

100 Miles to LOViT – A Race Report

RUNNING IS NOTHING MORE THAN A SERIES OF ARGUMENTS BETWEEN THE PART OF YOUR BRAIN THAT WANTS TO STOP AND THE PART THAT WANTS TO KEEP GOING

Appropriately, the race directors wrote that quote on my race bib. My wife laughed at my quote saying, “they couldn’t have accidentally nailed your personality better!” I have to admit my wife is correct, I like to argue and I like to run. Every runner had a unique quote hand written on his or her bib. This was one of the many things that makes LOViT a truly special event. At any rate, the LOViT 100 races have become two of the premier ultramarathons in Arkansas. Hosting both a 100k and 100 mile event, the courses span nearly 50 miles of single track along the southern border of Lake Ouachita. Offering around 20,000 feet of climbing on extremely rocky terrain, it is beautiful, it is challenging, and it offers everything you could ask for in an ultra while staying below altitude.

The February 26th, 2016 LOViT 100 Miler was my first attempt at the distance. I am proud to say I completed the race in 33 hours and 8 minutes. Further, I was honored to have completed the entire distance with my friend Brandon, 58 miles with my friend Ben, and 14 miles with my friend Jake who ran as a pacer. I can honestly say it was a team effort and I could not have finished without them. There were so many times those guys kept me going. In addition to Brandon, Ben, and Jake, my wife Amanda served as our crew. She pulled me through my lowest spot of the race and kept me focused.

LOViT – The Lake Quachita Vista Trail

Starting at 5pm in a lakeside pavilion, the beauty and challenge of the trail is illustrated in the first four miles. The race director described the first section with an almost twisted sense of humor. There’s a few small but very steep climbs in the first mile, followed by a long, steep, and rocky climb to the top of Hickory Nut Mountain. It is an out and back course so the final section is brutal; the race director even gives recognition to the fastest times from Hickory Nut to the finish. At mile four you reach the top of Hickory Nut. Here, 100 mile runners are treated to a panoramic view of the lake at sunset. It is difficult not to stop for a few minutes at this point because the view is amazing. Brandon often says he had no idea there was this kind of beauty in Arkansas until he moved here. I think his reaction is even shared by native Arkansans in this spot. Unfortunately, there is little time to waste as it is best to make the next descent while there is still daylight. A side note, the 100k runners start the following morning and enjoy the same view at sunrise. Anyways, Hickory Nut Mountain is definitely a milestone of the race. It’s the first and last climbs for both distances, and the 100 mile runners cover 3 different trails to the top. So from here, the 100 mile and 100k routes diverge.

The 100 mile runners descend down a western trail to the lake and into the dark. Most runners will make it to the bottom before switching their headlamps on but only if they are descending well. To give you an idea of the type of terrain throughout LOViT, I affectionately call most of the mountainsides “Arkanscree.” The hillsides aren’t true scree fields; however, the loose jagged rocks will have any runner questioning his or her ability to run downhill. From the western base of Hickory Nut, runners travel about 13 miles through undulating lakeside trail. For runners unacquainted with Arkansas Lakes, our hills are deceptive. A good way to describe this section is with the famous William Shakespeare quote, “Though she be but little, she is fierce.” The hills are runnable because they are small, but running these hills would be one hell of a hill repeat workout. Most runners seemed to make the run/hike switch

every 40 to 50 feet, which is effective, but still tiring. To add to the difficulty, this section is cold and dark. Nevertheless, it passes quickly, and runners climb back to the Peak of Hickory Nut Mountain.

For me, the second climb up presented itself at the most inopportune moment. Nighttime fatigue was setting in, telling everything in my body to go to sleep and stop eating. Ben, Brandon, and I reached the top, a little further than 50k into the race, not wanting to admit the nighttime was making us more tired than we should have been. We had hoped we could power through the night, letting daylight come and make us feel refreshed. Although daylight eventually came and refreshed us, being less than halfway through the night, and less than halfway through the race was wearing on us mentally. I don't know if starting at night is more difficult, but we certainly wished it was daytime. Fortunately, there was some reprieve after the second climb up Hickory Nut. The course takes a third route down the mountain, which is also the 100k route. There is a lot of downhill here, but it is still challenging as a good portion of it is Arkanscree; it is important to remember how steep and rocky this section is because it is the final climb of the race at mile 95. At the bottom, the course follows a forest service road for a couple miles until the two distances deviate again. The 100 milers travel south on a spur for a couple miles, while the 100k turns North in the same spot. This spur, which is actually a different trail called Charlton, is a couple of miles out then back. The 100 milers cover this spur twice, around mile 40 and mile 85, and it is the only other deviation from the 100k course.

For me, Charlton became my nemesis. The spur travels up and over a smaller, but still large, steep, and rocky mountain. It was dark and cold, and my left calve started cramping on the climb up. I was still moving pretty good though, so I pressed on to the Charlton aid station. Volunteers had tarped off the pavilion and had outdoor heaters, creating a giant party tent. It was warm, there was music, food, snacks, drinks, alcohol, comfy chairs, and I did not want to leave. I feel I should mention that every aid station was its own highlight and the volunteers were amazing. Some of the aid stations were giant parties in the woods and some were quite retreats near a campfire. The variety of aid stations was refreshing and seemed to illustrate everything I love about trail running. At any rate, I'm not sure if my leg was truly cramping or if I had a mild injury, but the few minutes at the Charlton party was enough to stiffen my whole left leg. We headed out slowly and I instantly started shivering. The weather forecasted about 40 degrees for a low but we were getting reports it was in the mid-20s. It was colder than expected, we weren't prepared, and it was taking a toll on our energy. Leaving the warmth of the tent was brutal and I was wondering if I was even going to make the steep switchbacks out of Charlton. Luckily my leg loosened, but there was still tenderness and inflammation. The issue with my leg never went away, but I did learn how to manage it. We finished the spur and headed to Crystal Springs. I can't speak for everyone, but I think the sections after Crystal Springs make or break the runner.

We were back on LOViT and it was turning daylight but it wasn't warm yet. We got to Crystal Springs and there were several runners struggling here. One runner could not quit shivering, which led him to drop the race here. Another runner had fallen asleep in a warming tent. He might not have been fully asleep because he left Crystal Springs before us, but the aid station volunteers thought he had been asleep. On the next section we passed him napping on a trail bench. We startled him awake and he ran with us for a few miles but said he wouldn't be able to stay awake the rest of the race. We never saw him again and I heard that he eventually dropped. I'll admit, I told Ben I was going to drop at the 100k mark. I felt the exact same way as the other two runners and completely understood the desire to stop. Anyone who runs 40 or 50 plus miles is amazing and it is hard not to be satisfied with what you've

already accomplished. My leg was really bothering me and I had been crying for a few hours. Something about the cold and sleepiness was making my emotions uncontrollable. Mentally, I was lost.

After some choice words, both kind and not so kind, Ben let me know that quitting wasn't a choice for me. I suppose that was fair, I was the one who talked Ben and Brandon into a 100 miler. I was also the one who chose the particularly grueling LOViT race. Anyways, it is just under 12 miles from Crystal Springs to Brady Mountain and you have to cross Bear Mountain. There is a small aid station at the base of Bear Mountain, but it is minimally stocked as there is no road access. The volunteers actually canoed across the lake with supplies to setup the aid station – a million thanks to those two. There are a few significant creek crossings, technical rocky climbs, and what feels like a never ending stretch of rolling hills along the ridge of Bear Mountain. This section is magically and seductively cruel. On one hand, it is the prettiest section of the race; I wanted to sit up there for hours enjoying the view. It is a five mile long, panoramic view of Lake Ouachita. On the other hand, it is a long journey before you get to a fully stocked aid station again, and we were yet to find a soft, smooth section of trail. There isn't a soft, smooth section by the way. It is pretty much rocky and technical from start to finish. Regardless, the scenery seems to breathe new life. Some of the leaders were returning already, and some of the 100k runners were catching up and passing. After the longest individual section of the race, we could hear the next aid station and we started to descend down some switchbacks. A side note before continuing the story here: as we were coming down Bear Mountain, the photographer for Arkansas Outside, Joe Jacobs, was snapping photos of runners. When I saw him, he was riding a giant golden retriever, wielding his camera like Thor's Hammer. This might have been a hallucination but I cannot know that for sure.

At the bottom, we reached Brady Mountain Road aid station at mile 58. It is the first time you can pick up a pacer and the first time I had seen my wife since the previous night. I had asked her to get some sleep so she would be fresh and ready to help us – it paid off. I started to fall apart when I saw her. I still had 42 miles left and two more mountains that I hadn't even climbed yet. I had voiced my desire to quit earlier and we were hours behind our anticipated pace. Everything in me told me to quit. I buried my head into her shoulder, refusing to look her in the eyes. I wanted her to give me permission to quit so badly but something amazing happened instead. She took her sun glasses off, grabbed my face with both hands and said, "You got this!" I think this is when I finally accepted my reason for running this race. Ben had asked me earlier about my reason for running this 100 miler. I knew when he asked but I wasn't ready to share yet. In many ways I was still embarrassed so all I told Ben was that I needed to prove to myself I could finish the race. In reality, my motivation stemmed from a former boss.

At 26, I'm now 30, I left a job to go back to school. My wife and I had discussed whether I should stay or go back to school and we decided on school. When I quit, my boss became irate. I'm not sure why my boss was so angry but he started shouting that I was ruining everything, I was an idiot, and he started comparing me to other workers. Just to slight me, he compared me to another worker I disliked saying, "I don't care how much school you get, you'll never be as smart or as good of a man as he is." I didn't know I was in a competition to be honest. Furthermore, I didn't know I was leaving my job to be better than anyone else. Regardless, these insults were profound. Not because he hurt my feelings but because I realized I wanted to make myself better. After I quit I ran my first mile. I went 9/10s of a mile downhill then walked back home, too tired to keep running. Just under two years later in March of 2014 I ran my first race, the Little Rock Half Marathon. In that half-marathon, I realized I could better myself

with running and I wanted to know how far I could go. Two years after that, I entered the LOViT 100 because I finally believed in myself. I believed I was better and I believed that running would continue to make me better. So that was my reason to run 100 miles – it was a celebration. Back to Brady Mountain.

Letting go of my emotions, I sat down and started smiling. This aid station helped me rally. Volunteers were drawing temporary tattoos and shaving Mohawks on those willing. There was music and food, even a BB gun and target that people were shooting at. It was hard not to get in a good mood. For Ben, the lure of Brady Mountain fun was too much to leave behind. Ben did go on to finish the 100k but he parted from me and Brandon at this point. In many ways I feel Ben ran the race more for me and Brandon than he did for himself. That might not be entirely true but Ben kept us going for 58 miles! He never complained, he constantly encouraged us, he joked, he smiled, and he refused to let us quit. There is no doubt in my mind that he ran that distance for us, and we needed him through every step.

Brandon and I hopped back on the trail with our pacer Jake, heading toward the dam. Feeling positive and travelling mostly downhill, this section passed by quickly. We reached the dam, known as the Avery Recreation Area, and officially completed over 100k of the course. I think Avery Rec is another test of dedication for the 100 mile runners because the race awards credit for 100k by reaching this point – it is kind of tempting to sit down and trade a belt buckle for a shiny medal. There was still 35 miles left and Avery Rec is in a valley so the climb out is one of the most challenging of the race. Much like the rest of the course, the climb is scattered with Arkanscree and steep grades. After that, the daunting 12 mile Bear Mountain section awaits on the other side. At this point, every runner faces four significant climbs. Moreover, the 100 milers have to complete Charlton again, for a total of six climbs. So, leaving Avery Rec takes a strong commitment to finish.

Climbing out of Avery was tough. The Arkanscree at this point was really becoming a nuisance. At times it seems like the scree sucks the effort out from beneath your foot. Additionally, it was getting hot. We had just suffered through 25 degree temperatures in the dark, and it was now 75 degrees and sunny. I was water logged trying to make myself sweat because it was difficult to acclimate to a 50 degree temperature difference. I was sweating, but not enough to keep me from overheating. It slowed my climb but I managed to make it back to Brady. Again, the wonderful volunteers fixed me up with hotdogs and anything else I needed. Jake grabbed some cold wet rags, draping them over our heads and Amanda got us ice cold Coca-Cola. Feeling good again, Brandon and I headed up the long Bear Mountain section together. We both admitted that we were a bit lonely without Jake or Ben but for some reason it felt like Brandon and I needed to be on the trail without them. Technically we were allowed a pacer from mile 58 to the finish but something magical happened when it was just me and Brandon. I started to forget about all the pain and emotions. Pretty soon, we were holding a good consistent pace. We were starting to see the sunset along that beautiful panoramic view and we were on our way to the finish. Obviously there was a lot of race left and it wasn't getting easier, but at this point the difficulty didn't matter to me anymore. We descended Bear Mountain and headed to Crystal Springs, switching our headlamps on for the second time of the race.

Brandon and I seemed to cruise through Crystal Springs, out and back on Charlton and through the forest service road to the base of Hickory Nut. Ascending Hickory Nut for the third and final time, Brandon and I started to struggle. We had reached the 30 hour mark, were on mile 95, it was midnight,

we were cold again, and we were going up another steep Arkanscree mountainside. We slogged into the final aid station on the top of Hickory Nut and dropped into some chairs next to a warm fire. The volunteers here were having a blast and it was difficult not to smile. They were dancing under the moon with disco lights and strobes, loving every minute of life. We ate some food and started down final section that the race director described with a tone of evil delight. The route was so steep and rocky that it took all my strength not to fall over or trip on the rocks. Just when I was thinking I couldn't take much more of the downhill pounding, we popped out of the woods and were on the half mile paved section to the finish. The few remaining hills were so steep we were practically falling down. It didn't seem to matter though. In hindsight, it was as if the pavement went by in an instant. Brandon and I walked into the pavilion side by side, officially completing LOViT. This was the first time Brandon attempted a distance beyond 50 miles, and the first time I attempted a distance beyond 50k. It took everything we had, but we did it. Brandon celebrated with a beer while I strategized how my wife could fit the car in the pavilion and save us from walking the 50 feet across the parking lot. She didn't pull it in there, but that's okay, I'll count the 50 feet as bonus distance.

An overwhelming thank you to the race directors Dustin and Rachel Speer, all of the volunteers, and Mountain Harbor Resort. Thank you to my sister Heather for your unshakable belief in me. To my wonderful sister-in-law Jodie for being an excellent training partner and mental support. To my parents for all your love. Thank you to Sean and Noelle Coughlan, and all of their employees of Fleet Feet Sports in Little Rock – you've constantly encouraged me from the beginning. To my friends Tamara and Darrell, and Team Agony of DeFeet for following the race – I saw your love and support while I was running and it kept me going. To Jay Chafin with State Farm Insurance in Mountain Home, AR for supporting a gear purchase. To Josh Teal, my oldest and lifelong friend for getting me to enter my first race, and everything else you've done for me. To Ben, Brandon, and Jake – your training and friendship got me to the finish. And finally, to my wife Amanda, I love you and all that we have together.

This was a truly special event that would not have happened without every person involved.