

3 Days of Syllamo

March 14, 15 & 16, 2008

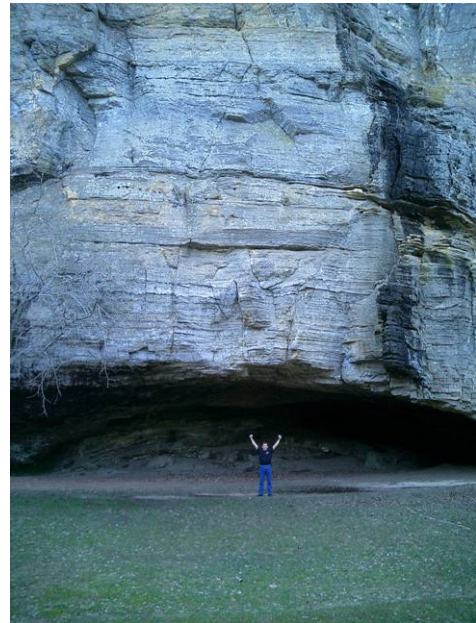
<http://www.3daysofsyllamo.org/>

Fifty-Six, Arkansas

by Lynn Ballard

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. –Ps 84:1-2

The weeks leading up to this event were fraught with distractions, so much so, I was even having trouble staying focused on getting out to run every day or so. My running year was in turmoil, without a race to focus on my training was wandering aimlessly even when I did manage to get a string of runs put together... It didn't seem to matter that I had set personal bests for both Bandera 100K and Cross Timbers 50 Mile, I hadn't run well in either... wait, where was I? Oh, that's right...FOCUS!



3 Days of Syllamo is considered a stage race, where the contestants run 50 kilometers on day one, 50 miles on day 2 and 20 kilometers on day 3. The courses are laid out in North Central Arkansas, where the Ozarks provide a good challenge (OK, an understatement). This may get overlooked as a challenge when considering it's only Arkansas, not the Rockies or the Cascades...how bad can it be? I decided to take another look at the GPS track I saved from last year's day one...MISTAKE! My track from last year reads...34 miles and 10,000 ft of climb! I know there are lots of issues with GPS accuracy on altitude, but even if it's off by 1/3, that's a lot of climb... I found another persons course from last year's race for day 2 (50 mile) and it showed 20,000 ft of climb...again, even allowing a healthy margin of error, the weekend promises as much or more climbing than I did in either Bighorn or Cascade 100 mile events last summer! That little fact seemed to get me to focus a little bit more, but would it be too late?

I left home (Dallas area) on Thursday morning driving East, headed for Little Rock, Arkansas, where I would turn North and watch the hills get taller and taller for the next 100 miles. As I entered the town of Clinton, I began to notice a lot of log piles...then houses with roof damage. I realized that this was one of the areas was hard hit by severe weather, including several tornadoes a few weeks earlier. The storm system that hit here created a tremendous amount of damage across the northern part of the state and was devastating to many in the southeastern part of Tennessee. It seemed the hilltops were hardest hit in the Clinton area, but further up the road, I noticed several places where it seemed the tornado(es) followed a hollow, knocking down entire sections of trees and



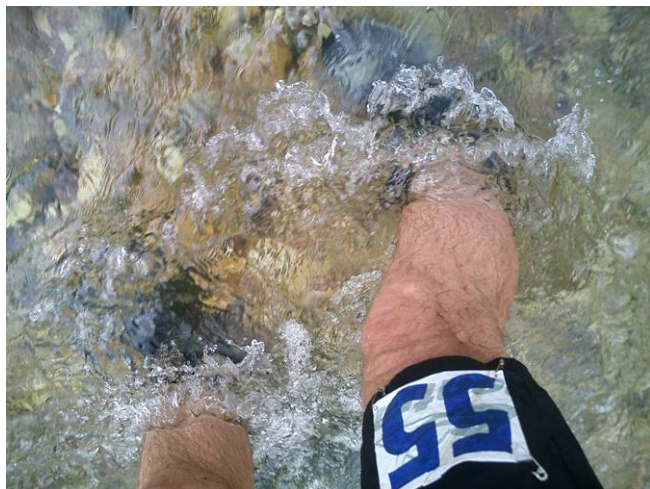
creating a lot of property damage. I saw a sign on the outskirts of Clinton that said... "Thanks For All Your Help", I suppose in recognition of a community that banded together in a time of need.

I rolled into Mountain View, Arkansas and was quite tempted to stop in the square and listen to the bluegrass quartet playing in the Gazebo, but pressed on to my goal of the Blanchard Springs Campground, where the race was headquartered and the location of the start/finish of

each day's event. Once there, I found Fred Thompson, a friendly face from the North Texas Trail Runners and we visited with other stage race hopefuls and settled in for the night. Storms moved in on us for most of the night, but I managed to sleep through most of the rain even though the sound of raindrops was amplified as they bounded off the roof of my truck. I did enjoy the lightning show before I drifted off.

Day 1 – 50 kilometers...

Despite the night's storms, I felt well rested from my night in the "Suburban Motel". I woke up before 7 a.m., had time for coffee and calories, lounged around a bit and began to prepare for the day of running at about 8:15 a.m. This felt a little strange, as many ultras begin before the butt-crack of dawn. We gathered for some brief race instructions and began our first stage pretty close to 9 a.m. This year's course was different from last year's out and back, so we began our long loop. The trail was pretty wet from the night's rain and our feet were soggy early and would stay that way pretty much all day. There were many climbs, steeper and longer than anything I am used to from North Texas. The footing was quite technical in places, providing quite the challenge to maintain pace. I ran a bit with Fred and we enjoyed the first section together. After the first aid station, I was alone for some time before joining up with Katie from Fayetteville, Arkansas. Katie and I ran together on and off for the next 15-20 miles. This part of the race had us cross a river three times. The water was never more than knee deep, but the slippery rocks on the bottom and the rushing water made it interesting.



The sun popped out a couple of times during the course of the day, but never really became a factor as the temps remained comfortable. The volunteers for this event were troopers and very cheerful. I was impressed with what they were able to do with relatively few people. We never had to go too far without support. As I monitored my progress throughout the day, I felt I had a good chance of finishing in 7 hours, but was pleasantly surprised with 6:30 for the first day. I used a Garmin to monitor progress throughout the day and measured the first day at just over 29 miles. Last year, I had a bonus mile or two on the 50K course and measured 34 miles! I didn't have any complaints with the shorter course this year!

Following the finish, I made my way to soak in the creek...sweet medicine for tired legs and feet. After about 10 minutes of standing in water as deep as I dared, the hot shower felt great! We were treated to a good salad, great pasta and desert before turning our focus toward the longer day that lay ahead in Stage 2.

Day 2 – 50 Miles...

More weather overnight meant that, in spite of the fatigue of running almost 30 miles in rough terrain, sleep would be elusive. Much tossing and turning and more light shows, combined with a 4:30 am wake up call made for a rough night. I actually woke up (if you can call what I was doing sleeping) at about 4 am and began preparing for our 6 am start. The weather from overnight was lingering, leaving ominous dark clouds overhead, making the pre-dawn darkness even deeper. The temperature was pretty comfortable, nice and cool, but very damp.



The cold creek water from the night before had done its magic and my legs felt pretty good, ready for the long day. Even more casual than the morning before, we received some simple directions...follow blue blazes then white blazes, then turn around and come back...OH, DON'T MISS THE TURNAROUND OR YOU WILL HAVE A LONG COUPLE OF DAYS OUT THERE! OK, that jarred me to a higher level of consciousness.

GO came quickly and we were off in the dark. I let out a customary whoop and received a nice report from other voices in the dark around me on the first climb. I settle in for a long day. We had run the first 16 or so miles of this course last year in the 50K event and it felt quite familiar. We climbed to the ridge top overlooking the campground and headed out on our journey, which would be seen through the glow of my headlamp for the first hour or so of the day. Sleepy conversations in hushed tones were dampened by

the dark and the wetness of the woods. The only other noises were breathing labored from the climbs and the rustle of waist packs laden with ultra-goodies. Moving along the ridge top, we approach the first big descent just as the first hint of the end of darkness arrived. Screaming down a muddy logging road, I begin to feel some strong discomfort in my left ankle on the lower inside. This had bothered me the day before and I worried that it might slow me down, making an already long day even longer, or even jeopardize my finish. This was the same issue that almost took me out of the Bandera 100K run in January...nope, not healed, not going away.

We arrive at the bottom of our descent and pad through a section of pine forest, where the fallen needles of the soft-wood giants caress our feet...sweet! But it doesn't last long and soon we are in one of the most technical sections of the course running right along side a stream on rocks, sand, gravel...all wet, all slick, all punishing. Luckily, this didn't last much longer than the pine forest...

Soon, we arrive at the first aid station and move efficiently through. I am suddenly alone, running as if there are no others in the woods with me. This is comfortable and I will spend much of the day this way. I soak up the beauty of the forest as it wakes up. Birds singing, creating a symphony to which I keep time with my foot steps. Yes, this is comfortable. Soon I am back up on another ridge top looking back down at the stream from hundreds of feet up, a different world altogether. It begins to rain, as if the string section of the orchestra has just arrived, the symphony gets richer. I offer thanks to the Maestro and move quietly up the trail.

More incredible eye-candy as I move through this part of the Sylamore Ranger District on the Syllamo and Ozark Highlands Trails. In and out of the second aid station and now I am truly in big wilderness with no roads or campgrounds or other signs of civilization. This is comfortable.



The discomfort in my ankle has grown difficult to ignore and my level of concern is growing. Somewhere near 15 miles into the day, I feel a "pop" in the problem area and a sharp pain on top of my foot just under the shoe laces. This forces me to a hobble, then a stop. I feel of my ankle and note that there doesn't appear to be any swelling. As a matter of fact, the pain in my ankle is gone, only the discomfort on top of my foot remains. I am in no place to stop or get help, so I test it by walking, then slowly begin to jog. OK, seems like there is no damage, I'll keep moving and see what the day brings. Soon I am moving full speed (for the conditions) and back to holding pace at about 4 miles per hour. I keep on to the next aid station where I find some calories and cheery volunteers.

Out of the aid station is another screaming descent on a log road and I push it a bit. My foot/ankle/whatever seems to be holding nicely so I really crank down the hill, almost ½ mile before rejoining the single track. Not too much more until the final aid station before the turn and my neighbor from the campground is there manning the aid station with lots of enthusiasm which seems to be rubbing off on me. I fuel and take off for the quick out and back to the turnaround. I am not moving quite well and feeling quite well.



Still running alone, I realize just how much color a forest can have even though the trees have not begun to put on their spring foliage.

Cascading water along the way helps keep my mind off my tired legs and I maintain pace. I know I am pulling away from the runners that were just 1-3 minutes behind me at the turn, and am confident I will overtake runners that were just ahead at the halfway point. This makes me comfortable and I settle in once more.

More great scenery comes and goes. Incredible rock formations are abundant. The running is challenging and at times, the trail is hard to find. More than a few times, I find it necessary to stop and locate a blaze marking the trail, as the winter leaves obscured the trail. I continue on my way and eventually overtake Melissa, from Little Rock (we met on the trail) and another runner I don't know.



They stepped aside to allow my passage. I acknowledge their gesture with a “thanks” tossed over my shoulder and added “I’m sure I’ll see you again, I just want to make time while I can”. Alone again, I feel as though I am flying... Soon, I hit a creek crossing that re-wets and refreshes my feet and lower legs, but it seems to weigh my shoes down quite a bit and I don't feel quite as fast as before.

More time with nothing but the trail and my thoughts. I think of my father and how much he loved being in the woods, and of the times we shared together before his passing. Back to reality, I realize I am losing focus and have to remind myself to keep up pace. I can tell my energy is dropping, so I pull out my last trick, chocolate covered espresso beans! I begin to munch on these, slowing to a walk, and Melissa comes up

from behind. “Are you OK?”, she asks. “I told you I’d see you again”, I say, realizing I must be weaving a bit trying to manage the caffeine/sugar cargo in the baggie I carried. I offered her some of my stash and she seemed happy to have something that might give her a lift. We finish the treat and pick back up to a nice pace, only about 4 miles from the finish, I estimate. As much as I had enjoyed the solitude of the trail, I welcomed the company for this final stretch. Soon, we make the last climb to the ridge above the campground and both begin to hoot and holler to the throngs of fans (OK, *tens* of fans) at the finish line. They cannot see us in the woods above, but still send a report back...Woohooooo! We make quick work of the descent into the campground and across the picnic grounds to finish in 13:04, about a half hour faster than last year. Later, I found a GPS tracks of the course that two different people shared that measured well over 52 miles and 28,000 ft of ascent (both were closer to 53 miles, and I’m assuming ascent was not “corrected” and likely to be overstated by as much as 25-30%). Overall, I am quite pleased with my day and pretty excited that I have managed to turn in a negative split!

I move quickly to prepare for my nightly ritual of a 10-15 minute dousing in the cold creek (as deep as I dare), a warm shower and a great meal of red beans and rice! Sleep comes easy tonight!

Day 3...

Another solid night in the “Suburban” motel and I am ready for the final leg of this year’s event. The final stage, like the first stage, begins at 9 am which allows ample time to do some packing as final preparations for the day’s short leg are made. The group of hopefuls at the starting line has grown and is a bit more crowded than the previous days, but is still quite manageable. We are told there are two aid stations, one at about four miles which is water only, an unmanned station. The second one we are told, is about half way, but is fully staffed with both fluids and appropriate calories. We are soon on our way.

I am quite pleased with the fact that I am able to run well and am keeping a strong pace. I fall in with five or six others to form a train that snakes efficiently through the woods. It seems really quick, but we come to the first unmanned aid station and blow right past. I don’t worry, as I am carrying two water bottles and still have plenty to drink. After a long climb, we come to a pretty steep and long downhill and I move through the train and pull away, soon to find myself in a familiar situation...alone on the trail.

I find myself anticipating the aid station, looking forward to taking on some calories... mile six comes and goes, mile seven and finally, near the eight mile I spot the aid station ahead, pull up and tie on the feed bag! The train catches up with me at the aid station and four or five runners pass by. I walk out of the aid station behind them with my hands full of M&Ms and think of Winnie the Pooh with the honey jar stuck on his nose! The train pulls out of sight.

I finish my feast to find a rainbow of color in the palms of my hands and pick back up to a good pace. I will run this way, pushing the down hills and running well on the flats and some of the ups. The last part of the course today runs parallel to a beautiful stream down into a hollow that empties into the campground. Although reluctant to leave the woods, I am eager to get done so I push out onto the road that runs through the campground and up to the group area where the finish line awaits – 2:45 for the stage. Race director Steve Kirk, a fine ultra runner himself, is waiting to greet me with a hand made finisher award and a warm handshake. It's off to the creek for a soak to ease the strain from the 14 mile 20K!?!? I guess we got in a few Kirk/Ozark miles!



Wrap-Up...

22:20:22 total official time for the three stages, officially, 93.4 miles. Measured more like 96 miles! Steve Kirk, his family and his volunteers put on a fine race, managing some really challenging logistics with what looked like little effort (although I am quite sure there was significant effort put forth by the gang). The trails in the Sylamore area are beautiful and quite challenging. The camping is awesome and the event is a must do that will bring me back again and again.