

# 50 miles of Maryland

JFK 50 memorial run through the Appalachians is oldest ultra-marathon on continent

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

BOONSBORO, MARYLAND—When faced with the task of selecting a name, every so often the earliest founders get it right. This tiny town of Boonsboro in the Civil War sections of Maryland may have been named after Daniel Boone's cousin, but it would seem just as likely that the first settlers simply stared over the rolling expanses and sensed they were surely in the boonies.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. Indeed, our group of four ultra runners have driven 660 kilometres south from Toronto to experience this terrain, literally step by step. We're here for the oldest and largest ultra-marathon in North America.

This is the JFK 50, a 50-mile race held annually on the third Saturday in November, as a memorial to the president, who was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963.

Shortly before his death, Kennedy said he felt U.S. marines should be able to march 50 miles in under 20 hours, believing that to be a minimum level of fitness. As an idea, it soon spread and 50-mile hikes became a cult hit.

Eventually the phenomena passed, though the event in Maryland held strong, partly out of patriotism as well as the tenacity of the local running community.

The route will see us race from the centre of Boonsboro, down a street of quaint porches and American flags, and then east to the Appalachian

Trail, four kilometres away.

There are more than 1,000 runners on the line this morning, including a handful of Canadians. The winner will finish in just under six hours. The majority of us will be pounding it out for nine to 10 hours.

The standard runner here looks nothing like the sleek, shimmery-clothed speedsters that crowd the start of a typical road race. This group is older, and if not exactly be-draggled, certainly grizzled. Most wear a permanent wince, as if they're happiest when suffering. They'll have lots of reasons to be pleased today.

Save for the brief trek through the town, the race really begins on the trail. Like an endless row of ants, we enter it single file, teetering over jagged rocks for almost 22 kilometres.

The Appalachian Trail runs down the Eastern U.S. in a nearly straight line from Maine to Georgia. We'll tackle only the tiniest of sections, yet our sliver is all knife-edged rock set at treacherous angles. Under a canopy of maple trees almost the entire way, the views are spectacular.

Unfortunately it's only newbies and the soon-to-be-injured who soak in the sights on this part of the course. A friend I'm with takes her eyes off the path for a moment and goes down hard, badly gashing her knee on the rocks. A message is sent, and with each passing kilometre, I find my nerves, and balance, increasingly strained. Not having looked at the course in advance — sometimes ignorance is bliss — I begin to worry the entire day will be spent bumbling over lethal shards. Then the switchbacks begin, dropping us 300 metres down, out of the forest and onto the C&O Canal Towpath, where an aid

station and a huge gathering of local supporters stand waiting.

The canal was built early in the 19th century to connect Washington, D.C. with the coal mines of the Allegheny Mountains. The twists and turns in the plot could, and probably have, filled countless books. Suffice it to say the engineering involved cost more lives and money than expected, and the canal was beset by every conceivable calamity. However, next to this misfortune now runs almost 300 kilometres of groomed trail extending through multiple states and serving as a national historical park.

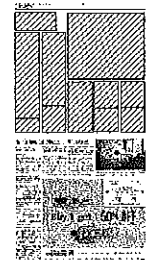
This morning we're only on for 43 of those kilometres; all of it flat, much of it shared with the occasional cyclists and dog walkers. One element of ultras is that participation shrinks as the distance increases. You can often go a long, long time without seeing another runner.

Another element is that iPods and headphones are usually banned, or at least strongly discouraged. In part, it's so you can alert others when passing on a tight path, but also to instill an esprit de corps. It's part of the ultra's ethos to be commiserating with each other and offering encouragement.

I'd happily do both today, but half-way through the trail I'm totally solo and left to conjure up the words of songs to raise my spirits. I settle on Paul Simon's "The Boxer," repeating over and over again to myself "that I've squandered my resistance for a pocketful of mumbles such are promises."

That is, until I hit one of the countless aid stations en route, this one devoted to every kind of Christmas cookie and treat conceivable. The volunteers here, as elsewhere, overflow with exuberance and reassurance, if not actual candour. (If we're still on this trail, we're not "almost there").

Later I meet "Mr. Incredible," a local dentist who cycles the course in a costume from Pixar's *The Incredibles*, with an enormous boom box in the basket of his bike. In addition to a much-appreciated high five, he gives me Carlos Santana's "Smooth" to



hum instead for the next few hours.

The trail keeps going, but at 67 kilometres we turn off sharply and onto pavement for the last stretch home. A volunteer points to the right, towards a long, steep winding hill. When I finally reach the top, rolling countryside unfolds into the distance. It's now mid-afternoon and the sun is shining on the fields. It's stunning, but I'm still alone, with no one in sight ahead or behind me.

I get a sinking feeling that I should

have turned left at the trail. The road is completely deserted. This can't be right, but what to do? I've been running for almost seven hours. Turning back now seems a miserable option, yet if this is the wrong way, every step forward is another mistake. At last, a truck appears with a race official at the wheel. He waves and drives past.

The finish line is somewhere up ahead, though nothing could offer more relief than the sight of that truck. Eventually there are more cars, more pylons, police and volun-

teers. And then the last turn, and a big red banner a few hundred metres away.

I always wish I could fully savour this moment, when there is a crowd on both sides, everyone yelling encouragement. It's one of the most unique and addictive elements of racing. But as ever, this part is just a warm, happy blur — a blessed end to an incredible day.

Noel Hulsman is a Toronto writer. His trip was subsidized by the JFK 50 Mile and the town of Hagerstown.



JOE STRETANSKI

Runners keep pace on the leafy, pastoral trail of the JFK 50. The race attracts more than 1,000 runners.