

2018 L2O 100k by Ashley Heclo



South Florida has some fascinating weather, unique seasons and really interesting topography. This is not the flat, boring place one assumes by looking at it on a topographical map but a conglomerate of swamps, marshes, sloughs, farms and large population centers all vying for the same space. “The Everglades” as people know them, are not a singular entity but as Marjorie Stoneman Douglas called them, “a river of grass.” And they do not start down in Everglades National Park but way up north in the Kissimmee River Basin. At the center of this ecosystem is Lake Okeechobee, from which the estuaries of the Caloosahatchee River running east to west and Saint Lucie River running west to east, the cities of West Palm and Miami and everything in-between, the thousands of acres of sugar cane fields, and the fragile southern Everglades all get their water. In the winter we usually have a mild drought and the single track trails of the 1,300 miles of Florida Trail are beautiful and runnable in lots of areas. Particularly in Palm Beach and Martin counties where the Ocean to Lake spur of the Florida Trail is impeccably maintained by our local hiking group, The Loxahatchee Chapter of the Florida Trail Association. If you’re a local runner who has ever wondered how our trails are always so runnable, it is because of these guys and gals, and if you’re not a member of the FTA yet, well, you should be. In early May the OTL (Ocean to

Lake) trail was in remarkable condition even by normal standards. The Corbett 50k in mid April was the driest on record by far. And then in mid May it started to rain, and rain, and rain. Nonstop for roughly 10 days. Then Alberto formed in the Gulf and feeder bands over the Atlantic inundated us again with almost a foot of rain in a few days in some areas. It stopped raining on June 1st, the Friday before the L2O 100k. It was going to be a wet year.

On Saturday June 2nd, at the eastern edge of Lake Okeechobee in south Florida, 26 ultra runners and their crews gathered at the water’s edge. Nervous chatter punctuated by the slapping of skin and the death of another mosquito. Eventually, inaugural race director Dusty Hardman (having taken over for Jeff Stephens, the creator of this madness) got everyone to pipe down long enough to remind them of really the only thing to remember when running the Lake 2 Ocean 100k. “Follow the orange *#*ing blazes! Not white, not blue, ORANGE!” With a countdown begun crews wished their runners luck and runners started thinking about the long 15 miles through the Dupuis management area before they would see their crew again.

“GO!” 6:00am had struck and we were off. L2O starts off innocently enough for the race virgin who doesn’t know what’s coming. A few miles of farm roads lead you into the Dupuis management area. From here you hop over a couple yellow water management gates and prance along merrily thinking, “This isn’t so bad, I wonder what all that prerace chatter was about.” Myself? I was not first timer, I know what’s coming, as do many others around me. The early conversations overheard revolve around, “My only goal is to not get lost”, “I want to make the Riverbend cutoff this year”, “I’m only hoping I don’t crap my pants.” True story. Oh but the water. We’re any of us really prepared for the water? And how much would there be? Conditions in Florida can change, not just day to day, but by the minute. What was once dry single track can become 6 inches of standing water in one brief rainstorm. Roughly 5 miles in and we started getting a taste of what the rest of the day was going to deliver. Still, although it was very early for there to be standing water on the trail, it wasn’t really that much and you could certainly run through most of it. A much more challenging aspect of Dupuis is that it’s an area not used a whole lot. So while other parts of the trail are quite obvious Dupuis lulls you in early and then becomes very remote, very quickly. Especially when everything around you is water and the area has recently had a controlled burn which had dulled some of the blazes. The fastest runners made their way through Dupuis and into the first crew stop under 3 hours. I believe that the first 15 miles of L2O might be the longest 15 miles in trail running. It seems so simple on paper and then you start wondering if maybe you’ve missed something

somewhere. Surely around this next bend, behind this next palm tree, are those power lines? Ah, I heard talking and then all of a sudden popped out of the woods and into the arms of my cheering crew. Like a pit stop crew at NASCAR the crews right to work. You're not allowed to run this race without them but all of the south Florida running community wants to be part of this special day and generally the hardest part is deciding who to ask. Before you know it they have filled you up, given you a pep talk and have pushed you down the road to the right hand turn into the back gate of Corbett. "This is a very runnable section!" I personally heard as I made my way back onto what appeared to be dry trail for the moment. Lies, all of it.



From the power line it is 7 miles to the next stop at Grade Road. I've heard that there were some panicky moments for the crews waiting for the first runners. And waiting. And waiting. Usually it's a race between crew and runner to see who can get to the Grade Road stop first and sometimes it has actually been the runner as it's about a 35-40 mile trip for the crews. What the crews didn't realize was that Corbett was underwater. Under knee deep or deeper water. Seven miles that felt like 20. When I say it felt like it was uphill the whole way that is not an exaggeration. The Cypress forest would have been easily navigable by kayak and I think I speak for all of us when I tell you how incredibly frustrating it was to be moving so slowly and how impossible it was to move any faster. If it was 7 miles, 6.5 of it was slogging through 2+ feet of dark water. Yes, this is Florida. We have gators and water moccasins and floating fire ant hills (yes, really) and basically everything down here is trying to harm you but what a sight it is. Here we are in 2018, the world is angry at each other for everything and sometimes the most amazing place to be is pushing through the swamp in south Florida where all you can hear is the sound of your efforts to get down the trail. The bromeliads were everywhere, orange and yellow milkweed cheering us on in the waves we were creating. Cypress trees giving us something solid to lean on when we needed a few seconds to catch our breath. And finally, Grade Road. We have made it, somehow, someway.

Our crews have worried about us and wondered what was taking us so long but they push all that aside as the effort now is to put us back together for 9 more miles through Corbett and into Hungryland.

During this 9 mile Corbett stretch, more than a few of us who were actually still in this thing started to do the math. There was a hard cutoff at mile 48 in Riverbend of 7:30pm. For all of us left, any pace charts have gone out the window hours ago and all of us are in survival mode. And still, actual running comes in fleeting moments as we cross hammocks that dot the wet landscape. The earliest settlers of these wetlands used these hammocks for hunting camps. Twenty feet here, a big one of 100 feet down the trail there. We were making progress but it was far too slow. Good miles were taking 17-18 minutes. Bad ones, over 20. Riverbend was the conversation. "Do you know what time it is?" "About how many miles to Hungryland do you think?" "When we get to the pond it's roughly a mile from there." "If my hamstring will hold up, I'm running down the road." "I wonder how wet Hungryland is." "The Slough will be tough, if we get there."

"The Pond", as it's known, is practically swimmable. Though not a known spot for gators (we passed that at Little Gopher Campsite, also swimmable) it was the one place I found myself actively looking for eyes. Finally, the road to the cabin at Hungryland, and who was there to greet us? None other than Jeff Stephens (previous race director) and Dusty Hardman. Dusty, bless her heart, has instituted a secondary hard cutoff at Beeline for 6:00pm. She thinks she is being cruel to those of us who have continued where others have not. But 6pm means that we can't possibly make it to Riverbend and we get to end this madness at 37 miles. Others have



chosen to end their day before now and as far as I know there were 9 of us who continued on to Beeline and 5, yes 5 out of 26 who left Beeline with a glimmer of hope in making it to Riverbend on time. Hungryland was much like everything else, a deluge of hot, dark, deep water and for your author here, a loop of shame, as I definitely waited for 6pm before putting any more effort in. Frankly, I didn't want to get there in time just to know I had an impossible 90 minutes to get 11 miles through the Loxahatchee Slough and Riverbend. My day was over and I was ok with that. But wait! What about our 5 runners who left Beeline? Eddy Souza, Robert Plante, Daniel Berry, Ron Hines and Andrew Barrett all left Beeline with a chance. That there was only 5 of them speaks volumes to the difficult conditions this year. The lead runners, Eddy and Robert, made it into Riverbend at 6:37. In better conditions a 12:37 finish time wouldn't have even won but this year they still have 15 miles to go. Ron Hines somehow sprouts wings and squeaks in with 5 minutes to spare and Dan Berry elevates everyone's blood pressure by waiting for 7:29:45 to head out to Jonathan Dickinson and the final 15. Our local L2O hero, A-2, does not make the cutoff and comes in at 7:39pm. For anyone who has ever followed this dude, or the unlucky few he has relentlessly stalked and run down in L2O and other races, you know it's tough when Andy says it's tough. Four. Four out of 26 make the whole trip from Lake Okeechobee 63 miles to the Atlantic Ocean.

Eddy Souza 15:49
Robert Plante 16:12
Ron Hines and Dan Berry 17:30

For most of us the trail won this year but man was it fun just trying. Everyone who dared to start, knowing what conditions lay ahead, well you're all a special kind of stupid.

A big thank you to the Loxahatchee Chapter of the Florida Trail Association. I think we might be one of the only running communities in the world so fully and happily embraced by the local hiking community. Without you and your tireless maintenance and defense of the local trails, we wouldn't have much to enjoy.

