

ET 51 in NV
August 5, 2012 by David Holmen

On August 5, 2012, I ran the Extra Terrestrial 51K race in southern Nevada. This race is run along highway 375, which is also known as the Extraterrestrial Highway. The highway gets its name from the unusually high number of UFO sightings in this area. The ET Highway runs alongside the eastern edge of a large military base, commonly known as "Area 51." This is an area where the air force does a lot of test flights of experimental aircraft.

The race distance, 51 kilometers, is inspired by Area 51. To add to the mystique, the race starts at midnight. There's also an Extra Terrestrial Midnight Marathon, as well as shorter distances.

I stayed at the Hard Rock Hotel in Las Vegas, which was the headquarters for all the races. I arrived Saturday afternoon, and checked in just as the last day of packet pickup was starting. I saw lots of familiar faces, including several runners who I first met last year at the Tahoe Triple. After packet pickup, I had dinner with Jane Sturzaker from Australia. Then I had just enough time to change clothes and pack my gear bag before returning for a Marathon Maniac group photo. Busses to the start left Las Vegas at 8:45, and there was a bus reserved for Marathon Maniacs and Half Fanatics.

The marathon and 51K both start at the "black mailbox," which is located next to a road that leads into Area 51. Although some people assume this is the mailbox for Area 51, it actually belongs to a farmer who happens to live nearby. Originally, his mailbox actually was black. He later replaced it with a bulletproof white mailbox, because he was tired of people going through his mail.

Because we run at night, everyone is required to wear a head lamp and reflective clothing. If you didn't have any reflective clothes, you could buy reflective tape at the expo. Some runners take it a step further and wear alien-themed costumes. There's an award for the best costume.

It normally takes about 2 ½ hours to get to the start, but we had a few delays. One of the busses had an encounter with a UFO. Really!

We were only about an hour out of Las Vegas when our bus pulled over. At first, all we knew was that another bus had a problem, so all the busses were waiting. Eventually we learned that an object about the size of a bowling ball flew into the front windshield of one of the busses, shattering the windshield. The driver had some severe cuts, and the glass spread all the way to the back of the bus. Some of the passengers had minor cuts, but none of them had serious injuries.

Since nobody seemed to know for sure what hit the bus, technically it was an Unidentified Flying Object. Our best guess is that it must have been a large nocturnal bird or one of the large bats that are common in this area.

That bus was no longer usable. I think all of the runners from that bus were loaded onto other busses. Our next delay came when two busses (including ours), missed the turn onto the ET Highway. Despite the delays, we arrived in time for the races to start at midnight. In the past, Calico Racing has delayed the start, if necessary, to make sure everyone was there.

From the "black mailbox," we ran about 20 miles to reach the small town of Rachel, where all races would eventually finish. The first 13 miles were a long gradual uphill. My goal was to average 8:30 per mile, but the last few uphill miles were tough, and I started to fall off the pace. By this time, I was starting to pass some of the half marathon runners. The next seven miles to Rachel were a gradual downhill, which allowed me to recover and pick up the pace.

The half marathon finished in Rachel. After leaving those runners behind, I expected the road would be almost empty. Instead I started seeing runners from the 10K. The 10K course was the same as the final out-and-back of the marathon course. Next, I started to see marathon runners coming back.

When I reached the marathon turnaround, I still needed to go about three miles to reach the 51K turnaround. A volunteer at the marathon turnaround asked me which race I was in. When I said, "ultra," he said, "keep going, you're first." I said, "seriously?" and he confirmed that I was in first place.

Until this point, I had no idea how many runners were ahead of me. I was starting to fade, but I thought I could win my age group if I hung on. I never imagined that all of the runners ahead of me had been marathon runners.

I knew I couldn't keep up my earlier pace, but I ran the best pace I could manage with 8.6 miles to go. As the 51K turnaround came within sight, I started to see the light from a runner who was gaining rapidly. I turned my head and saw the lead woman go by. She was surging to a strong finish. By the time I made the turn, I could no longer see her.

I ran a fair distance before I saw any other runners, so I knew I had a substantial lead. The next few miles were tough, but with three miles to go, I began to pick up the pace. I was determined to hold onto first place among the men. I finished in 4:34:59. I didn't hit my time goal, but more importantly, I was the first place male. This greatly exceeded my expectations.

The finish was at a diner in Rachel called the Little A'Le'Inn. Little A'Le'Inn has made a cottage industry out of the whole Area 51 mystique. They serve breakfast and sell alien souvenirs year round. As we finished running, we all had breakfast there. After breakfast, we were bussed back to the Hard Rock Hotel. Busses left whenever there were enough runners to fill a bus.

I wish I could have stayed longer to see more of the runners finish. I also would have been nice to see more of Rachel. I can see from my friends' photo albums that there was some cool stuff there. I was flying home the same day. I had to get onto the next bus, so I could get back to Las Vegas in time to check out and catch my flight.