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The good... the bad...and the muddy.

Confessions of a trail running coach.

I have a great job. I spend my days working with personal training clients who strive to improve their health, fitness and functional abilities. I spend my evenings leading groups of participants through the trails, parks and green spaces of the beautiful Comox Valley, on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Leading outdoor 'fitness adventures' with my company Equilibrium Lifestyle Management, is one of the best parts of my job and I look forward to every class. As a running clinic instructor I teach participants how to become stronger, faster, smarter runners so that they can improve their performance and decrease their risk of injury. I teach my eager participants the rules that I live my own training and trail racing by. However, sometimes things just don't go as planned...and these races gone wrong become lessons in themselves. Following is the story of my recent experience at a Gutbuster trail race in Victoria, BC. I am sharing this confession so that you may learn from my experiences, laugh at my mis-adventures, and see that even your running coach screws up now and then.

Saturday, March 24th, 7:00am: Victoria. I wake up early to make sure that I get my pre-race breakfast down the hatch with plenty of time to digest. The race start is 10:00am and I need a few hours for my belly to work on my meal of multigrain cereal, banana and soymilk. Mmmmm...one of my favorite pre-race breaky's. A glass of water and a mug of hot Tetley wash it all down. Plenty of time remains to get dressed and lounge for a bit before heading out to beautiful Royal Roads campus. All is well.

The rain has finally stopped pounding this morning after pouring for 48 hours non-stop. The temperature is warm and there is a perfect gray race sky overhead. It is a few degrees warmer here than at home in the Comox Valley and I am almost giddy at the idea of wearing shorts for the first time this year. I throw on my pre-race warm up gear and pack my bag for the race. In my bag are: race shorts, tights/gloves/hat in case the weather turns, hydration pack, Sharkies (gummy bears for athletes), wallet, water and dry clean clothes for after the race. At the last minute, after a tough decision I bring my old trail racing shoes-rather than the new ones that I just bought yesterday, to avoid the threat of nasty 'break-in' blisters.

8:45am: I head out the door...ETA 9:15am to allow 30 minutes driving time. Right on schedule and I am very pleased with myself at this point. I am from Victoria, although I have lived in the Comox Valley for 7 years, and I don't feel

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the need to look at a map. I will just head towards Sooke and look for the signs to Royal Roads University/College.

Confession #1: Royal Roads is not in Sooke. Royal Roads is in Collwood.

Lesson #1: Always confirm race location by simply printing off race details conveniently listed on the race website by well organized race directors.

On the road! I am feeling good, and 'Lemon Jelly' is bumping up my spirits with every song that rolls out of my iPod. I head north on the highway and look for the signs to Sooke. I am in a mellow mood but starting to get excited about the new adventure that lies ahead as this will be a new racecourse for me.

The Vancouver Island Gutbusters are my favorite running races by far. All off-road, these races combine amazing cross-country terrain with long steep climbs, rewarding descents and fun technical sections. Bryan Tasaka, race director and event organizer knows what we as trail runners are looking for. He gives us a good hard race with entertainment along the way in the form of gravel pits, mud bogs, flowing creeks, bridges, stairs and supernatural scenery including ocean views and raging waterfalls. The Gutbuster trail races, along with Tasaka's popular single day Adventure Races (MOMAR) offer racers a festive atmosphere where you will feel welcomed and like you are part of 'the gang'. It is inevitable that you will have fun, get to know other racers and exchange epic race stories with your new buddies at the post-race feeding table.

9:10am: Langford. I see the sign for Sooke, take the exit and begin looking for familiar landmarks. Making my way northwest, I do not recognize this new cityscape of Langford, although I sense that I am just a few minutes away from the Royal Roads campus. I am sure the race start is just around the corner, which gives me time to pop into a gas station, grab some cash for the race and make a last minute pit stop. I smell the fresh brew and decide to grab a small coffee for a little pre-race boost.

Confession #2: I am not a coffee drinker.

Lesson #2: TBA

Back on the road I continue towards Sooke passing the last of Langford's business district. I have a strange feeling that I may have missed the turn to Royal Roads but also a sneaking suspicion that it may still be up ahead. I speed up to cover more ground and see what is around the next bend.

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Confession #3: I ended up in Sooke, about 45 kms north of Collwood.

Lesson #3: The faster you drive the faster you get lost.

9:30am: Lost, somewhere in Sooke, BC. After a conference call with my support crew (my savior of a sister Googling at home in her p.j.'s) I make an emergency U-Turn and head back the way I came. Race day registration just closed.

9:40am: Lost, backtracking towards Langford, looking for the spot that I went wrong. Strong coffee, maximum road speed, techno beats and the urgent sense that time is slipping away from me do not sit well in my belly. Drive on, I think, you just might make it.

9:58am: Royal Roads campus. I consent to the fact that I will probably not race today and I will have to go on a tragic solo jaunt in the woods sans race bib. Where the heck is everyone? Where is the race start? I park the car in the first spot I see (reserved, will tow), make a car change into my shorts, grab my cash and start running downhill at a frantic full tilt speed. Ill prepared tourists wandering the grounds stare at me in shock as I yell random questions at them: "Have you seen a large group of people?"..."Do you know where the race starts?" Finally, I man points down the road and adds "It's a long way, you better hurry." I kick it into high gear, guess straight at a 3-way fork and haul downhill.

10:00am: Race central. I hear the announcer on the loudspeaker and a sense of hope sparks inside my chest...I am going to make it! I see the crowd a few hundred metres ahead and I sprint to the finish-I mean start line.

Confession #3: My legs were burning and I arrived totally out of breath to the race start.

Lesson #3: Arriving exhausted to a race start does not qualify as an effective warm up. Be sure to warm up gradually for 10-15 minutes prior to racing.

10:01am: Race registration/start line. I am a mad woman pushing my way through the crowd to the registration table front and centre. "Can I still race?!" I am a crazy lady throwing cash on the table and grabbing pins for my bib. As the countdown starts I am completing my registration form and hear bits chatter around me: 10...9...8..."Follow the orange flags"...7...6...5..."Please print clearly"...4...3...2... No-it's the blue flags-don't follow the orange flags"...1..."Go!"





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10:02am: The race is underway! I am flying high on a mix of caffeine, adrenaline and bit of left over fear. I find myself charging uphill with the front of the pack, keeping a good cadence and smiling to myself. I made it!! My breathing rate catches up to my pace and I am forced to back off slightly. I settle in and enjoy the ride. Beautiful single track, mossy forest floor, little ups and downs make for a great start. It is good to be alive!

10:35am: I am spent. My legs get sluggish and it feels as if I am running in sand. I almost check my back tire to see if it is flat. Perhaps the gal behind me has hooked up to me for a tow? No, I am afraid not. My shocking rock-star start pace and lack of warm up have just caught up to me. I surrender to a lower gear on the next long climb and acknowledge my foolish mistakes whilst watching 2 women cruise on by.

Confession #4: I temporarily lost my racer identity and became one of *'those'* racers who start out too fast and crash hard. Normally I pride myself on my patience and gleefully pick off such inexperienced racers one by one in the second half of a race.

Lesson #4: Aim for a negative split in your races, so you don't explode at the half way mark and embarrass yourself.

10:?? I lose sense of time and finally get into my groove during a stretch of single-track heaven. Woohoo! I cheer wildly as I leap 4 metres at a time, down the mighty 'gravel pit' and laugh as I conquer the climb up the other side. I am running for the sheer joy of it now and taking time to soak up the scenery, smell the spring skunk cabbage, and jump with both feet into every stream and mud pit. Survivors of the final uphill stretch fly downhill towards me after completing an out and back and I sense the end is near. Pushing up the grade one rhythmic step at a time I am driven by the knowledge that there is a beautiful downhill reward at the top. Sweet relief and I am flying at top speed for nearly 2kms downhill...on a road.

Confession #5: It took everything I had to hold in that coffee for 11.7km.

Lesson #5: Arrive early to make sure you give yourself enough time to use the facilities-a few times.

Lesson #5B: Do not try a new food/drink on race day...duh.





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11:??: 1km from race finish I am struck down mid stride at the base of this fabulous hill with a foot cramp from out of nowhere. I stifle a scream and drop to the ground in an effort to take the weight off of my left foot. 1...2...3 female racers fly on by me and gallop off into the next skunk cabbage swamp. Grrrrr. I limp after them cursing a pledge to catch them under my breath.

Confession #6: I wore my old dead trail shoes because I did not purchase new ones in time to try them out.

Lesson #6: Buy new shoes before your old shoes die.

Confession #7: I tragically forgot my water pack in the car in the frantic moments leading up to the race start.

Lesson #7: Never vary from your tried and tested race hydration routine. Dehydration leads to muscle cramping, loss of co-ordination and fatigue.

Slowly, thankfully, my plantar flexors release their mighty grip and allow me to run again. Another smiling volunteer gives me the good news: "You are on the home stretch!" and I add my finishing kick with less than a km to go. I manage to pass 2 people who are slogging up the final grade and I hold a respectable finishing cadence all the way across the finish line. I sputter "Thank god" and shoot a muddy grin towards the finish line volunteers. What a race. What a day.

There are always lessons to be learned in every race and training run that we endure. Some races just hold a few more lessons than others.

Gutbuster Trail Race: \$30. Life Lessons: Priceless.

For more info on the Gutbuster series go to www.gutbustertrailrun.com.

Sarah Seeds is a passionate trail runner and the owner of Equilibrium Lifestyle Management (ELM) a group fitness and personal training company in the Comox Valley on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Contact ELM for trail maps and information about trail running adventures on Vancouver Island.
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