

# The Running of the Bull Run Run

Or, how I looked for a bluebell and found a 50-mile race.

BY JEFF HOROWITZ

I don't believe in ultramarathons. I want to be clear about that. I mean, I know they exist, unlike Santa and the Easter Bunny. It's just that I don't think they're something I can do. Not that I haven't done them—I've run two 50-milers and a 34-miler. I just don't feel like I really *owned* them, you know? Like I knew what I was doing and ran them the way I wanted to, like I do with the marathon. I guess you could say that I've got issues with ultras.

So running another ultramarathon wasn't really on the top of my to-do list when Gaynor brought up the subject. Gaynor can best be described as being kind of like Sandy Duncan doing Peter Pan, but in an even better mood. She's small, with an angular face and short hair, and she's always upbeat and smiling, even when she's complaining, which is a trick I've yet to learn. Gaynor is my massage therapist, so I'm always happy to see her, even when she's beating me up on the massage table and I'm wincing in pain. Maybe you could say that I've got issues with my massages, too.

When I received an e-mail from Gaynor one morning, then, running an ultra was about the furthest thing from my mind. I was expecting to hear about when she could fit me in for our next session, but instead, she had written to tell me that registration for the Bull Run Run 50-Miler had just opened. That's a race I had signed up for a few years earlier but ultimately had to skip because of a scheduling conflict. I had heard that the Bull Run 50 is one of the best ultras in the country, a beautiful but difficult run with a few small stream crossings that can get very muddy in wet weather. At the time, I had thought it would be a great race to try. I had long since gotten over that when I received Gaynor's e-mail, so I ignored the subject when I wrote back to her. I thought if I didn't respond, maybe she would forget that she brought it up at all, and it would just go away.

► The author feeling irrationally exuberant early in the race.

Fat chance. A few days later, when Gaynor had me on her massage table in a weakened state, she brought up the race again. Gaynor was going to run it and wanted a partner in crime, so she wisely appealed to my vanity by saying how easy it would be for someone in my excellent condition to run it. The unspoken subtext was that I was a fraidy-cat if I didn't do it, and I didn't want to be shown up by a little wisp of a girl, did I? Her tactics were juvenile and completely transparent, so of course they worked. I went home that night and signed up for the race online. As soon as I hit the send button, I wondered, and not for the first time, whether someone with all the schooling I've had shouldn't be a bit smarter than that.

And that's how I got roped into doing the Bull Run Run 50-Mile Race.

## Brutal hills, bloody hills

Bull Run is a little slip of water that runs near the Occoquan River in northern Virginia. What we would call a stream in New York, where I was born and raised, is called a run in the South. In the nearby town of Clifton lies Hemlock Overlook Regional Park, which contains a hilly trail that runs alongside, and sometimes over and through, these waters. In 1992, a bunch of crazy trail runners—and are there really any other kind?—formed the Virginia Happy Trails Running Club, with the sole mission of creating a 50-mile race along this trail. Thus was born the Bull Run Run, first held in April 1993, complete with the stuttering name.

There's a lot of history in those hills. The first major battle of the Civil War took place nearby in the town of Manassas on July 21, 1861, when a Northern force of 35,000 raw recruits marched against an army of some 21,000 untrained



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Confederates for control of a strategically important railroad junction. Northerners had believed that the Southern rebellion would be easily put down, and many new recruits feared that they would miss the glory of battle altogether. Those fears were rudely dispelled when the Confederates routed the Union troops, who fled back to nearby Washington, DC in a confused retreat. With losses from the battle totaling 460 Union soldiers and 387 Confederate soldiers killed, many on both sides suddenly realized that the war might end up being far longer and bloodier than most people expected.

A year later, on August 28, 1862, two larger and more experienced armies clashed again at Manassas, when 77,000 Union troops marched against 55,000 Confederates. The South won again, losing 1,481 soldiers over three days against the Union's loss of 7,724 men. But the Union's loss was not as calamitous as it had been a year earlier—strategically speaking, at least—and historians have looked upon the Confederates' inability to deliver a knockout blow in the fields near Bull Run as a crucial turning point in the war.

Almost 150 years later, the Civil War still rages in these hills, though without the loss of life and high stakes of those earlier, bloody times. The Bull Run Run keeps the memory of those battles alive in its race theme. In 2009, the race director planned to pit the North against the South for bragging rights on the trails, with runners who finished under 10 hours scored for the side they had enlisted in or been conscripted for.

It wasn't the competition from other runners that concerned me, however; it was the race itself. The BRR is considered a tough course, with very steep climbs and drops checkered with a minefield of rocks and water crossings. Veterans break this race down into four sections: the 16.7-mile upstream section, the 11-mile downstream section, the notorious 10-mile Do Loop, and the 12.5-mile final stretch to the finish line. On the course map, the Do Loop looks like a keyhole route, with a short loop at the end of an out-and-back. But in actuality it's a couple of loops, with the official three-mile Do Loop itself laid out on crisscrossing trails. The potential for confusion is legendary; it's known as the Vortex, where runners go in and are never seen or heard from again. It's said that there are still runners from past years out there, trying to find their way out. I began to wonder whether I should have read the waiver on the application a bit more closely.

But for all its history and challenges, the race is most famous for a small lavender-colored flower called the Virginia bluebell. Even though the flower is supposed to be in full bloom on race day, the bell-shaped flower is as fragile as it is beautiful, so with rainy conditions typical of race day, there's never a guarantee that the flower will even be on view.

Brutal hills. Mud. A labyrinthine course. A reclusive flower.

This was going to be an interesting race.

## Making it a team effort

Gaynor is a unique kind of person and a unique kind of runner. She has given up on all road running—races, training, running to catch a bus, all of it. If it's on concrete or asphalt, Gaynor wants no part of it. She's convinced that her body can't take it. But she has learned that her body can take hour after hour of running on forest trails and scrambling across rocks and roots. So that's all she does, but pretty much only in races. Her thin training regimen makes experienced runners wonder how she could possibly survive an ultra. A popular local story tells how a well-known ultrarunner in DC found out that Gaynor was about to run her first 100-miler without ever having run in the dark. He quickly assembled a team and helped guide her through her first night run and then afterward just sat back on her race day and hoped for the best. He needn't have worried; Gaynor did fine in the race, which she tends to do. What he didn't know was that beneath her easygoing manner is a deep wellspring of stubbornness, which makes her a typical ultrarunner, I suppose.

## And Marti makes three

Race day came all too soon, as is usually the case with races for which I feel ill-prepared. I picked up Gaynor in the predawn stillness and drove us to the Virginian countryside, where a mass of cars had invaded Hemlock Park's small parking area. We parked and followed the runners making their way toward a cabin in a clearing, where volunteers were handing out race numbers, technical shirts, and beer glasses bearing the race logo.

As it turned out, I wasn't going to be her only companion on race day; her friend Marti would be joining us. Gaynor found Marti and introduced us. She was tall and thin, with an easy smile, and looked every bit the fit long-distance runner that she was. But she has a reputation for being a mule in gazelle's clothing; she had raced alongside Gaynor and paced her in several epic runs in the past, including a rainy, awful BRR several years earlier. Marti disclaimed any expertise in ultrarunning, though. "I don't give a damn how the body works," she said. "I just want to run." When I passed this along to Gaynor later, she laughed and said, "Oh, Marti's so full of it. She studies the training theories as much as anyone."

We all dropped our gear off at a covered shelter nearby, and then we joined the other 311 starters on the roadway. After a short blast from a bullhorn, the 17th running of the Bull Run Run was on.

The beginning of an ultra is always strange to me for its lack of strangeness. I've never had a feeling of the momentousness that you would think should accompany such a big undertaking. Near as I could tell, no one else seems to feel any seriousness or dread either. In the BRR, as in the other ultras I've done, we all set out as if we were on a mass training run, expecting to be done in an hour

or two. I looked down at my legs and wondered if they would forgive me when they learned the truth.

After a quick three-quarter-mile loop around the park, we descended onto a single-track trail, where we would remain for most of the race. This was the calm before the storm, as we ran a mostly flat section along Bull Run Creek and into Bull Run Park. The bluebells were anything but shy here, ostentatiously laid out in lavender carpets along the trail. It was simply stunning. It was hard not to wax poetic about it, and many of us spent miles guessing whether the glorious display was due to the previous year's storms, which had dumped plenty of nutrient-rich sediment onto the soil. We were in pure runner's heaven.

Bluebells weren't the only splashes of color on the trail, though. Blue ribbons hung from tree limbs, marking the trail, and were doubled when they designated a turn. Blue blazes painted on the trees also marked the route, and other colors could be seen painted on trees as well. Red ribbons on the ground warned runners where not to tread.

Meanwhile, Gaynor and Marti were the doyennes of the trail, with runners coming up to them to catch up on news and gossip and to reminisce about races past. The ultra crowd seemed to be a close-knit club, friendly and familiar to anyone who became a regular. With Marti and Gaynor, I was clearly among ultrarunning royalty.

Our first aid station came up on us quickly at mile seven. It was well stocked with water, sports drink, soda pop, cookies, chips, crackers, and candy. These stations would come along every five miles or so, in a fashion typical of ultras, but I kept my eyes open for the one that had the bottle of liquor rumored to be a tradition of the race.

After continuing on for a short while, we reversed field and returned to Hemlock Park. The day was turning out to be beautiful for a run in the woods—clear and warm, with temperatures in the 70s. There was none of the rain and muck that had plagued runners in earlier years. Still, it wasn't completely dry; at one point logs had been laid across the trail, providing safe passage over a perennially soggy patch. I carefully hopped the logs, but to my right another runner fearlessly dove straight into the mud. Just as I wondered whether I was being prissy for not doing the same, I heard a loud sucking sound and saw that the runner had suddenly lost one shoe. We both laughed as he dropped to his knees and began fishing around in the mud for his lost footwear.

"I'm not worried about it," he said. "A friend is meeting me later with new shoes." Apparently, this sort of thing happens a lot.

Gaynor, meanwhile, was not doing quite as well. She had been ill recently and now was breathing heavily and laboring even on the flats. Marti and I tried to boost her spirits by keeping up a steady banter. "Come on, G-Girl!" Marti called out, as I answered back with "Remember: no pain, no Gaynor!" The aid stations,

► Miles of smiles: Gaynor making it look easy.

we declared, were for Gaynorade. I wasn't sure if we were helping, but Gaynor kept running. Maybe she was just trying to get away from us.

We left Hemlock Park again and veered toward the river and the toughest portion of the trail, in Fountainhead Park. There was no single monstrous climb, just rolling hills, ranging from challenging to daunting, for 11 miles. The temperature, so pleasant earlier, now rose up dangerously, but salty chips and electrolyte capsules at the aid stations gave us the edge we needed.

At mile 26 we pulled into the Wolf Shoals Run aid station, famous for its ice cream sandwiches. I couldn't help but think that at this point in most of my races, I would be crossing the finish line. But as we finished downing our snacks and loading up on fluids before our plunge back into the woods, I tried not to think about the fact that we were only barely more than halfway done.



## Into the Vortex

Marti was running effortlessly, like a machine, and Gaynor seemed rejuvenated. Having fought through the worst of her problems, she was now running smoothly. I should have worried more about myself; I was starting to feel an ominous twinge in the hip flexor on my left side. Not much to do about that except keep running and hope for the best. Besides, I had other things to worry about; up ahead was the beginning of the Do Loop. As we drew closer, I began to worry about the dreaded Vortex and became more and more like the kid in the back seat on a long car ride:

Me: "Are we there yet?"

Gaynor: "No, not yet."

Me: "Now?"

Marti: "No, still not yet."

Me: “How about now?”

And so on.

Up ahead, something unnatural caught my eye. As we neared, I recognized it as a pair of old, rusting vintage cars, nestled impossibly in the woods. They must have been at least a half-century old, but their decrepitude only gave them more character. As I monitored my aches and pains, I wished I could say the same of myself.

And then: splash! I had gotten careless, slipped on a rock, and stepped deep into a pool of brackish water. I knew there were no friends waiting up ahead with nice clean shoes for me, and runners nearby tsk-tsked in sympathy, but as I got back into my running rhythm, I was surprised to find that the cool water in my shoe actually felt refreshing.

After a five-mile approach, we reached another aid station and then finally entered Do Loop. The hills here were short but steep, and the trails were still covered in leaves. I saw runners through the trees heading off in different directions, and sounds appeared to come randomly at us from all angles. I wondered how a course that seemed so simple on paper could seem so confusing on the ground. We met up with Ryan, whom Marti knew, and he serenaded us in German. It was a song by a band called The Doctors, Ryan told us, so named in honor of a demand by one of the band member’s mothers that her son go to medical school. The song, Ryan explained, was called “Men Are Pigs.” We all laughed, climbed another hill, and left the Do Loop behind us.

We had now reached mile 38. The pain in my hip flexor had reduced me to walking. When I managed to run, I dug my fingers deep into my hip flexors and tried



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► All business: Marti on the trail.

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to massage them, achieving only limited success. The early, carefree miles were long behind me, and I was starting to suffer. It was, I acknowledged, why I had really agreed to run the Bull Run Run: to prove to myself that even after all my years of running, I was still the kind of athlete who would not stop, despite fatigue and pain. And I knew that I was not alone. This was why we're all here, really, struggling and suffering while others slept in late or reached across the table for a second croissant. We were the kind of people who did not stop.

Marti and Gaynor pulled ahead of me, running strongly, and I silently released them, marveling at their strength. But then they looked back at me across the gap and stopped, silently asking me a question: Would I still run with them? I answered wordlessly by picking up my pace to catch up with them. We reformed our little pack and made our way forward. Gaynor pressed me to take one of her electrolyte capsules, which did seem to help as we left the woods and ran along a rock-strewn path encircling a soccer field. Around us were families picnicking and watching the game. We passed like ghosts without acknowledging them. They did not cheer for us. We were foreigners to each other, violating the laws of physics by occupying two different worlds in the same space.

Marti told us that her husband would be ahead on the trail with their dogs, waiting eagerly to see us (well, to see her, of course, but she was being kind). We hit another aid station where the volunteers were cooking up quesadillas and surreptitiously offering shots of whiskey. None of the runners I saw took a swig, but the proprieties had been observed and the tradition kept alive.

There were now five miles to go. I committed myself to running the rest of the way as we climbed two more hills and circled back around the soccer field we had passed earlier. Two miles left, and we were back along the Bull Run. Gaynor and Marti shouted out, having spotted Marti's husband, dogs in tow. We pressed onward as I calculated how much time we had left to run. Then I tried to think about not thinking and focused simply on the profound act of putting one foot in front of the other. *Just run*, I thought. *Just run, just run, just run, just run. Runrunrunrunrunrun.*

We burst into a clearing. Ahead of us was a short hill. Beyond it, I knew, was the finish line.

## Furl the flags, for the battle's done

Gaynor climbed the hill and flew through the finish line, looking for all the world as though she was debating whether to turn around and do it again. I managed a weak smile as I crossed. A volunteer handed me a race pin, and another one gave me a green, long-sleeve, technical finisher's shirt. Across the back of the zippered shirt was a quote from the Union's Major General John Pope, dated August 1862: "Be Expeditious, and the Day is Our Own." And so we from the North were,

because I was also given a bandanna signifying membership in the victorious army. Of the 97 runners who finished in under 10 hours, 73 were from the North and 24 were from the South. The North had finally won at Bull Run.

Overall, of the 314 starters, 266 finished the race, with 44 percent of them being first-timers. Leigh Schmitt finished in 6:31:14, winning the BRR men's title for the fourth time, while Amy Sproston finished first woman in 7:34:05, claiming her second BRR victory.

The finisher's area was small but festive, with music playing and a cookout in progress. What appealed to me most, though, was an inviting stretch of grass just to my left. I surrendered to gravity and lay flat on my back, wondering how long it would take for the grass and weeds to grow over me.

"Hey, Jeff! How was it?" I squinted my eyes open and saw Mike Broderick standing over me. Mike is an instructor with the Road Runners Club of America, helping teach its coaching certification program. He's also a local legend in the ultrarunning community, having recently survived horrific weather during a 100-mile race. He was using the Bull Run Run as a training run.

"It was good, Mike. Really good." I was hoping he wasn't expecting me to get up and shake his hand. Or lift my head.

Mike had had a good day, and as he prowled the crowd, looking for his friends, he exuded the joy of motion. I, on the other hand, wasn't going anywhere. I wondered about my gear bag, which lay on a picnic table some 50 feet away. Fifty loooong feet.

► Amy Sproston, the overall women's winner, cruising in the early miles of the race.



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Gaynor sat down next to me.

“Hey, how are you? I’m heading over to the gear check. Want me to get your bag?”

Oh, yes, God, yes!

“Um, sure. If you’re going over there anyway, I mean.”

Little by little, my energy returned, and I made my way over to the cookout. A long slug of cold, caffeinated soda and a sizzling burger put me back on an even keel, and I started thinking that this was actually a pretty good day after all. It had been a beautiful race, and I could now hold my head up high around Gaynor, confident in the fact that I had taken up her challenge and comforted in the knowledge that it was over and done with.

It was only a few days later that Gaynor called to check in with me. “You know,” she said. “I’m planning on running a 100-miler this summer. You should definitely do that with me.”

Here we go again.

## Bull Run Run

Hemlock Overlook Park is not accessible by public transportation, so you should plan to drive in, either directly or after flying into Dulles International Airport or Reagan National Airport and renting a car. (I did spot someone riding out of the park on his bike after running the race, which both impressed and intimidated me and also left me wondering about his sanity.)

With a car, any lodging in the DC metro area is feasible, but the easiest, most economical, and most convenient lodging would be to use the dorm-style bunks that are available at Hemlock Overlook Park. They cost only \$30 per person for Friday night, although you’ll need your own bedding or sleeping bag and towels. If you stay in one of these dormitories, you’ll be just about 30 yards from the starting line on race morning. The bunks are not available for Saturday night, and no camping is allowed in the park, but campsites are available nearby. There is a prerace pasta dinner, and a light breakfast is offered on race morning.

The race starts at 6:30 A.M., and there is a 13-hour limit with intermediate cutoffs. There are no early starts, and the entries are not transferable.

For more information, visit the race Web site at <http://www.vhtrc.org/>.

Bluebells photo © Charlie Miracle

