

## 2017 Moonbow 50K

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I planned on taking it easy this year and only running shorter events. But, when my friends started talking about a new trail race at Cumberland Falls State Park in Kentucky, I couldn't resist. There would be waterfalls, wild rivers, rock overhangs, and amazing forests. I decided on the 50K course since it seemed silly to drive that far for a 25K race. I took a day of vacation and drove down on the Friday before the race. I walked from the lodge to the Cumberland Falls and got a sample of the trails that I would be running. They were far rockier than I was used to so I added a couple of hours to my estimated finish time.

I woke up race morning before any of my four alarms went off. (Maybe there is something wrong with me?) I'm normally not anxious before a race but this one was different and I didn't sleep very well. I got moving and left my cabin a little after 6 a.m. I planned on walking to the lodge to pick up the shuttle, but I met it coming down the road. I confirmed that he was going to the start of the race and wasn't just some random bus driver driving around. The driver was very nice and said that his instructions were to drive a rather unusual route and pick up anyone that wanted a ride. I originally planned to take the trail to the start, until I realized that it would be pitch black when I started.

I was glad that I had a cheap poncho with me. In all of my planning I forgot to pack a throw away shirt. It was around 50 degrees and the thin plastic made the waiting more comfortable. I think I was among the first to arrive, but the volunteers were ready to go and checked off my name. I could hear the falls and see some mist in the air, but could not see the falls. I paced around some and of course used the nice flush restroom numerous times. I had a nice talk with Stevie while waiting and got caught up on her many ultra-events. As it got brighter, runners started to pour in. I saw Amy and met her parents and dog. We walked towards the falls and then saw the other Amy, Lizzie, and Andrea. It was fun to have a big group from Indianapolis to share the adventure. As it continued to get brighter we could more fully appreciate the beautiful setting. We got our traditional "before race" photo and soon it was race time.



The race director called us to the line and reminded us to take a water bottle, since there were no cups on the course. He also said there would be many records set today (because it was the inaugural race). He had boxes if you wanted to send stuff to the

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aid station or pick up after the race. I thought he was kidding when he said that the most technical part of the race was at the start, since we started on an asphalt path.



He gave us a countdown and then we were off. It turns out there really was a technical part at the end of the 200-foot-long path. We were soon on a stony single track trail running between and over large rocks. There were a couple of steep staircases thrown in for fun. It was incredibly beautiful and every turn brought something amazing. I got separated from Amy when she went with a faster group and I was busy taking pictures. I ran with a few people off and on, but was on my own within two or three miles.



The river views were kind of mystical with some fog and large round boulders in the water. The trail surfaces included sand, dirt, and rocks of all sizes. There were some roots and critter holes tossed to make things even more interesting. There was one fallen tree that was too low to go under, too overgrown to go around and too high to jump over. I thought and opted to climb over and left some skin behind. There were times that I felt like I was on a treadmill – a treadmill with leaves and rocks on it. I really lost interest around five miles. I'm not sure how or why, but the fantastic scenery was getting on my nerves. Maybe I just

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wanted to take it all in; maybe I was tired of stumbling. All I knew was this had long day written all over and I was really wishing I had signed up the 25K. And then it happened, I fell and I was only 6.3 miles into the race. Fortunately it was one of the few places that actually had dirt instead of rocks. While my hands stung a little and body was a bit shaken, there was no blood. That was really a good thing!



A couple of people passed me with lots of pep. It is a real joy to watch someone with great running style on the trails. I was counting down miles to the second aid station to have a mini goal. Along the way I saw the unmanned water station that the race director had set up. We crossed a bridge that was missing a board – watch your step!

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It was farther to the aid station than I calculated and it was at the end of a short out and back section at the top of an incline. As I started up I saw Amy running down by herself. She said she would wait for me. After I checked in, I ran back to Amy and we ran together to the halfway point, about another eight miles. It was really nice to have company to share the experience and to help with decisions on directions and the run became more enjoyable. The trail was always offering challenges. While the route was marked fairly well there were a couple of places we had to think about the turn and then look for the green and white ribbon for confirmation. In some places it was narrow and one foot frequently slipped off the trail. Other places required climbing over rocks. I can't imagine how long it would have taken had the trail been wet. I just kept thinking that these are the kinds of trails that I hike on with Julie when we say I can't imagine how someone would run on them.

There was a short road section that went to the third aid station. I really appreciated the time and effort that the volunteers put in to help us. They were in the middle of nowhere without phone service for an entire day just to take care of us. When we got back on the trail we entered a world where green plants had taken over the trees and rocks. The lead runner was approaching us near our 13-mile mark. He was flying and it was quite a while before we saw the second runner.

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There was another road section where we got to climb over a guardrail. Amy's mom and dog ran with her across the bridge and then we turned back on the trails. It was such a tease to look across the parking lot to the aid station only to have another mile to run on the trail to get to it. Amy picked up the pace and I saw her briefly at the aid station before she went on. I took my time and headed back at my own pace. I felt much better and now had a purpose. I needed to run back to my cabin for some chocolate milk! I talked with a very experienced runner about other races, since we were running about the same pace we took turns leading.

I got to a point where I was almost afraid to run because I didn't want to fall. I ran/shuffled where I could and power walked in other spots. I had a near fall around 21 miles that would have been really bad, since it was in a very rocky area. I was once again enjoying the scenery even if my mental capacity was slowing down. As I checked in to the aid station, one volunteer asked for my number and I said, "131" and the other one looked at me and asked, "Do you mean 138?" I looked down and said, "yeah that's what I meant." I enjoyed the brief section on the road and then turned on to the trail. I caught up with a couple of people and we took turns passing each other depending on our strengths and trail conditions. It was really becoming a mental challenge to judge rocks, roots, and holes and where to best place your foot. One challenging area required scrambling over

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large rocks. I was carefully lowering myself down when I started to slip. I put my foot out to catch myself on a rock only to have it roll away. I managed to land somewhat gracefully – yeah, I meant to do that. Other than the racers, there were very few people on the trail, but I did come across three mountain bikers. For as hard as it was to run, I can't imagine biking out there.



I came to a section with a tough climb up through rocks and came across a runner that I think was in the 25K race. While she was quite cheerful, she agreed that much of the course was not that runnable. I checked my watch and started to count down the distance and time to the finish. When I started to see people that weren't part of the race, I figured the end was near. Normally people don't venture very far from the trailhead and I could hear the waterfalls in the distance. As I ran it got louder and louder. And then I saw the sign, "you're almost there" and I really was! Soon I saw the asphalt path and a group of strangers cheering at the top of their lungs. It really helped and I picked up the pace (like it really mattered at that point). It was fun to see Amy and her parents at the finish line. She had finished almost an hour ahead of me. When it was over I was glad I picked the 50K race and after 8 hours and 36 minutes and 6000 feet of climb there was a real sense of accomplishment. I felt surprisingly decent even though I was dehydrated, tired, scratched, and bruised but I survived an awesome trail adventure.

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