

8-HOUR 'RUN FROM THE DUCKS' REPORT

Clark Gardens, near Mineral Wells - September 25, 2010
by Bill (The Trailgeeze) Rumbaugh

After check-in at the gate to Clark Gardens, and signing the waiver, I followed the line of cars into the parking area for the event. A sprinkle or two was felt on the way to the car from the gate. By the time we drove the short distance to the parking area, it was definitely raining. No surprise, lightning was clearly visible in the area during the drive West along 180 from Weatherford toward Mineral Wells. But this is Texas, it will pass or at least slacken in just a few, right? So I busied myself with pinning my race number onto my shorts, checking out the race shirt, and then listening to the radio for a bit. Ten minutes or so before the scheduled race start of 7 AM, it should have started getting light. It was still dark. I wasn't sure where the start area was for the current layout of the course, so I figured it was time to make my move. After all, I did not want to miss the start. So I opened the car door and promptly stepped into a puddle, the first of countless repetitions of that experience during the day. Gathered my cooler and other stuff from the trunk and headed in the direction where the start area was at the inaugural running of the event 3 years ago. I guessed right. The two easy-ups which served as the start/finish area for the first event have been replaced by a huge commercial tent owned by the Gardens. It was complete with indoor/outdoor carpet and even a section of dance flooring. So there was plenty of dry space in which to put runner's stuff and also to stay dry while we listened to the pre-race briefing, or the last part of it, in my case.

The race was scheduled to start at 7 AM, but the driving rain and lightning were good reasons to delay it for an hour. Various smartphones among the clusters of runners showed via radar that the rain would not be letting up soon, but the heavy stuff should move to the East before long. About 7:35 RD Tony Mathison suggested that we jog the course to get acquainted with the somewhat complicated series of turns it features on the second half. The venue is a botanical garden and there are limitations on what is prudent to do in the way of "trail" marking. A few potted plants, a sawhorse or two and a couple of signs were about it. But once introduced to the route, these few hints were all that were needed, I don't know of any runner who lost their way.

Returning to the tent, there were a few minutes before the official start and the runners busied themselves with the usual pre-race preparations. Keeping with one of the traditions of the event, the starting line was a line in the dirt (mud this year) made by Tony who gave us the GO and we were off in the rain for an 8 hour run.

The layout of the course is an .854 mile loop. From the finish line, it is a short distance past the tent to the side of a rectangle in a Northerly heading. This is interrupted by a short jog to the East where the course leads through a large gazebo where the timing chip mat and equipment was housed. After returning to the rectangle for a short distance, it then turns to the East. At the end of the Eastbound leg, it gets complicated, winding through the manicured grounds of the Garden where none of the paths are straight. The grass of the first part of the trail also changes to a red crushed rock. Eventually you are dumped out onto a short section of gravel road and after a couple of turns you pass the aid station and a short distance later you have arrived back at the tent. The finish area is actually in the Gazebo, so there are a couple of hundred yards to go before you can actually call the loop complete. The aid station was well-stocked with a wide variety of tasty items that were attentively offered by Tony's daughter, Cayla, an ultrarunner herself.

The rain persisted for much of the day, though it had mostly stopped after about 4 hours. The angry-looking skies persisted the rest of the day and I finally saw my shadow on the last loop. The grass on the first part of the course took a real beating, particularly on the Eastbound leg where in several sections it was reminiscent of the Grasslands ("Mudlands") run earlier in the year. Also the short detour to and from the Gazebo was pretty messy due to the standing water and heavy traffic. Later in the race when things began to get really soupy, I adopted the strategy of walking through these areas, which played a significant role in my remaining upright during the entire event, always a good thing. Shortly after crossing into the main Gardens area with the crushed rock was a section of what appeared to be Norfolk pines on either side of the pathway. Weighted down with the rain, the limbs hung low over the path.

Runners had to bend way down to get through the section. Andy Blessing from Abilene quipped that it was appropriate for the event that we had to "duck walk" through this section. My method was to try to choose the best path through, put my head down and run through it, trusting my hat to keep most of the water off my face. Invariably, just as I thought I was past one section of trees, I would look up and get a rain-laden branch right in the face. It's times like these that I really wish I didn't have to wear glasses. It was almost comical, no matter how much I tried to avoid these last wet slaps, the trees would get me every time. And then the last tree in the series had some seed pods which hung about head high. Just as I thought I was through this mess for the current loop, I would get donked on the head by a seed pod. A final parting shot from the trees to remind me that this was their turf and they demanded due respect. When the rain abated and the limbs dried a bit, this obstacle became progressively less of a challenge. Despite the crushed gravel in the walkways of this area, late in the race it was quite soupy in parts, taking on the characteristics of the mud mentioned in the previous sections (many deep shoe prints filled with water).

Getting soaked in the walk from the parking lot to the tent, I was shivering while waiting for the event to start. Once the running started, there were no further problems with staying warm, despite the rain. I had planned to wear my Ducks shirt from the first running of the event and then taking it off before the start and just wearing the singlet that I had on underneath it. The additional layer felt good in the rain, and I ended up leaving it on until about the midpoint of the event.

There is little shade on the course and the issue is usually dealing with the heat and potential for dehydration. So I packed sunscreen and sunglasses. Who knew a rain jacket would have been a better choice for this time. I had heard Friday's weather report where they called for a 40% chance of showers in the area, and was actually hoping for a sprinkle or two and some cloud cover. Lesson learned, check the weather radar before leaving home. Seems so obvious now....

So there were cooler temperatures and no energy-sapping sun to deal with. But the poor footing in several parts, along with fairly deep puddles elsewhere, seemed to also impede forward progress. It is an open question which is better for a good showing at a given event, sun or rain. It is part of trail (at least non-street) running that every running of every event is different. Part of what we love about the sport.

I wore road shoes to this event (trail shoes in the bag just in case), and the thought of gaiters never entered my mind. Not sure they would have helped, but I did get a couple of rocks in my shoes early on that somehow coaxed more and more of their friends in to join their little party at my expense. Finally about six hours into it, just as the pebble party was going good, I had enough and took a time out to clean out the shoes as best I could. The sox were caked with mud that had infiltrated the upper part of the shoes and formed a custom mud orthotic. I did manage to get the larger of the rocks out and restore some semblance of comfort. I found that the stinging sensation on my lower calf was from weeds and debris that had built up under the chip band worn above the sock. It felt like a nice deep scratch from briars. So I cleaned out from under it as well. This was enough to get me through the rest of the day. With the ingress of foreign objects I experienced, I could not help wondering how Paul Mastin fared with his Vibram Five Fingers (minimalist shoe resembling a glove for the feet) during the run. Cleaning up my shoes the following day was a chore. The sox had so much mud that it took three buckets of rinse water before they were clean enough to put into the washer. The shoes were as bad. After scrubbing the uppers and the tread diligently, I finally got them halfway presentable. A final inspection of the soles showed that the manufacturer's name molded into the rubbery material was chock full of teeny-tiny red stones from the Garden trail. A lasting memento of where they had been.

The race has grown in the number of participants since its start 3 years ago. There were 12 runners the first year. This year 40 signed up and 36 of us ran. With the longer format of the course layout and what looked to be a wider array of paces, people seemed to be spread out more. There appeared to be less chatting going on, something that is a real attraction for me to a timed loop event. You get to know new people and to renew acquaintances with other runners you have known for awhile. It's all good. But it was there if you wanted it, especially later in the event when folks were moving at a more uniform (as in slower) pace.

This is a really nice venue for this type of event. The sights do not get monotonous and are very pleasant. In the Gardens proper, the course takes you by a small picturesque wedding chapel, a fountain and several covered patio areas equipped with sinks and counters where a nice social event could be held. There are ponds, trees and an abundance of flowers and other plants, all well cared-for. A pleasant minty scent could be detected at places along the course. Adjacent to the course was a clean modern rest room, a real bonus that we all appreciate, being accustomed to porta-potties (or porta-bushes) at other events. The flock of ducks seemed content to stay in one of the ponds during the event. So 'running from the ducks' on a course that encircled the pond was reminiscent of the old Aggie joke about the Houston hurricane evacuation route of I-610. A sizeable flock of Canada Geese took off noisily at one point in the day. There was a flock of guinea hens who roamed the premises looking for tasty bits here and there. And a pair of peafowl, a real treat to see them in free-range mode. The male was not in a show-off mood, but they are still striking creatures to see up close.

The gazebo housed the chip timing equipment and there were periodic feeds to the internet, posting the standings after the event was underway for a time. This is a nice feature not normally found at low-key events. The chip timing also eliminates the need for lap counters, which means that fewer volunteers are needed. The awards ceremony was in the gazebo, also. There are several traditions of the race that Tony pointed out to first timers during the ceremony. Besides the starting line drawn in the dirt, every runner is recognized in the awards ceremony, not just the top finishers. Also, no 'paid' runner has to suffer the indignity of being last, Tony and daughter Cayla log enough official miles to qualify for that spot. This year all finishers were given a mousepad from Clark Gardens, something I can certainly use. Proceeds from the event go to support the National Vietnam War Museum located nearby. Volunteers from the museum's supporting organization were on hand in the gazebo throughout the event to applaud and cheer on the runners with the completion of every lap. We all appreciated the encouragement and well-intentioned jests.

I am reminded of the old adage, "There's no such thing as unpleasant weather, only inappropriate clothing." Those that showed up and ran the event were rewarded with a good experience under what others would consider to be bad conditions. For my part I know I will recall this one more frequently and fondly than many other events run under ideal conditions. Thanks to Tony Mathison and his able crew for hosting this memorable event.