

The weekend is not beginning smoothly, but it's my own fault. I didn't do my geography research, didn't download offline Google Maps, and didn't bring a paper road map. When Google Maps offers me two different routes to Grants, New Mexico, I simply choose the second offering and hit the open road.

Now here I am, on a sandy and quickly degrading unpaved road on the Navajo Nation's off-reservation trust land south of Farmington, and I have no tools to find out how bad the road will get. Of course, the road is deserted and so there's no one to ask either.

I turn the car around and point north, retracing my steps and joining up with Google Maps' first route. It's a waste of about two hours, and a good reminder for tomorrow's Mt. Taylor 50k—and life in general—that a couple minutes of effort now may save hours later. Consider the little problems so they can't become big ones.

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As the last blue daylight sinks from Friday night's sky, I pull into the starting-line parking lot at 9,500 feet on the flanks of Mt. Taylor, the massive high point among an ancient volcanic field which rises thousands of feet above the rest of this part of New Mexico. I slide my car into the space next to Sean Meissner's truck camper. It was Sean's encouragement that led me to the Mt. Taylor 50k starting line. He'd run this race once before, loved it, and was headed back. We've known each other for something like a decade, and we can always pick up conversation like the gaps of time between seeing each other don't exist. Now that we're both here, we chat in the dark for a while before each settling into our gear preparation and a night of sleep.

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Before sunrise on Saturday, we racers are sent up Mt. Taylor. It's the crepuscular hour, light enough to see a little but not bright enough to trail run, so we are a passel of bobbing lights headed uphill. It's far warmer than I'd expected, after reading race reports from previous years where a common denominator was a below-freezing start line. Today, I'm shedding my wind jacket at mile 2.5, needing only a t-shirt, shorts, and gloves to crest the rim of Mt. Taylor's caldera and drop off the other side.



Being a stranger in a strange land—a state removed from my ‘home’ trail running community of eastern Utah and western Colorado—I am surprised and delighted when a woman at La Mosca Lookout Aid Station cheers me by name and gives me a drink. Sarah Willis is one of the many Albuquerque area runners participating in or helping put on today’s race. Thank you for making me feel at home!

The next five-ish miles are dirt-road tumbling off the high reaches of Mt. Taylor. Runners whiz past, me unable to turn my legs over any faster. I feel good today, so it’s not as if there are any bad feelings from the waist down. It’s just that my legs won’t hustle. *That’s what you get after a summer of stomping around high-altitude mountains where focused running is a rarity*, I think to myself.

The Spud Patch Aid Station around mile 10 is riotous. First, it’s ‘staffed’ by a huge group of Boy Scouts, all of them legit cheering all of us in and out of their aid station. And second, race director Ken Gordon himself is here, and he seems giddy like a kid on Christmas. It’s easy to carry the energy of Spud Patch back onto the trail with me.

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The race’s halfway point has come and gone. Here, the famous Continental Divide Trail (CDT) alternates between joining old doubletrack roads and cutting singletrack through the woods on its own. There’s no rhythm to be found and a little concentration is warranted to stay the course.

Pretty much anyone with Mt. Taylor 50k experience told me before the race, “Watch out for the climb to the Mt. Taylor summit in the second half! It’s hard.” So, in these meandering CDT miles, I physically chill, taking time to drink all of my water bottle and up my hourly caloric intake from 200 to 300 calories, in preparation for the work ahead. For the last mile before the Gooseberry Aid Station, we run on a wide, smooth forest-service road that slants gently downhill. No concentration on running is required, and so this road offers me few minutes of mental space to center myself for what follows.

I love big climbs, whether it’s the kind of terrain and distance on which you run, hike, or mix in some of both. The climb to Mt. Taylor’s summit is a little over three miles and has 2,000 feet of vertical gain, topping out at about 11,300 feet. The trail surface is good most of the way, with only a couple steep pitches thrown into an otherwise moderate grade. What this means is that I can mix in a bit of running with my powerhiking. An hour goes by and suddenly the summit arrives.

The race photographer perched up here asks me if I would like my photo taken on top—yes, please! I smile ridiculously big as all of northern New Mexico spreads around us and a warm sun shines through a cool breeze. Why is it that the body is able to so quickly forget the work involved in getting to a mountaintop when the mind takes in a summit view?



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No one warned me about Water Canyon! It’s not the Mt. Taylor summit that is the hardest for me; it’s what comes next in Water Canyon.

Maybe it's the fall season or maybe its name is a four-season misnomer, but there is no water in Water Canyon—nothing to splash on face and arms to cool oneself from the warm, wind-sheltered, sunny canyon. And, dropping off the caldera rim to its east side some 1,000 vertical feet when one's inner compass knows the finish line is west off the top is a major mind trick. Down, down, down we go, all the time knowing that all this descent is followed by equal ascent.

For anyone who reads this report and runs the Mt. Taylor 50k: here is a warning for Water Canyon. When you top out on Mt. Taylor, use the mile descent from there to the Caldera Rim Aid Station, through which you will pass twice on the way in and out of Water Canyon, to intentionally prepare yourself for it. Get in some water and food. Get in a mindset to do some more hard work. Like the hike to the summit, Water Canyon doesn't last forever, but good feelings will make it much easier and more enjoyable.

In Water Canyon, I am thankful to have the motivating—and distracting—company of Sarah Eury. We are cat and mouse-ing each other for the race's final 10 miles, she busting past me on the downhills and me squeaking in front of her on the uphills. She's Colorado Front Range-er who has run Mt. Taylor several times before, and I do my best to shadow her expertise.

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The final two miles of the Mt. Taylor are a fabulous free fall, 1,000 feet or so off Mt. Taylor's high shoulder to the finish line at around 9,500 feet. At 500 feet per mile's worth of descent, you can really open it up and run.

The freedom afforded by the downhill is one of the best feelings I know in trail running. It's work, of course, not true free movement—your quadriceps muscles always seem to remind you of this. But the freedom of soul offered by moving swiftly downhill along a trail, of creating your own cooling wind, of letting gravity do at least some of the job for you: this is what I love.

About that cat-and-mouse game? I am ultimately the mouse and Sarah Eury is the cat. She passes me right before the finish, her downhill running skills superior to mine. No matter, though, I cross the line feeling jubilant.

Race director Margaret Gordon is there to welcome Sarah and I—and all the other runners—in. She bears our medals, a prize for finishing among the top-five women, and a handmade bracelet she and her friend created for all the female finishers. Right after that is a hug from Ken Gordon, a greeting from Sean Meissner who had his own great race, and a visit to the finish-line buffet—delicious barbeque from Albuquerque!



My race lasts six hours and 12 minutes, but really the day is just getting started. Sean and I retreat to our cars a short distance away to change out of our dirt- and salt-encrusted clothes and into comfy sandals. We head back to the finish to cheer on the rest of the race finishers, enjoy the high-altitude air of northern New Mexico, have a couple more BBQ servings, and chat away the afternoon.

When the cloak of evening begins to enshroud the finish and the last runners have crossed the line, we bid the Gordons and Mt. Taylor good bye and head downhill, en route to dispersed camping on the Bureau of Land Management lands in the wide-open desert far below. When I crawl into my sleeping bag, my legs twitch, still in neurologic overload from today. But as I watch the Milky Way arc through the black, velvety sky, a calmness overwhelms me and I lapse into the contented sleep of a day well lived.

Thanks to Ken and Margaret Gordon and all of the Mt. Taylor 50k volunteers who engineer and cultivate this fantastic race. Thanks to the volunteers who cheered for me and filled my bottles—your full-service aid stations are as good as they get. Thanks to those who set the track with those perfect course markings. Thanks to the other runners with whom I shared the course, for your little conversations, inspiration, and motivation, especially Sarah Eury.