

8-Hour 'Run From the Ducks'

Clark Gardens, near Mineral Wells
September 25, 2010

by Kay Scott

The race is supposed to start at 7. I plan a 6AM ETA for packet pickup, but as usual, I'm late leaving, pulling out of the driveway in a steady downpour, and I still have to stop by Dunkin Donuts to pick up Munchkins. No problem, though, right? I'll still have ½ an hour after I get there to pick up and get organized, more if I can maintain some speed (but darn, I have to get gas!) No pressure ...

But the rain just keeps getting worse, until I'm in the immediate area of the race, and visibility is so bad that I'm convinced I've missed the turn-off. I finally see a sign for Clark Gardens, and keep going, turning right onto an unlit street, and slowing down to 15 mph to try to make out any landmarks or signs. I'm crawling, but time isn't, I'm going to be late!

I pull into Clark Gardens, winding my way forward until I see lights. "Don't worry, the race has been postponed until 7:30. Do you know where you are going?" (No) "Then Cayla will lead you." So I follow Cayla's car to the race staging area, pull into a spot and start gathering my things in the car. Then I slog around to the back of the car, and huddle under the hatchback while I gather things from back there too, luckily remembering to grab my extra rain poncho. (I end up with 4 pair of shoes, 2 extra pair of socks, 4 hats and 2 rain ponchos.) Finally, I gather my courage and run through the rain and lake-sized puddles to the race tent.

I enter the tent, and say "Hi" to some people I know, (Ken and Lorrie Gray, Deborah Sexton) and nod to some people whose faces I know, but I've never actually met before. Deborah tells me the race has been postponed until 8, but we will be running the course at 7:30. I look out at the sheeting rain, and can't imagine that it will have stopped by then.

7:30 comes, and a few hardy souls follow RD Tony (how can he be so bubbly at this hour of such a depressing morning?) out into the murk; a few more hesitate, and then follow the pack. I resist peer pressure, and stay in the tent. The runners return shortly, dripping wet, and don't say much.

[Before the race starts, a segue for some background about me: I did my first 50k at Cowtown in Feb 2009; at the time, I was a road runner, and hated the pebble "trail" that the 50k course used to get the extra length over the marathoners. Ironically, around this time, I stumbled upon the Bandera results (100k! On rocky trail! Those people must be nuts!) But by next January, I was one of the nuts, skipping right from 50k to 100k, and loving it! The half at Grasslands/Mudlands `10 was my 2nd trail race. Then, when I wasn't chosen in the Kona lottery, I decided to do my first 100 miler, Heartland. I only had 6 weeks to train, though, after another goal race, so I chose Run From the Ducks as a training race in order to practice distance, pacing and dealing with the boredom of a repetitive landscape.]

8:00AM. The rain hasn't let up, (maybe it's even gotten worse?) so I've half-convinced myself that another postponement will save me from the downpour. But nope! Tony appears before us, and ushers us out into the rain. Because of Mudlands, I'm NOT looking forward to this run, but I know I need to stick it out, or finishing Heartland will be just a dream. I take a place at the back of the pack, where I plan to stay. Tony draws a "line in the mud" and we're off!

We're a pretty tight pack to begin with, slowing to a slow single file as we take the tight turn into the gazebo where the timing mat is located (only dry flat spot on the course?) and out, across the grass and right towards the lake. A sign says "Turn left and go around the lake" as if we might decide to run through it! (Though at this point, we practically are running through the lake.) We go around the lake on a grass berm, then across a road, and onto a red-brick-dust path through an allee of conifers. Their needles are

so weighted down with water that we have to run bent over; my back does not like it, and I think, not for the last time that day, of how I'm going to explain this damage to my chiropractor. The trees do nothing to keep the path dry.

We can straighten up once we reach a party area on our left, and then the path opens up, with roses and other flowering bushes. We take a right turn onto a winding path, from which we get a glimpse of the first parking area, just inside the gates. Then a few more curves, and a right turn, into a formal garden, past a pretty chapel, around a fountain, then a straightaway. At the end of the straightaway is a slight left to a restroom, or a right turn towards the road. Running ahead of me are two blond 20-something girls who slow down when they see the restroom; I take advantage of their hesitation to pass them. I need to go too, but I don't want to get lost by falling behind the pack, so I decide to wait until the next lap.

So, to the right, another short straightaway, on a smooth dirt-and-rock road this time, then a jog right and immediately to the left and another left, still on the road. There is another straightaway past the aid station, which is not yet set up – 5 bottles of water forlornly sitting on the table. Putting out bottled water in this rain strikes me as funny, like "bringing coals to Newcastle" and I laugh, but no one else seems to get the joke.

We turn right past the tent, right across the grass, right onto the grass path between the roses, and left into the gazebo, and the first loop is over. By this time, the pack is very spread out, and I run through the gazebo mostly by myself. Volunteers cheer me on by name (that always feels good, doesn't it?)

I repeat this maybe 20 more times before the rain stops. I learn the path of least resistance around each of the curves, and through each of the puddles. I watch a swan, swimming on the lake; it has a black beak, and I wonder what breed of swan it is. And I get cheered by wonderful volunteers each time I pass the aid station or through the gazebo.

Somewhere in there, I change soaking shirts twice, and change from the first plastic-sheet rain poncho, which has been steadily tearing at the neck, to my backup poncho, made from one of those foil sheets you're wrapped in for warmth at the end of a large marathon; this one has a red and purple Dallas White Rock Marathon logo on it. I also change from my black canvas hat to a black mesh hat, but change back within a few laps because it's still too rainy for mesh. I stop every 2 laps for a Munchkin (a habit I picked up at Turkeys and Tatars, om nom!) and maybe an E-cap.

I curse the Conifer Alley each time through it – I'm just over 5 feet, but I have to bend in half! Claude Hicks, the eventual winner, passes me while running through the trees on my 11th lap, and cracks me up with his dry comment "these trees are really starting to get old." I can imagine! He's at least a foot taller than me! Each time he passes me, I tell him how many times he's lapped me – I think it was 4 or 5 at this point (I lost count around 12 or 13.)

By the time the rain stops, the course is trashed. The grass paths are mud and debris. The grassy berm has several spots of shoe-sucking mud, and the wild mud has won the battle against the civilized red-brick-dust path. Standing water is everywhere, some of it still ankle deep. The rain had been fairly warm, but the puddles are starting to cool down, and the mud is even colder, though nowhere near Mudlands standards.

The sky remains overcast, but slowly geese, guinea fowl, pea hens and their showier husbands start to appear. (I never do see a duck, though.) The swan hauls himself onto the bank, where he grooms himself beside a Canada goose, dwarfing him. Sonia B. tells me about a white peacock, and later, I see her stalking him with her camera. I can smell goats while running on the berm, and I catch the smell of roses while running on the grass paths. I begin to look around, and appreciate how beautiful the gardens must be when it's not raining and muddy.

But there's more than just wildlife on the course – there's also the guy with the floppy hat who keeps changing clothes (there turn out to be two guys with floppy hats, no wonder I was confused) and the guy with the Prairieman shirt, the guy with the OKC Memorial Marathon shirt, the guy with the rust-red shirt, the Trail Geezer, and all the other guys who keep passing me, all with encouraging words. One woman, wearing a purple shirt and a black skirt, has passed me twice. There's the couple, Cheri and Jeff, running together. There is the lone dedicated spectator sitting outside during the rain, and the two or three others who come out to support us once the rain is reduced to drizzle. And there is RD Tony, always with a smile on his face, who keeps showing up in unexpected places, one time sprinting past me with a trashcan on his shoulder?!?

Sometime after the 4-hour mark, Tony writes the "top 5" for each sex on a white board and I'm not on it; it's a bit confusing, because I've only seen that one woman pass me, although it's possible that someone else did while I was in the bathroom. But I eventually decide that most of the other top 5 must be within a lap of me.

Fueled by this knowledge, I speed up. I pass a woman who I later realize must be Karen R, then the women's leader, Angela, who is walking and will soon leave. I pass Tammy U, then lose ground to her again when I take a pit stop, then pass her again on the next lap. I make it onto the board, in 5th. I pass Deborah S, as we both slog along the mud path leading to the gazebo, and she cheers me on (always so nice!) On the next lap, I spot the woman in the purple top (who the gazebo volunteers tell me is Katrina, the new leader) and within one more lap, I've passed her too. I run my heart out, putting in my 3 fastest laps, to the end.

But, all of this passing doesn't get me ahead; it just gets me back onto the same lap as the others. (I guess I need to stop peeing so often, so I'll know it when I get passed!) The race ends with Katrina at 41 laps, and Deborah, Tammy and I at 40 laps. Deborah finished her lap first, then Tammy finished, and then I squeaked in, so we end up 2nd, 3rd, and 4th. But I'm happy, (tickled pink actually!) to have run the same distance as Deborah and Tammy, two AWESOME runners who've been at this for much longer than I have.

The sun comes out 2 minutes before the race ends, so we don't freeze while sitting through the race results, but instead are able to enjoy recognizing every competitor present. I'm one of those people who likes to stay until the last Age Group winner has been recognized, so I really appreciate Tony's dedication to recognizing everyone.

Driving back from the race, I reflect on how it helped me, training wise. I did more miles, in less time, than my previous training race, but I'm afraid that my pacing wasn't as consistent as I'd hoped, especially once I thought I had a chance at an award. And as far as helping me deal with boredom? Fuhgeddaboutit! This race was anything BUT boring!

I'll be back, for sure!