

Blogging for Teva – February 8

It was my second foray into Cross Country (XC) running and my first time racing in spikes. The event – USATF Cross Country Nationals – was held Saturday, February 7 in Derwood, MD, at the 410-acre Agricultural History Farm Park located in the Montgomery County Park system. My race was the masters women’s 8 kilometer route, same distance as the men’s masters would race (there would be different distances for each division -

<http://www.usatf.org/events/2009/USAXCCChampionships/>). My team, the Fleet Feet Boulder Fast Women, would race in the 40-49 division. My teammates were seasoned harriers with Lisa Goldsmith and Lesia Atkinson for sure in the hunt for individual medals. This would of course bode well for team scoring, yet all three of us would contribute to the final score in the competition.

I arrived in Maryland on Thursday to spend some time with family friends in Chevy Chase located about 20 minutes from the Park. I headed to the course for a short workout on Friday morning at a time to coincide with the 9:45 start time of our race on Saturday. I wanted to check out the conditions of the terrain for that time of day which was really smart in retrospect. My arrival to the Park was perfect for a few laps around the hilly 2 kilometer loop course, some strides, and then a visit to the pre-race press conference. Six athletes who would race in the open category were on “stage” to answer questions about the course, their fitness, their strategy for the



race, and whether they would accept a spot on the U.S. National Cross Country team (should they finish in the top six) who would travel to Jordan in March for the World Cross Champs. Edward Moran, like me, would be racing in his second cross country race, “I’m in the base phase of my training and looking toward May-June-July track season. The race tomorrow fits well with my training.” For Samia Akbar, one of the top women contenders and a Virginian like Moran, “The race is a measuring stick for fitness and a nice way to get another really good, hard effort.” For Meb Keflezighi, this would be his first cross country race since 2003. “Cross country is unique. This (course) is very true cross country – challenging and a great spectator course. A great field assembled here. It’s a benchmark where I stand. It is a stepping stone for the season basically.” Jorge Torres agreed with Keflezighi about the course, “Speaking on behalf of all cross country runners, we like true cross country – mud, hills, challenging.” Of last year’s course in San Diego, Emily Brown related, “San Diego seemed like a track to me.” Akbar followed up with some race strategy saying, “With any hilly course and lots of turns you have to decide how to come off the turns and the downhills. There is more strategy than you would normally think. You really sink your teeth into it.”

It's always enlightening and certainly inspiring to listen to top competitors share their stories and experiences. And for athletes in the citizen races, masters' races, and junior races...what an opportunity to be racing on the same course as these elite runners. I went away from the conference jazzed and ready to race my best...especially after asking Coach Larsen to snap a photo of me with Meb – who was super gracious about this new XC groupie hoping to get close enough to an Olympian that some speed, strength, and gritty determination would rub off through osmosis. At about 3:30 p.m. I was heading back to the course to meet Lisa, Simon, and Andy, after I had collected our race numbers at the host hotel just 10 miles from the Park (about a 20 minute drive with traffic and 40 or so if you get lost like I did – no excuses for getting lost because USATF Long Distance Running Director Jim Estes gave me excellent directions which I read, but didn't digest – apparently).



Lisa arrived into Dulles airport with Simon Gutierrez and Andy Ames who would be racing the men's course. Simon would be defending his XC Club National title from December's downright brutal weather conditions in Spokane. Simon didn't miss a beat in Spokane because the conditions weren't any worse than what he faces daily in his home – a.k.a. the nation's ice box – Alamosa, Colorado. Andy would be racing for the 45-49 championship category. Both men were members of the second-place masters' team in Spokane although they didn't have a full team for this event. Lisa ('97 and '06), Simon ('02-'08), Andy ('04), and I ('95) have collectively been on 11 U.S. mountain teams. There would also be a few of our junior team members racing to include Alex Dunne (bronze medalist in '08), Tim Smith (5th man overall in '08), and Zachary Rivers ('06 and '07).



Lisa, Simon, and Andy met me at the course and we four headed out for a run. Course conditions had somewhat changed/ie: deteriorated through the day and there were stretches of mud at several intervals on the course. Something that hadn't changed was the off-camber sections of the course. I said that the conditions would most likely return to those I experienced earlier in the day due to the overnight freezing temperatures that were expected. I said the ground would

probably feel like concrete and the mud would turn to hard-packed dirt overnight (this was the case on Saturday although the ground was loosening up a bit by 10:30 or so). Lisa and I ran one loop of the course and I opted to do a few strides in my spikes while Lisa did another loop. The guys did at least three loops.

From the race course we headed to the grocery store to pick up fixins' for dinner which we would cook in our large two bedroom/two bathroom suite complete with full kitchen and living room...and three televisions. Lesia would arrive by about 7 p.m. It was super comfortable for all five of us and a great way to work together and plan strategy for the race. Simon had more spikes in his arsenal than any team coach would have on race day. He was set for any course condition and spoke eloquently about the nature of spike length and even had a few secret weapons in his stash – some kind of short screws that would help balance on slippery turns.



There was time to experiment with taping (feet, shins, whatever), choose the right race-day apparel, and figure out how to cinch the IPICO chip onto our racing shoes. For anyone who hasn't had the opportunity to race on a team, consider it. The element of camaraderie is fantastic and on race day, not only do you score as an individual, you also get a team score.

Race day provided ideal race conditions. Although it was chilly in the morning when we arrived at the course, the temps would slowly creep up to the forecast high of 52 by early afternoon. Lesia, Lisa, and I did our warm-up running the loop backward and watching the 4km citizens' race make their way around the course (their start was at 9 a.m.). After the

loop, we opted to run another mile or so out and back on the road. It was time to lace up our spikes strip down to shorts and singlets and head to the start line. A few pre-race strides and we were ready. Lisa led us in the team cheer, "It's OUR day." Pre-race announcements quickly followed including a command to get to the line. The starter pistol fired and we were off! My strategy was to maintain loops between 8:30 and 9 minutes having done my warm-up laps at an easy 10-11 minute pace. I was right on target the whole way and finished in just over 35:30. Lisa led our team in second place overall Lesia was sixth, and I rounded out the team with 20th place. Our



team score of 14 (only athletes running for a team were scored) was good enough for the gold medal spot with the second place team garnering 19 points. We were thrilled with our finish.

We headed back to the start line to gather up our sweats and change

shoes (except for Lisa who kept her spikes on – to be honest, my calves were screaming and I was thankful for my cushy road shoes). After waiting at the start to collect some gear from Simon and Andy, I went back on course to find Lisa and Lesia to cheer on the guys.

Simon took off with a commanding presence and the race unfolded with Simon (age 42) and newly-turned masters' runner Ray Pugsley battling out through the entire 8 kilometers. Coming up the nearly 400 meter straightaway (slightly uphill) to the finish, Simon and Ray were step for step. Slowly, but deliberately, Simon pulled ahead. With a quick glance over his shoulder, Simon



pumped his fist in the air and with a broad smile ran to the tape for the victory. Andy had a great race as well. He finished in the top ten overall, but got out-kicked in the finish stretch for

the 45-49 age group title. Lots of hardware for the Coloradoans and great memories to last a lifetime.



Andy # 183



Simon post race interview



Pre race warm-up

