2013 Mt. Taylor 50K

by Andrea Feucht

I wiggled my popsicle toes: nope, still no feeling. At least the silence of the toes was not preventing the legs from carrying this runner’s body over the branch-littered trail in creeping pre-dawn light: up, up, up to the first pass of the morning and a blast of sunlight. Perhaps then they’d thaw out from the 25 degree starting conditions. The time was before 7 a.m. on Saturday, September 28th; about 150 of us were headed out for Mt. Taylor 50K, loping around and over the namesake 11,000’ peak, just outside Grants, New Mexico.

Regardless anyone’s toe situation, we all knew the weather would be spectacular for this event, topping out in the 60s at the start/finish point, a 9000’ clearing called Rock Tank. The clear sky was a lucky break, as the race could have started with a muddy whimper or not at all: storms and flooding had descended upon the region in previous weeks, washing out trails and generally making local watersheds happy and mud haters cranky.

The desert southwest has a way of drying out quickly, so luckily no course changes were needed. The final piece of the perfection puzzle was a cold front that sailed in on Friday evening before the race, taking the usual daily highs of 80s and knocking off 20 degrees in one chilly blow. Those runners huddled at the start for the final hour of waiting stomped in vain to keep all appendages warm. An overnight camper said, almost with glee in their voice, that their thermometer hit 17.

Then, at 6:35, RD Ken Gordon let us all scamper on our way, directly up to the first overlook and that glorious sunrise from La Mosca lookout – a spot we’d return to twice more when the Caldera Rim full aid station was up and running. The race leaders were already motoring to the first major aid station called Spud Patch at mile 10, taking advantage of one of the many runnable downhills on this scenic course.

If there’s one thing to be said for Ken’s route planning, he doesn’t hesitate to throw in all the “treats” – building a course with equal measures of steep climb, hairy descents and flats so nice you just have to run. At many other ultras, a nearby peak often means the course will skirt around the shoulder, oh-so-close but no peak-bagging tingle. Here you ***will*** nab a summit of Mt. Taylor and you will like it and the 3K’-in-four-miles climb it took to get there.

The course is a modified figure-8; the start/finish is also the mile 16 aid station, perfect to refuel from tables or drop bag, dump off the morning’s jackets, and get ready for the biggest climb of the day, another five miles up the trail. Occasionally we see evidence of recent tree-clearing and some washout, but most of the trails are in great shape.

The fall color change seems to be on rain delay after those storms, serving up a tunnel of coppery aspens along the road to Gooseberry aid station at mile 21. From there everyone skips merrily up to the summit of Mt. Taylor, 3000 vertical feet up in less than 4 miles. Scratch that. Actually, most runners do something between a power-hike and a shuffle to the peak, possibly with some moments of gasping for air and muttering despondently about the vast switchbacks ahead.

Luckily those tired thought patterns are offset by unutterably gorgeous views: of Grants, of the open slopes, of northwestern New Mexico as a whole. This mountain is sacred to the nearby Navajo, who’ve trekked on these trails through all four seasons for more years than we transplants can wrap our heads around. They foster love of athletics these days with the Nideiltihi Native Elite Runners group (www.nativerunners.org), which receives much-needed donations from the race proceeds to train and mentor local runners in all distances.

Just 4 hours and 30 minutes after the frosty start, Chris Peverada, 26, of Albuquerque flew over the finish line to capture first, with Boulderite Matthias Messner, 32, 2nd in 4:41:08 and Albuquerque’s Andrew Hahn, 40, sneaking under 5 hours with 4:59:12. As the day rolled on, many more of the 107 male finishers arrived, including Masters winner Steve Peterson, of Reserve in 5:27:18 (Ken starts this Masters division at age 45, a nice change of practice).

Women were grinning and zippy as usual, all 31 of us eating up the climbs and flying down the technical descents with aplomb. Michelle Hummel, 28, brought home the winning cowbell for Albuquerque in 5:33:07. That’s right, I said cowbell. Top finishers were awarded lovely – and highly functional – brass cowbells for their pains. I rarely find race awards all that exciting (sorry, RDs of the ultra world), but when I do, it’s something weird like a cowbell. Next up was Stephanie Lynn, 32, of Farmington in 5:52:08 and Albuquerque’s Stefanie Tierney, 34, in 6:04:19. Molly Roberts, 45, claimed her Masters title for Albuquerque with a 6:42:02.

And so the early afternoon progressed at the finish area, the smell of food welcoming the always smiling running “team” of Ryan Wixom and Sean Cunniff, just out for a fun run in the mountains. They were plopped in camp chairs, like many other runners, with food and beverages already digesting by the time I plodded in more than 30 minutes later. I nearly tackled Ken with a bear hug for doing the ultrasphere a major solid with this event.

Mt. Taylor 50K attracts both the speedy and the “get ‘er done” crowd, with a generous final 11.5 hour cutoff. This means the last few runners come in around 5:30 p.m., well before dark and the oncoming cold. Ken and Margaret greet each and every one, getting them typed into the finishing list, handing out awards and raffled giveaways, and smiling until it seemed that their faces would freeze. Not that there’s anything wrong with that.

Ultimately a total of 138 finishers hike, skip, and dance their way back to Rock Tank for a finisher’s medal and the chance to nosh on burgers and brats while chatting about trail adventures. Some of those stories are visible and still bleeding at the finish line, or they’ve been amassed inside as internal battles and drawn-out narratives, waiting to spill out in the camaraderie of post-race bonding and brat-induced bliss. Thanks for another great year, Ken!