Jones and Santa Claus if Santa trimmed his beard and dressed for hiking. I got a burst of energy for that final ascent, feeling good because the breeze and altitude temporarily tamed the heat and “Paradise City” by Guns N’ Roses came on my iPod. Running, then hiking the last rocky steep stretch, then running again, I powered over the top—I did it! Out of the corner of my eye I spied a box, which I associated with a summit marker. But where’s the man in the lawn chair handing out bracelets? He must be down in the shade of those oak trees. Down I ran to find him, all the way to the next intersection where the trail loops back. Then I began to worry—where the heck is the guy who’s gonna give me my bracelet?! I looked up behind me and saw a couple of runners coming down the hill, both of whom were fiddling with something on their wrists. Oh, shit—the box! A sickening realization hit me that there was no volunteer working up there, just a self-service box containing dozens of plastic bracelets, and everyone but this dummy knew to reach in and take one. There was only one thing to do: turn around and go back up. It wasn’t too far, maybe an eighth of a mile, but it went straight uphill and I felt like screaming “Nooo!!!” I turned and began hiking back up, blurting out to the startled runners coming down, “I forgot! I didn’t know! *I was looking for a man!*” Three-quarters of the way up I started hollering, “Hey, anybody up there, can you please get me a bracelet, somebody?” A woman runner took pity and brought me one down, and I thanked her profusely while mumbling more nonsensical explanations. Then I took off and ran as fast as I could back down the hill in the right direction, embarrassed and upset by the whole episode.

After the Rose Peak loop, the course drops sharply and follows an 11-mile-long spiking elevation profile that I’ve heard described as “brutal” and “sadistic.” I stopped listening to my iPod in order to listen to my body, quiet my mind, and try to run relaxed in spite of the stress. These miles marked uncharted territory for me because I had never set foot in this part of the wilderness between Rose Peak and Livermore, and I had never run this distance in these conditions. To get an idea of what it was like, imagine running a 20-miler up two mountains in desert-like heat and then having to plunge downhill—but wait, here comes another half-mile uphill at an 80-degree angle! You trudge up it and then have to run and stumble straight down again, on a slope so steep and slippery you’re certain you’ll fall and slide on your ass the whole way. The trail finally flattens for maybe a half-mile and you think: At last, I can run steady! But your legs won’t cooperate because they feel like they’re in waist-high mud, thanks to the lactic acid and cramps in your quads, and when they finally loosen up so you can run like a halfway normal human being, *bam!* here comes another long climb. Sometimes these uphill spikes were so steep it felt as though I’d fall backwards if I straightened up rather than leaned into the hill. So that’s how the miles between 20 – 25 went: As I hammered down the downhills, the pace on my Garmin would register sub-8 and sub-7-minute miles, but then sharp hills would come out of nowhere and I’d be reduced to baby steps at a 20- or even 24-minute-mile pace. Often my progress was so slow and at such a near-vertical angle that the pace field on my watch would blink out, indicating I had stopped moving.

I began to feel increasingly discouraged and weak, and less and less able to run on the downhill or flat portions. When I reached a pretty, shady stretch of switchbacks that

ordinarily would have been a pleasure to run, given the gentle downward slope and the blissful shade, I didn't even want to walk; I just wanted to sit. I just wanted it to be over. But my desire to get it over with by reaching the finish overruled my desire to stop, so I ran stiffly. My legs ached, my toes felt pulverized, and my throat and head felt dry and hot no matter how much water I drank. I paused longer than usual at an aid station somewhere around there (I can't recall which mile it was in) to get my bearings. I don't know if I was taking too much salt or too little, but my fingers had swelled up like sausages so much that my rings were digging into my skin and I couldn't make a fist. But the aid station volunteers, saints that they are, worked their magic and made me feel better. I left that aid station with a militaristic we've-got-a-job-to-do determination to finish as best I could. When negative emotions started to pull me down again, I reminded myself that I was relatively fortunate because my stomach wasn't acting up (unlike the guy behind me who kept dry-heaving noisily), I wasn't having any "bathroom issues," and I was still able to jog without any sharp pains. My confidence began to return, and I started to celebrate around mile 27 that I was indeed going to finish this thing—I really could do it. And then, goddamn it, another merciless hill—the last, but seemingly the longest—intervened at around mile 28.

I've heard runners use the phrase "that hill nearly killed me," and now I know what it means. That last climb took virtually everything out of me—it drained all my desire to run and my faith in myself. The course certainly had many other steeper and longer hills, but this one seemed to me like the worst because it was so unexpected and ruined the rhythm I was starting to regain in my stride. I *finally* managed to ascend that last circle of hell, but then I found myself stalled in the purgatory of a long, flat, barren stretch along a ridge top. I alternately jogged and walked that stretch of that awful fire road, feeling aimless and disoriented, having no idea where I was or when the long-anticipated final downhill stretch would begin, but reaching the point where I was on autopilot and thus beyond caring.

Two things kept me moving forward: (1.) I knew it was my only option, my only way to get out of there. To stop and rest would only prolong the trip through hell; and (2.) I had something to look forward to at the final aid station, mile 29. I knew that my friend and former boss Kitty Moore (who ran the Ohlone 50K a few years ago) would be volunteering at the very last aid station. This became a powerful motivator—I had to get to her! We had traded emails about how I would run to and through her station, barely saying hello, and then we'd get together afterward, because our expectation had been that I would be cruising down the hill and not need to stop a mere two miles from the finish. Now, I couldn't wait to stop and take my time to spill all my emotions and drink in her words of support. Finally I came upon a little hand-lettered sign saying "Next aid station a half mile ahead, and then it's all downhill!" I really felt as though my prayers were being answered (and during the past 9 miles, my internal dialogue had in fact become prayer-like). I did my best to run strong because I hadn't seen Kitty in a long time and I wanted to look good when she saw me. At last I spotted her blond hair and smile, and I immediately stopped and dropped all pretenses of looking or feeling strong. I started mumbling and blubbing about having a system shutdown and not feeling like I could go on. She sprang into action, took a bucket of water and sponge, and thoroughly doused my head and shoulders. I don't recall exactly what she said because all I could focus on was the relief from the water pouring down my neck and back, but it was something to the

effect of, “You’re the fourth woman, so you’re doing great. ... Now you’ve got only two miles left, so get going.”

That and one last packet of Gu were all I needed. I started to run as fast as my legs could turn over on the sheer downhill, leaning forward and feeling a sense of flow as my pace got back down to sub-7. It was close to 2:30 p.m. and I knew I couldn’t get to the finish in under 6:30, but 6:40 seemed possible. Adam had warned me about an annoying flat stretch in between the final downhill and the finish line, and sure enough, it was no fun having to slow and stiffen up on another flat straight-away, but I didn’t let myself walk in that final half mile. I made it to the last turn, spotted the finish area, and sprinted when I saw the numbers on the clock. I crossed in 6:38:44, 25th overall.

I lay flat on my back on the grass while Morgan and our kids and dog came up to congratulate me. My dog started licking me all over because I had turned into a giant salt cube. It was a happy but chaotic reunion, with the kids demanding that I watch them turn cartwheels and swim in the lake. I let my daughter pull me up and lead me to the shore, where I plunged in wearing my filthy running clothes. All the feelings of dismay and doubt, so powerful only a half hour earlier, were replaced by a profound sense of gratitude and satisfaction.

I can’t describe how happy I felt except to say it was in proportion to the unhappiness I felt during the low points in the last third of the race. And that’s mainly why I wrote this, as stated at the beginning—I didn’t want the details to wash away and evaporate the way the lake water rinsed away the grime and left me feeling clean and refreshed.

I also want to go on record thanking the volunteers and race organizers who met the extreme challenges of the day and made it possible for me to get through it. I absolutely could not have done it without the aid station support. I’m not sure how hot it actually got (like a fish story, I keep hearing higher numbers), but it felt like the high 90s, and some runners took longer than 10 hours to finish the course. Those volunteers and participants who were out there the entire day, and especially the runners who stopped to help rescue two others who had to be hospitalized for injury and heat stroke, are all heroes.