

Grasslands Marathon

The Grasslands Run – LBJ National Grasslands
by Bill Rumbaugh, The Trailgeezee - 3/20/10

I've run in the rain and I've run in the mud. I thought I knew what it was about. I was very wrong. The saturated soil conditions in North Texas and recent additional rain created another Mudlands Run, reminiscent of some of the events early in the life of the club's annual Grasslands Run. The trail conditions today brought things to a whole other level.

It rained the night before and was raining as I made the drive from Carrollton to the LBJ National Grasslands. So I took the detached perspective that, I had read accounts of the Mudlands from yesteryear, and now I was going to have the experience myself. All part of the fun of trail running. Another yarn to spin. I had signed up for the Marathon this time. Having run the 50 miler on two previous occasions, I knew I was not in good enough shape to take that on. Certainly not under the expected conditions.

The 50 milers were launched in the 7:00 darkness. They straggled out, a long day ahead for them for certain. As the marathoners gathered near the starting line for the pre-race briefing, it was a foretaste of things to come. The mud was gooshy and your shoes sunk in about an inch. And it was sprinkling. Normally one would try to find an alternate route to avoid such messy conditions. But guess what – there were none! (Get used to it, Bubba.) The sprinkling was no big deal, the runners were all dressed for the conditions and were ready. Race Director Kevin Boudreaux delivered the prerace briefing and we were on our way. First the White Loop then the Blue Loop. No littering. Got it. These are established equestrian trails, and are well marked. Within the first mile, all of the marathoners had slogged through enough mud that nobody, and I mean NObody was gingerly stepping around trying to avoid the mud. It was just a mess, as bad as anyone can imagine, and there are some vivid imaginations out there, I'm sure. I've heard of "shoe-sucking mud" and been exposed to it a few times. This event had it in spades. Fortunately, I never lost either shoe, but I could feel the definite tug for many long stretches at a time, where it certainly could have happened. I count myself fortunate.

There were sections where the entire trail from one side to the other was a mass of footprints, all partly filled with water, thoughtfully kept full by drainage from a nearby field. It looked like an army had marched through there. The only way through those areas was the slow slog. Don't even think about running. You were lucky if it was relatively level. Adding even a small amount of elevation change threw some unpleasant variables into the game. It was easy to tell where others had slipped and slid all over the place trying to scale the mini-hill. A good idea to avoid the areas where the footprints had long slide marks associated with them. Find someplace else, if you can. I noticed that the mud had different colors depending on where you were on the course. There was a dull, ordinary gray color, a yellowish tan other places, and in still others a reddish-orange-tinted color indicative of iron-rich soil. The Grasslands must have had a confused geologic history, with this much variation. At one point the yellow and red mud were together at the same soupy location. The slide marks were somewhat more colorful in that area as they attempted to blend the two colors together. How artistic. Other places, instead of an army of footprints, there were relatively few. In fact, only a handful. Hmmm, had I taken a wrong turn? No, there's a trail marker on a nearby tree. I eventually concluded that the mud conditions were such that they had sort of a self-healing property that closed up all but the most recent footprints. Maybe it was a "pre-quicksand" condition that, if left untreated, could lead to a more serious trail hazard. (Gosh, that horse was there just a second ago. Joe? Joe! Aaagggghhhh!)

There was a real tendency to travel to the side of the trail in search of traction and firmer ground. We know that this is bad practice because it has more of an impact to the environment than staying with the established trail. We all know this, yet we all shamelessly did it anyway, your humble scribe included. At times the trail was several times wider than its original width. Often we paid for our transgressions. To the side of the trail is traction, sometimes. But there are also briars present to exact their toll. We probably all brought back some good scratches on our legs, a little souvenir from a day on the trail.

There were several gulleys that had to be traversed. My previous experiences with the course were under dry conditions and I don't remember there being anywhere near the number we crossed this time. Some were rather large and treacherous, but even the smaller ones were not trivial. I found that the downhill side was worse than the far side where you had to climb out. I saw a group of 3 half-marathoners coming toward me at one point. Did not know what their route was, so I asked if they were running the half. Yes, but we're going back and dropping. Too bad for them, they missed a great adventure. I mean that in all seriousness. About a quarter mile later I saw what caused them to reconsider. A pretty big, intimidating gully. I got down it using caution. Got turned around, and was descending backward at some point, but somehow got to the bottom still upright. Who can explain how these things happen. Getting up the other side was not a terribly big deal. There is a definite technique to it, though. Too bad that I never figured out what it was. I planted both feet, one in front of the other. But the one I was lifting up to move forward was often held in place by suction, requiring quite a bit of force to pull free. Which put more downward force on the stationary foot. On level ground it was no big deal. On a slope the "stationary" foot would often respond to the increase in downward force by sliding down the slope a bit, making forward progress laughable. In fact, I found myself laughing out loud several times at the sheer silliness of the situation. Why in the world would anyone do this if they did not have to? (Not to mention that we paid good money to do so). I don't have an answer that would make sense to anyone but another trail runner. Trekking poles might have helped, if they did not get stuck too. It was not in these gully traverses where I had my close encounters of the muddy kind, but other more benign places.

Early in the race, I was still fresh and was trying to run when the conditions were beyond my balancing skills. I slipped and I slid and barely kept things together. Wondering how I even got through several sections upright. I knew it was not a matter of whether I would go down, but rather how many times would it happen. Where the trail was narrow, the bottom was pretty churned up shoe-sucking material, often several inches deep. Like a mousse that you would add ingredients to by carefully folding rather than stirring. Gotta preserve that delicate texture. If you can get to one side, you might find more solid mud where running was possible. Sometimes it was, but usually not. Normally the sides of the trail have a slope to them and if you try running, your foot may slide toward the middle, once you put your weight on it. With all the sliding going on, frequently one foot would slide behind the other, reminiscent of a speed skater making an edgy turn on the oval track. (No, I won't be growing a "soul patch" anytime soon.) Eventually I did meet the trail close up, as I knew I would. Several times. It was bad enough getting your legs, side and backside muddy, something you can't really dust off to conceal your ineptness to your fellow runners. But the worst part was that my gloves inevitably got wet and muddy. And my water bottle. I'm not averse to getting dirty, I think I've proved that to anyone's satisfaction today. But you really like to have halfway clean hands. A few times they landed next to green mud. The color of vegetation. After it's been through the horse. Plus the mud was wet, and with the wind chill in the 30's my hands were really cold. The old saw about "cold hands, warm heart" is bunk. Cold hands – cold and unhappy runner is closer to the truth. And gritty water from your bottle is never pleasant. Each time I went down, I thought about how much fun I was not having and began to think about how to explain another DNF to my cronies. Believe me, I can conjure up a plethora of convincing stories. I have plenty of experience. At some point I realized that, since my balance skills were not what I might have liked, I decided to just slog through the slippery parts and run only when I had traction and the promise of reasonable footing. There were actually a lot of places where running was possible. The trail was in fact dry in several sections. This made more sense than trying to push my luck and going down too often. Also, I think mediocre balance is only part of the deal. Some of it is dumb luck. Even someone with superior reflexes and running skill can hit a bad spot and kiss trail. They don't look much different from the "good" spots. Anyway, this was not going to be anything like a PR, au contraire, in fact. And with the 50 milers out there on the same event, Marathoners did not have a cutoff time. So just settle in, cowboy up, and get 'er done.

There was one section that I'm glad no one saw and videoed for a U-Tube snippet. I was climbing a short hill that was liberally covered with very loose mud. It was the consistency of a delightful dessert, smooth and buttery. I did not have a strategy on this, other than just get over the dang thing. So it was one foot over another, climbing like a ladder. Except that I was not climbing, I was sinking, losing ground to the minor elevation change. After about 3 or 4 moonwalking backward steps, my stability was lost and I veered to the side and went down. I'm sure it would have been a hoot to watch.

It was in this frame of mind that I came into the Start/Finish (S/F) area, to recharge and get ready for the infamous Blue Loop. It was slightly longer than the white loop and had eaten my lunch on previous occasions. I seriously considered dropping at this point. I had already experienced everything that I could expect in terms of muddy conditions, what would be the point in another 13 or so miles of misery. But I had not fallen in awhile and still had gas in the tank. So, with a bravado that I really did not feel inside, I set out again. This was pretty much a point of no return decision at this point. Had I encountered some insurmountable situation, such as a compound fracture, I could have slogged back and dropped. Everyone would have understood that the situation was insurmountable and there would have been no loss of face. But this was running, what is insurmountable about that. So once you start out on a loop course, you are pretty well committed to getting it done no matter what. With my more reasonable strategy of running only when I had decent traction, I did not go down again. (Note to self: Don't run when you don't have traction. Ever.) And I probably was not that much slower. As a result, the second loop went much better. Except that the wind had picked up a bit and there were some exposed parts of the trail. I started to get a bit cold and was glad I had decided to wear my new rain jacket, though it needs a really good washing long about now. What a way to break in new equipment. It stopped the wind, and the hood was welcome several times. The pit zips are a nice touch to help regulate temperature. I thought about leaving my gloves in my drop bag at the S/F area, they were wet and muddy and cold. Full of moisture, they stayed cold due to evaporative cooling. Surely bare hands would dry quicker. Then I remembered that the wind chill was in the 30's and that I like to have gloves on when the temperatures are below oh, about 50 degrees. So I was fiddling with them when Paul Tidmore took my picture at the start of the Blue Loop. A couple of miles later I noticed that they had actually dried out to the point where they were no longer freezing cold. So that was the right thing to do. In getting them to dry, it helped not re-applying water and mud from time to time by going down.

There was actually a good part of the event where I did not have much company on the trail. I enjoy chatting with other runners, but I also like the solitude, which often occurs late in an event. Obviously the trail conditions had a lot to do with spacing the runners out. On the Blue Loop I was not paying a lot of attention to the trail markers and was following the tracks as they led by a barbed wire fence. The trail seemed, uh, less definite I remember thinking. On the other side of the fence was a blacktop road. In the distance I saw a couple of runners coming toward me on the road. I thought to myself, these guys must be serious runners, out on a road in the middle of nowhere. About then I realized that it had been awhile since I had consciously seen a blue marker. As they got closer, the man asked if I had seen a marker lately. Well, not really, now that you mention it. It finally sunk in that they were ahead of me and that the three of us were off-course. So I turned around and headed back as they climbed back through the fence to join the search. There was another couple not far behind me who were also off-course. Probably following me. Assuming I knew what I was doing. Big mistake. About a quarter of a mile back, there were not one but two markers leading off into the trees. We had all missed them, clear as they were. Though I was ahead of both couples at that point, they all passed me in the next few minutes. The young woman who was on the road looked vaguely familiar. I asked her if she was the person whom I overheard at the S/F aid station telling the volunteer that this was her first marathon? Yes. Well, you picked a doozy. She said something about a 7-hour marathon. And I pointed out that no matter what, she gets a PR for the day. And thought to myself I'd be lucky to get this one done in 7 hours.

One of the benefits of running under really sloppy conditions is that you can easily hear overtaking runners coming up behind you. Probably with your iPod cranked up loud enough to frighten birds. Slap, slop, slap. Since there are so few good paths through most of the trail, I would try to stand to the side to let an overtaking runner have his/her pick of the meager selection. So, it is helpful to know when you are being overtaken. As for passing, well forget it. I don't think I passed anybody on this one, certainly not more than a few. The second couple who passed me after our little detour were even easier to hear coming. They both were wearing trash bags and the wind whipped them into a very audible rattle.

About an hour and a half from the start of the event, the rain turned briefly to sleet, a new experience for me. Running under sleeting conditions. Later, on the white loop I thought I saw some snow flurries. Couldn't be sure, though. About 5 and a half hours into it, I positively did see some flurries for quite some time. I believe the later 50 milers saw plenty of them as well, as a front moved into the region (I was

safely home by then). Ironic for the first day of spring. So on this event, the only form of precipitation we did not see was hail.

I cycled through the Outback Gate aid station, things reasonably under control as I refilled my bottle. Scott Eppleman told me that he did not recognize me "all covered with mud" guess I had wallowed around even more that I thought. What fun.

A few miles later, Drew Meyers asked me about the water crossings as I refueled at the Red Ant Pond aid station. I told him they weren't bad, the deepest water was where a pond (guess we call 'em stock tanks here in Texas) was overflowing, it was almost knee deep there. Did not do much to wash the mud off my legs, even at that. You would think that water would feel cold, but it was not that bad. Hardly anything you would notice, under the conditions.

Well, what did I learn from not dropping after the white loop? I did not have any new experiences with the mud, I had pretty much done and seen all it had to offer by then. But I did realize that "running" under those conditions is way more demanding than usual trail running. I was bone tired at the end, so grateful that I had signed up to do "only" the marathon, not the 50 miler. That would have been a really bad idea. The folks who ran 50 miles are tough cookies, my hat is off to them [only 7 finished out of 70 starters, it turns out] . As I came into the S/F area for the second and final time, the finish line was a sea of mud. How fitting for this event. I offered that sage observation to Kevin as he gave me a high five and handed me my medal. He indicated that it was not an original thought. Probably not. I had forgotten to mash the mud-encrusted button on my watch so I don't have an accurate finishing time, but it was in the neighborhood of 7:20 and, as the oldest finisher, I'm happy to have it. The finishing time is, after all pretty irrelevant in such an event, except for the top few finishers. The aid station volunteers were to a man (or woman) interested, helpful and cheerful. You cannot ask for better people. It was a long day for them trying to stay warm in often exposed, windy areas, wind chill near or below the freezing point. To serve the occasional runner. And they were there long after I was done. Amazing.

This was truly an unforgettable experience.

I did manage to get my equipment about right. If you are running an event like this maybe this next section will be useful to you. Temperatures were probably in the mid 30's to mid 40's, I can't guess any closer than that. The wind chill was significant, and definitely in the low 30's or worse much of the day. I had on wicking underwear, top and bottom, nylon shorts, a long-sleeve technical shirt and a sleeveless technical shirt over that, to maintain core temperature. Trail shoes, Injinji toe sox, gaiters, thin dri-max gloves, cotton bandana, and a ball cap that is a gore-tex knockoff. The rain jacket was hooded and could be pulled up over the hat for wind/rain protection and to keep my ears from getting too cold in the wind. This was about right. The sleeveless shirt could have easily come off after the white loop had it been too much. The long-sleeve shirt had a half-zipper that could be unzipped and of course had the sun come out, the jacket could have been pulled and tied around the waist or over one shoulder to allow better access to the bottle carrier I had around my waist. A change of gloves would have been good at the start of the blue loop, but they might have gotten muddy, wet and cold immediately, no way of knowing. Tights might have been good to protect your legs and keep the mud off of you. Might have been cold for awhile after the water crossings, though. Throw 'em in the washer when you are done.

I changed into dry clothes at the side of the road before heading back home, it's hard to get warm when your clothes are all wet. My shoes, sox and gaiters were fused into a monolithic mass of mud. Which made them difficult to get off with my cold-numbed fingers. I finally managed to do so and get my slightly more presentable-appearing self into the car for the ride back. Fastening the button fly on my pants was pretty laughable, I finally gave up on that. Tired, cold and hungry, I put off until the next day hosing off my clothing items on the driveway so all the sand and mud did not give the washing machine a hemorrhage. Leaving to tomorrow to unpack my case, honey disconnect the phone.... It was time to keep yer Comrade warm. The hosing operation may take more courage than I thought yesterday, since daybreak on Sunday finds the ground covered with an unseasonable layer of snow.

My personal demons on this run included a pretty good bash on my left shin within the first mile or so. Trying to stay on good ground I dodged around a tree and did not see a stump next to it. Ouch. Blood dripped from it for awhile, until it got covered with mud. Well, that's not such a big deal except for the fact that every time I brushed up against a weed or a branch with that leg, I got a nice little zing. And there were plenty of weeds and branches. The other demon had to do with my socks. They bunched up and gathered some infiltrating mud so there was a wad in both of them that was extremely uncomfortable for most of the event. I had a similar situation on the last leg of the Tahoe Rim Trail a couple of years ago. Guess I have to admit to a learning disability there. Injinji socks work fine for many people, but I need to see what else is available. They have let me down when I needed them once too often and are problematic to get off and on quickly under adverse conditions. There was no harm done, no blisters, but there was a shot of pain with every step (which is lingering into the next day). And under muddy conditions, where the foot tends to move a bit after it is planted, it felt like the pain was being ground into my foot with each step.