

Second Verse Same as the First...NOT!

By Rebekah Trittioe

Last year I had the opportunity to run an ultra in the company of my then 15 year old son, Caleb. We ran the Holiday Lake 50K++ ultra, 34.4 miles in length according to a runner's GPS instrument. The conditions were cold and rainy with temperatures in the low 30's. In my decade of ultrarunning, I have never encountered as much slick, shoe-sucking mud as last year on race day. Nevertheless, Caleb and I ran along side-by-side and often in the company of other ultra-running friends. He ran when I ran, walked when I walked. He never said a whole lot, preferring to listen to my relentless chatter and staying true to his overall laid back and quiet spirit. He would simply nod his head in acknowledgement to the many who gave him verbal notes of encouragement as they encountered us on the race course. We completed the race in 6:22, positioning Caleb as the youngest runner ever to cross the finish line. It was a great accomplishment for Caleb and I was overjoyed to be apart of it.

But now, a year later, I have opportunity to write a new story about my run with another son. However, this time the story centers around my 12 year old, Seth. The only thing that was similar to last year's run was the distance. Two different kids, two different personalities, and two completely different race experiences. The second verse was certainly different from the first!

It's tough to be a second child. Comparisons are always being made, especially when the oldest is very bright and talented. My two kids are typical first-born, second-born. Caleb is quiet and cerebral, getting visibly excited about little other than soccer. Seth, on the other hand, holds nothing back. From day one, he was full steam ahead. Being fearful or tentative is unknown to him. He rides his motorcycle with wild abandon and seems to take great delight in scaring his mother half to death with his antics. He loves being the center of attention and making people laugh. Bragging rights to overtaking Caleb's status as "the youngest finisher" was Seth's impetus to run. The feat was something that could never be taken away.

His first long run in the mountains was on New Year's Day. We were in the company of several other runners from the area. As expected, there was nothing tentative about his approach to the day. He was the first to slip hunks of ice down the other runner's shirts – time and time again. He laughed as we climbed a mountain and was happy to run in the lead down the parkway. On the final descent down a dirt road to our parked cars, he tore off ahead of everyone to the finish. Of course, when some of the guys decided to jump in the swiftly moving stream of icy cold water, he was right there with them. He didn't seem to consider that he had not brought warm, dry clothes to change into. So, off we drove from that run, Seth shivering and blue-lipped, wrapped only in a towel, but as pleased with himself as could be.

Some have questioned whether a 12 year old should be running ultras. There is concern for the appropriateness and risk of injury from mile after mile of training. Well, in the case of my two boys, injury from over-distance was never an issue! For Seth, preparation for the race this year consisted of a 13 miler in the mountains, a single loop out at Holiday Lake, two 11.3 mile road runs and a handful of other 30 minute treadmill or Nordic track workouts. Indoor soccer once or twice a week and hour-long sessions of DDR (Dance, Dance Revolution) rounded out Seth's preparation. No, overtraining was not a problem! However, both of them have been around ultras enough to know that if you just keep going, you can finish. Besides, kids are resilient and I knew that one six-hour period of exercise was not going to kill them.

Seth took great delight in wearing his name tag at the pre-race dinner. A name tag meant that he was a runner, a part of a select group of people who ran ultramarathons. It meant that he belonged. Unlike his more reserved brother, he moved easily among the runners and organizers, chatting with those two, three, four and even five times his age! He was a little restless as we climbed in our sleeping bags in the bunk house. Nevertheless, it wasn't long until he fell a sleep. As morning was heralded by David Horton's rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner, he quickly changed into his running clothes, pinned on his race number and joined the others for breakfast.

Given the nature of the course, I had told him that we wanted to start about a third of the way back from the front-runners. The first two miles is on narrow single track, making it difficult to pass. Seth hit the trail ahead of me and fell into line behind a big tall guy. The pace was a little fast but I thought it would be okay until we got a where the trail widened into an old road, allowing us to slow down without getting run over. Nevertheless, Seth showed no sign of slowing down, despite my occasional warnings. We reached the first aid station in the top 30. As we gulped down a drink, I sternly told Seth that he had to slow it down. Fat chance.

As we ran on, I found that we actually did not talk very much. In all honesty, it was hard for me to talk at times. Seth kept pushing the pace, almost always ten feet in front of me. When we would get to a walking hill, it would be me that was ten feet ahead. I needed to run faster and he needed to walk faster. Within three miles of halfway point, we fell in with a couple of guys, one of which Seth knew and admired. Off he went, arriving at the aid station about 75 yards in front of me. I was a little annoyed. Didn't he understand the plan to "run together"? And, though I honestly was trying to keep him from "blowing up", it was just a little embarrassing to have the lad beat me in.

Another warning to slow down was given as we headed back out on the return loop. It was actually quite difficult for me to keep up. I think that Seth was a little annoyed as well, thinking that I was holding him back from greatness and glory. At one point he quipped. "I feel as good as I did at the start." Hum. This could be trouble for an under trained 47 year old mother. What if he could actually hold on and keep this pace? I decided that I would have to hang on as long as possible and if I had to, release him to his own folly. Maybe it would be my desire to run side-by-side with my second born that would have to be abandoned. Maybe Seth was destined to finish this race without his mother. What a dreadful thought! However, at about 19 or 20 miles and a long, slow uphill, the tide turned and I knew that I might be able to regain control of this situation.

It wasn't as though he started whining. I just started to notice how slowly he was climbing. When we got to a seemingly endless stretch of relatively flat single track, he requested frequent walk breaks. When I asked, he said that his butt hurt but never complained beyond that. Getting to the next aid station gave him opportunity to eat and drink and suck down some ibuprofen. I tried to encourage him by telling him that we were over the hump. Now, the aid stations on the way back were no more than about 3 miles apart. "Come on, Seth, we have got to keep moving."

In the next 12 miles, Seth was a little more willing to take my lead. I would pick out a point to which we would run before walking, then another point at which we would run again. I had to encourage him to walk a little faster as I would easily pull away during those periods. However, when the time came to run, Seth never lost his form. But, would he ever run right next to me? Seldom. It was always a few steps ahead. As I tucked my ego into my back pocket, I would try to start a short conversation. "Seth, what are you thinking about right now?". "I want my motorcycle", would be his reply. "Seth, how are you feeling?" "I just want to be done." His attitude was typical of a tired ultrarunner; nothing more, nothing less. But, as he commented that we would never beat Caleb's time, I was concerned that it would become a long walk home.

Gary (my husband, Seth's father) met us again with six miles to go. Since I did not have a watch, I quietly asked him the time. Wow! It was only 11:35. I decided to tell Seth the news. "Seth, do you realize that we have a great chance of beating Caleb's time? And, if we really push, we could possibly slip in under six hours." I should have waited to tell him this until there was only three miles to go. His eyes glared, his spirits lifted, and I was again breathing hard in an effort to catch his little tail flying down the road. It was the proverbial horse heading for the barn. Finally, after about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile, I sharply yelled out a desperate "Seth"! He stopped dead in his tracks as I approached. "Seth, you are running on pure adrenalin. It won't last for another 5 miles. You have to settle down and run smart!" "Well, why don't we just walk the rest? I know I can beat Caleb but I want to break 6", he retorted. Uh oh. We have a problem, Houston.

It's hard to explain the difference between running smart and running wildly to achieve a goal. I regretted

telling him we might be able to get in under six hours. Given those last six miles, it would be tough for us even if not at the end of a race. But now, I wondered if my own insecurity about being able to hold on was keeping him from his own quest. Maybe I should just let him go and see what happened. But, there was no time to ponder the question any longer. We both began to run again, this time at a quick but not unrealistic pace.

Before long, we climbed the hill leading to the last aid station. We both had run very strong after that last encounter and anticipated a walking break. Seth was even goofing around a little as we got within sight of the station. We gulped down some drink, said our goodbyes and began the last assault in finishing the race.

We ran steadily, passing a number of people in this final section. As we hit the final two miles of single track, I took the lead and told Seth to follow. He did so willingly and with nary a protest. I was never more proud of him. We pushed ourselves and ran in unison. Finally, this was the "warm and fuzzy" feeling that I had been wanting all day long. My son and I were getting closer with every step to the goal and our wills and efforts had finally merged into one. At one point, a shout and thud behind me indicated that Seth had taken a hard fall. But, he was not to be deterred. He leaped to his feet and continued on, hardly a second wasted. We passed another group of runners before hitting final 300 yards of pavement leading to the finish. Seth and I ran side-by-side. Some of those watching shouted out for Seth to sprint ahead of me. Though I know this last minute spurt had been in Seth's plans prior to the race, Seth made no effort to move ahead. We crossed under the finish banner- together: mother and son, ultrarunner and ultrarunner. I have never been more proud!

Anyone have a kid I can rent for next year's race? I'm all out!