

Seriously Downhill.... At Dawn!

Downhill (really!) at Dawn is a 13.1 mile race that took place at the Ridgecrest Resort in the beautiful Black Mountain, NC area. It was a first-time event in conjunction with LifeWay Conference Centers. Ron Pratt headed everything up with the help of the Nashville Striders and I have to say that they really did an outstanding job with this inaugural event. If you made a weekend out of it, the event included meals, worship opportunities, running opportunities and a plethora (I love that word!) of indoor/outdoor fun and games for the whole family.

Dawn comes early in Ridgecrest. I was up at 4am having breakfast. The weather was perfect and I slept with the windows to my room open all night. I wandered down to the packet-pickup area and met the rest of the Christian Runners there for a group photo and some happy-chatter. We had a super-fantabulous turnout! Everyone was in a good mood for such an early hour. After all- this event was in celebration of one thing- Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! How exciting to have a running race solely dedicated to Him!!!

Our race packets were FILLED with goodies. Among the goods, a most excellent long-sleeved black high-tech running shirt with the Christian Runners Logo smack on the front and the D@D2008 logo on the back. NICE! Really- anyone who sees it is sure to wish they had one of their own!

We took the group photo and meandered over to the starting line for instructions and a pre-race prayer. I was so excited that Ron asked for one of the Christian Runners to lead the blessing. I was uncharacteristically nervous about leading the prayer. During my pre-race warm-up I asked God to put the right words in my mouth... I prayed from my heart but oddly enough don't remember what was said. I hope that's not a bad thing!

We had about 40 runners on the starting line. Eric Hoyme lead the race out...he immediately established a generous lead with 2 other guys. By the end of the first mile we could no longer see the remaining 3 leaders.

I was in a group of 8 or so runners. J-La (Jen Lazansky) and her husband Brett, Sandy Riggins, Andy Koss and Ryan (Chattanooga CR peeps) were all present in my group. What an awesome opportunity to run with them!!! As we came up on mile 2, we heard a train whistle... It was close! We could see the train off to our right and as we rounded a bend in the road we stumbled upon Eric and the two guys who'd made an early break in the race! They were sitting on the ground having a picnic together while the train passed! Kidding- It was funny, though- The train was SO long that we managed to COMPLETELY regroup every single runner who started the race! About 3 to 4 minutes lapsed until the train passed and then we were off! It was like the race just started over! Pre-race jitters, twice in one day? You bet!

The runners started to get distanced from each other as the next 2 to 4 miles of the race had some pretty good inclines. However, as the Downhill@Dawn website advertised; *"You will experience some absolutely incredible views on this Downhill @ Dawn Half Marathon. The wooded mountains are majestic. You will pass some beautiful streams and rivers and The Old Geyser Park. The entire experience will be a time for celebrating the greatness of our Creator God"*.

**NO KIDDING!** The race promoter was delivering exactly what was promised!!! I love it when expectations are met, don't you? The running course definitely got pretty remote. Miles 5 through 8 were spectacular and took the athletes deep into the forest on a dirt/gravel road that seemed to descend forever along rivers, waterfalls, and steep canyons amidst the deepest green foliage found this side of the Black Forest, GE.

Alas- I found myself running alone in the forest. The smell was amazing...It smelled like breakfast! Yeah- Like what breakfast in Heaven might smell like. It was cool, but not cold. I barely had to pick up my feet to keep moving as the trail was continuously descending with no end in sight. Every step was perfectly effortless and perfectly glorious. I was moved to feel grateful for the gift of running- blessed to run so freely and have that 'high' that we runners experience when the body is working and the head is clear and the terrain is pristine. Oh, THIS IS WHY I LOVE TO RUN!

Ding-ding DING-a-DING!!!! I was jarred from my dreamy-running-bliss by, uh, ummmm... goats? Let me look again, just to clarify, because that just seems out of place. Yes- in fact there were goats. Friends, let me tell you it was like a scene from Alice in Wonderland or Lord of the Rings! There on the steep ravine off to my right were goats so white they looked like giant chunks of cotton bursting from the lush forest around them. I don't know how they got up to the ledge they were on and I certainly don't understand how they didn't fall to their doom. Oddly enough, the goats were wearing cow-bells (or is that 'goat-bells'? So do cows wear goat-bells, then? And who's to say which came first?). As I coasted down the hill past them, they seemed charismatic as though they were smiling at me in a freaky kind of way. Once the goat-heebiejeebies dissipated, I continued on down the hill. The terrain leveled a bit but I was still going down. As I came around one of the final turns in the forest, the most amazing sunbeams suddenly burst through the tree canopy from above. The beams were HUGE and beautiful. Eric even thought they were special enough to mention post-race. Funny- I thought I was the only one who caught them.

I left all of my burdens back in the forest as the trail turned to pavement. It was nice to feel sure-footed again. The course, now civilized but still remote, was wide open and surrounded on all sides by mountains and hills. I felt so small. I love that feeling... it's the feeling of simplicity when I'm all alone and I've stopped worrying or thinking and I'm just running. It's that feeling when you see God's hand in the nature all around you and you suddenly realize what's important...and more importantly, what's NOT important.

On a lighter note, can I give a major GOD BLESS YOU to whoever suggested placing a porta-jon at mile 8? THANK YOU!!! Usually inaugural events really mess that part up. This race, however, had it all! There were plenty of porta-j's and water breaks available. GREAT JOB!

Because the race started before the chickens woke up, there was hardly any traffic at all. Most of the cars I saw were police cars. They did a great job looking out for the runners and were patient with our strung-out group of athletes making the 13.1 mile journey from Ridgecrest to Old Fort. The direction/arrow signs were frequent and obvious. Even though I was alone at times, I never felt lost or

like I was going the wrong way. Even the mile marker signs were dead-on! Someone definitely used GPS to set this course up. At the finish line my Garmin read 13.13. It doesn't get much closer than that!

Speaking of the finish line- What a great surprise! You'll never see this one coming. The Finish line isn't visible until you run PAST it. Runners had to run past the finish line, then go through a little parking lot and back to the finish. I don't know about you but when I see the banner that says FINISH, I'm done! Honestly, the hardest part of this race was the little uphill section of the parking lot that rose up to the finish chute! Imagine!

What a great day! This race had everything and then some. I'm going back next year for sure. The course brought out a roller-coaster ride of emotions. Best of all, it gave me a brief glance at what life is like through God's eyes. He must be SO happy when we leave our worries and our burdens to Him and we run... we just run without thinking or fretting or worrying... we run and just see the world exactly as He sees it...perfectly, beautifully, and unspoiled. We see sunbeams so close and thick that we can touch them... streams in every color and shade of green that we wish we could find in a crayon box or paint-set but never can... And goats wearing cow-bells when we least expect... just because.

Thanks to everyone who made the Downhill @ Dawn such a successful event – Thanks to all of you CR members who made the trip and ran the race. I hope it was as much fun for you as it was for me.

<http://www.nashvillestriders.com/>

<http://www.nashvillestriders.com/results/08/Downhill@Dawn08.txt> (results include train delay AND potty breaks!!! ☺ )