

Run Lovit 100K

“There are so few edges, secrets, and wild places left in the world. Go in search of an adventure and if you are lucky you might find one.”

Brian B Williams

I was not expecting to love the Run Lovit 100K. I was looking at the race like a chore that had to be done if I wanted to accomplish something else. I have been stepping up the distance and difficulty of my race calendar and training for the better part of 6 months. I have been doing so with the goal of running the Georgia Death Race on March 30th 2019. Completing the Run Lovit 100K was the last big effort in the methodical training regimen that myself and several of my best friends had put together with that goal in mind. It was not something to enjoy, it was supposed to be work. It had been raining for a week on top of already saturated ground and I was not looking forward to being wet, cold, and exhausted. I just wanted to check the race off the list and move on. I even told my wife that I was not looking forward to this weekend except spending time with you.

With that in mind, Danari Fowlkes, Michael Hirons, Sean Hilsdon, and myself signed up and traveled to Mount Ida, Arkansas to run one of the best ultras in the area. We rented fancy cabins within a mile from the start line and talked all of the wives into crewing for us. They worked just as hard crewing us as we did running. My wife Lorrie is always my crew chief and likes to say “She Crews Like a Beast” and let me tell you so do April Hilsdon and Sarah Hirons. The Run Lovit 100K is a very low key, single track trail, mountain race put on by some of the most caring people you will come to meet.

The night before the start, I stared at the ceiling of the cabin unable to sleep. I love a good thunder storm but not the night before a race. The alarm went off at 4:30 a.m. and I was just thankful to have something to do besides listen to the storm. We got up, got ready, and headed to the starting line. The race started about an hour before dawn so we needed headlamps. The weather was so bad that we ended up needing light for almost an hour past normal daylight. Like so many ultras, the start was a few minutes of last minute instruction with little to no fanfare before you are sent off into the dark. The trail started about a mile from the starting line, but it was so dark that everyone immediately took a wrong turn. Normally being lost and getting extra mileage is a mental nightmare for me but I found myself not upset at all. I was just resigned to the fact the day was going to be a little longer than expected. The race director came speeding up in his pickup truck and guided all the runners back on course to the trailhead. Really, what is one extra mile in a 100K?

Sean and I have a verbal dance we do before almost any race we run together. It is like courting in a way. On a training run I will ask “Do you want to stay together during the race?” Three or four miles will go by and he will say something like, “I am sure we will run together some.” Three or four more miles will go by, then I will say “Sounds good and if the race gods pull us apart at some point we run our own races.” We both agree to that very loose binding contract and don’t speak any more about it. Over the last few

years we have run a lot of races together and it has really amazed me how much we actually do stay together. I believe it is not because we have talked about it. I think we both add value to the others race even if we can't nail down what that value is. I believe every race I have run with him has turned out better than if we had been out there alone. We spend the day passing each other over and over again, making jokes, singing stupid jingles, quoting movie lines, and grinding out distance. Run Lovit was no different.

Lovit is advertised as having 10-12K worth of vertical elevation depending on where you are researching and the trail started up as soon as we turned onto it. When we got to the top of the first major climb there was an overlook at the 5 mile mark. It was still raining, dark, and the fog was covering everything so we completely missed that view. We soon turned left and started our decent. It was a steep descent in soft pine. There is nothing in the world that I love more than running down, in the dark, on soft pine trail, deep in the woods. It was amazing. The trail had a pattern to it. It would climb, then be runnable, descend, cross a storm swollen creek, then be runnable, then repeat. The trail was also very tacky and rocky so even though the ground was wet I had soild footing almost all day.

We got to the 12 mile aid station and we missed our crew. Lorrie had convinced the entire crew to do an early morning yoga session at the cabin and lost track of time. The storm was raging but Sean and I were feeling good so we refueled and headed back out happy as a clam. The trail ran on a ridge beside the road for a quarter mile and we passed them scrambling to the aid station. We saw Lorrie slam on the brakes and throw the truck in reverse but it was too late. In an ultra it is against the rules to accept aid outside of designated aid stations. Sean mooned everyone from on top of the ridge and we laughed and moved on. We found out later that because of the storm the park was delaying people who entered that aid station right after we left. Our timing leaving the aid station was either extremely lucky or unlucky depending on your view of running in a thunderstorm. About 3 miles later we came to a low no guardrail bridge crossing a fast moving creek. The creek was flooded over the bridge and the current was really moving. We did not pause for a second. Onto the bridge and into the water we went. The current was fast enough that I was slightly worried about getting washed off the bridge and downstream. On the return trip they were shuttling people across that point because it was too risky to cross on foot. We ran in the storm and crossed many fast moving creeks until about 5 hours into the race when all of a sudden the sun came out and it started to heat up. The views on top of the mountains were spectacular. At about the turnaround we realized neither of us had hit a low spot and we were both feeling great.

When we popped out of the woods at the 31 mile turn around Lorrie and April were there to crew us. At some point during an ultra, a runners senses dull and your mental facilities fade. If you are lucky you don't notice it but I promise others will. Things that you normally would take for granted like drinking water and fueling stop being routine. A good crew will think for you and if you are smart you just do what they tell you to do, understanding that even if you don't agree they are smarter than you at that moment. They are there to keep you safe and I have seen Lorrie save many a racers day. After checking my hand swelling, my clothing, and making sure I had eaten April and Lorrie sent us back out into the woods. We would not see them again until mile 37 where John McDaniel would join us to pace us the last 25 miles to the finish.

When we ran out of the woods at the 37 mile aid station we were supposed to meet our crew again but nobody was there. Sean and I decided to eat something refuel on our own and head back out. We both were still in wonderful spirits and so the fact the crew was missing did not phase us. We were about 15 seconds from leaving and hitting the most remote and scenic 13 mile stretch when John comes sprinting up with Lorrie and April in tow. They had been sitting in the car faced away from the trail and enjoying some music when the live race tracking reported us checked in. Even in a good mental place, a friend and a happy face can go a long way in an ultra. John was chomping at the bit to see some mountain trail so we headed back out refueled and happy. The fresh face and an additional happy soul kept us moving pretty well. We had a 2 mile climb and a 4 mile ridgeline run that was just amazing. At the end of the ridgeline there was a perfect overlook view. For the first time in my race career we stopped long enough to take a selfie. From high up the 3 of us looked out on the most perfect view of Lake Ouachita you could imagine. I told Sean and John that we could not post that picture for a few weeks and if anybody asked we came back and ran the trail again a few weeks later. We all laughed and down the mountain we went.

In the middle of this remote section of 13 miles the race had a bare bones aid station. A volunteer had canoed water and a few bananas in the night before and camped. We checked in and kept moving. I do not know the people that spent the time and effort to make that station possible but maybe they will read this and realize how much every single runner appreciated them being there. We had 5 more miles before we would see friendly faces and get any real support. During those miles we started hitting lower points. We never went into what some runners call the dark place or the pain cave but the banter and joking was down to just John. It was getting late in the day when we pulled into mile 50 aid station to be greeted once again by our crew. Lorrie told me it was about to drop 20 to 25 degrees in temperature and the wind was coming back. Out of pure stubbornness and fear of taking my race pack off I told her to just put the extra clothing in my pack. She was not happy but agreed. I asked her to rearrange my pack a little to ensure the headlamp was on top because I knew I would need it in another hour. Knowing the trail ahead we set out prepared and ready to be finished.

After the last stop it was hard to get moving again. It took me almost a mile before my legs actually started working correctly. We came to the low no rail bridge and got shuttled across. John and I made motions with our arms like we were still running for our watches to pick up. Doing stupid things this far into a race can keep me my mind entertained for many miles. Once on the other side we took off running again and hit what we thought would be the last hard section. It was the soft pine trail that I mentioned before only now we were headed up. We played a game to see how dark it had to get before we went for our headlamps. Simple things can keep you focused sometimes. Once we decided to put our headlamps on we were in the middle of the last large climb. I asked John to hand me my light and it was already on and very dim. No being able to see and knowing we had 5-6 miles of difficult trail left brought my mood down. The only thing I can think is that somewhere during the day the light was turning on and off as it bounce around in my pack and the charge was gone. Oh well, I bitched some and on we went.

We got to the last aid station and it was still being run by the same gentleman who was there 11 hours before only now his son was with him. I asked the young boy if he was a runner and he said not yet but he was working on it. We laughed and I told them thank you for being there and we headed past the same overlook we had missed in the morning but now it was too dark so we missed it again. Down the mountain we went. The going was slow and the fact I could not see did not help matters. I spent most of the descent watching Sean pull away.

About 2 miles to the finish we got to a smoother part of jeep road and I could trust my footing again. John kept saying we could still finish in the 13 hour mark if we did work and he was not taking no for an answer. With the thought of finishing and Johns pushing we started to gain momentum. John kept asking how far to the finish and since we had been lost earlier in the day we had no idea. The only response was to keep pushing harder and harder. We finally got to a point I recognized. The realization hit me that we really could finish in the 13th hour. We started crushing it. We came up on the race director and he decided he would run us in. We changed gears and speed up again. Then I felt Sean over my shoulder and we changed gears again. The look in the race director's eyes was priceless as we dropped him. I heard April yell out the famous movie line from Days of Thunder, Rubbin' is Racin' and it was on. We both crashed through the finish area and almost took out the clock laughing like little kids.

The race director caught up to us at the finish and said there is good news and bad news. Of course we wanted the good news first. He stated that we had easily made the finish in the 13 hour mark. The bad news was that the race timing software he uses rounds to minutes so Sean and I officially tied. Danari would say "That is a ridiculous 10." A few minutes later John said that was the best trail he had ever run on. After everyone finished we all decided to go back to the cabins and get in the hot tub. Why not stay up for the full 24 hour period? Now that is a ridiculous 11.

Other things of note.

1. At mile 43 Sean started karate kicking a rotten tree that had not fallen yet. The advice John gave him was "Don't go Judy choppin' things that don't need Judy choppin'" and I am still laughing.
2. I am going to stop saying those were the best volunteers ever. All the volunteers in all the races I have ever run are the best. The ultramarathon just attracts the best people out there.
3. April and Lorrie think they started the #ultraculture hashtag and I am going to steal it for something at Walking Tall 50K
4. Lorrie was correct about the extra shirt.
5. Run Lovit 100M/100K is a perfect race. I would not change a thing.
6. Quoting lines from The Quest for the Holy Grail never ever gets old.
7. I am blessed to be a part of my ultra family.
8. Sarah Hirons gray poof jacket is turning into her adventure jacket.