

# Adventure Abounds on the Seneca Greenway Trail

## Report on the Greenway Trail Nearly a Marathon & 50-K

**-Rayna Matsuno**

Two years ago, a blizzard postponed what was to be the first Seneca Creek Greenway Trail “Nearly a Marathon”. (The cars couldn’t access the roads to the aid stations. You didn’t think a few feet of snow would keep *runners* off the trail, did you?) This year, less than a week after somewhat lighter snowfall and a year after a waterlogged inaugural event, I joined more than a hundred other runners for this 2 in 1 race. The field was as diverse as the course itself- a conglomeration of young and younger, first time trail runners, seasoned ultrarunners, locals and out-of-towners. One out-of-towner hailed from across the globe: Hajime Nishi, a self-described “ecomarathoner” and world record holder from Japan.

In the weeks leading up the event, race director Ed Schultze send out reminders, updates, and participant demographics. His mention of a runner from Japan immediately grabbed my attention. Having grown up in Japan, I was eager to meet our overseas guest and perhaps attempt to speak what little Japanese I had left in me after years of non-use. As it turned out, Nishi spoke impeccable English and was more than willing to tell me his purpose as an ecomarathoner.

Nishi, who holds a Guinness world record for running a marathon on each of the seven continents in 168 days and has run several hundred marathons, founded Ecomarathon International to advocate an environmentally responsible lifestyle and interconnectedness with others through running ([www. Ecomarathon.org](http://www.Ecomarathon.org)). In promoting his beliefs, Nishi rates each marathon he participates in based on eco-friendliness, non-competitiveness, and overall race management. I was sure he would especially appreciate the beauty the Seneca Greenway Trail had to offer.

With just a few minutes to go before the 8:00 AM race start, Schultze gave the last –minute warnings about “black ice and normal ice” and wished us a great experience. And what an experience it was! Not even a minute into it, a woman in front of me slid not once, not twice, but three times as we funneled toward the trail. I hoped she’d met her quota for the day, as there would be no “best blood” category to reward her falls. Shortly thereafter we were all running single-file, snow beneath us, still close enough to hear each other’s chatter.

Several small uphill and stream crossings later, we were spread out, the frontrunners far ahead and out of sight. At mile four or so, Marti Kovener, whom I’d met at a training run a few weeks prior, approached me, slowing down just long enough to offer early encouragement before surging ahead to eventually place third in the women’s 50k. I remained comfortably in the middle of the pack, happy to run on compressed snow thanks to the fleet-footed folks and enjoy the scenery. Did I mention the course was diverse? Before reaching the ‘crossroads’ (really the Lake Aid Station at mile 15), I had run on snow, dried pine needles, grass, shoe-sucking mud, and rocks (it wouldn’t be an East Coast trail without them).

It wasn’t long before the Lake Aid Station presented itself at the top of a small climb. When I reached the aid station, I was asked, “Marathon or 50k?” Two members of the Virginia

Happy Trails Running Club (VHTRC), Linda Wack and Jeff Reed, were taking names and bib numbers. Seeing people I knew from the Club was really uplifting, but I also knew I'd hear it if I opted for the marathon. I indicated "50k" and headed off toward Clopper Lake (which would add 4 miles to the jaunt) before I could change my mind. Behind me Linda remarked, "Good girl."

As I ran counter-clockwise around the lake, I thought about how cool it was to have the choice. I wondered if there were any ultra virgins in the race who were going for the 50k. Half way around the lake, I ran past a family going on a nice morning walk with their dogs. We exchanged smiles, but I'm sure they thought we were all nuts. Finally, after some efforts in navigation with a woman I'd practically been running the race with (it's embarrassing to share this because it really shouldn't be that hard to run around the perimeter of a lake without getting lost) the Lake Aid Station presented itself once again. Mile 19-now with PB&J sandwiches and Doritos! I spent some time eating and went on my way.

Mile 20 is the point at which a lot of marathoners hit "The Wall". Apparently, The Wall does not discriminate. My legs decided they'd had enough less than 10 minutes after I left the Lake aid station. Up ahead I could see an older gentleman doing run/walk intervals. He let me pass but stayed close behind until we reached a road crossing. These are infinitely more dangerous than any stream crossing...and not nearly as fun. The gentleman caught up to me and we decided to walk together for a mile or so. He told me that he ran his first marathon when he was 50, an admirable feat. We shared a few stories before I felt energetic enough to pull ahead.

The next aid station was situated at the bottom of a hill covered with saplings. For a moment I forgot about the snow that marked earlier parts of the trail. Shortly after reaching the aid station, the aforementioned woman from Clopper Lake joined me at the spread. Cookies, chocolate, crackers, chips...and one very nice volunteer who expressed his awe and support. The woman remarked, "This is a piece of cake compared to taking care of my three children." I do not have children. I thought I wanted children. She took off while I finished my eating. I never saw her again until after the race.

The Wall has friends, and you will occasionally meet them. With only 6 miles to go, I decided to walk the rest of the way. I thought about Hajime Nishi's enthusiasm for nature and his "slow running philosophy". To him, moving through a race slowly, purposefully, and with awareness allows for the utmost connection with one's surroundings. The beauty of the trail, the bubbling creek, and the crisp air took precedence over time, ego, and fatigue. Before long, I caught up with Jim Cavanaugh, another member of the VHTRC. We ran together to the next, and final aid station where yet another member, Gary Knipling, appeared out of the woods. It seems he had managed to get some bonus miles in. (Actually, the consensus is that we all ran bonus miles; seems this was the Greenway Trail Marathon/50k a la Dave Horton). We all grabbed some food and left together. After a stream crossing, we started up what would be the last significant climb of the race.

At the top of the climb, Jim told Gary and I to go ahead. Gary is a sexagenarian, and age really is just a number. I was forced to run my guts out to keep up with him. We reached the last road crossing, where a volunteer told us we had a little less than a mile to go. "No matter what distance you're running, the last mile is dessert," Gary remarked. Personally, I'd rather have a thick slice of New York cheesecake. But Gary is the type of guy you don't want

to disappoint. We dashed to the finish, where volunteers greeted us with big congratulatory smiles. I should mention here how wonderful the volunteers were. Most of them being members of the Montgomery County Road Running Club (Maryland), I'm sure they, like the family at Clopper Lake, thought we were all nuts. But that didn't stop them from smiling, offering their support, and cheering us on.

The Seneca Stone Cutting Mill and quarry master's house were in plain view a short distance from the finish. Seneca sandstone has quite a history. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the sandstone was used in the construction of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and the Smithsonian Institution Building. On our way to the gathering at Riley's Lock on the C&O Canal, Gary and I ran into Dale Reicheneder of Malibu, CA and winner of the men's marathon. Reicheneder was carrying his plaque, beautifully handmade by Monika Bachmann. John Dodds of Arlington, VA and Greg Kemp of Germantown, MD were second and third, respectively.

Schultze gathered the participants so he could hand out award and raffle prizes. Monika Bachmann of Castleton, VA won the women's marathon, followed by Caroline Cardulla of Rockville, MD and Jeanne Grillo of Potomac, MD. Rob Magin of Olney, MD won the men's 50k, followed by Mike Bur of Kensington, MD and Steve Smith of Boyds, MD. Sarah Almodovar of Stratford, CT won the women's 50k, and was followed by Michele Harmon of Gaithersburg, MD and Marti Kovener of Falls Church, VA. Top finishers in each category received a plaque and hydration pack, courtesy of REI.

The field was impressive and the course was challenging. Schultze, with a group of selfless volunteers, put on a fantastic race. Before heading home, I stopped to grab a pretzel and came upon Nishi, who has just completed the marathon. Curious to know how he rated the event, I asked what he thought. He exclaimed, "This marathon was very tough! But I love nature, and the air was very clean, and it was beautiful." It was what I expected. But then he leaned in and confided, "The only thing I don't understand is why they held it this time of year when it is so muddy." I smiled and decided to share my response in Japanese, "Trail runners *love* this. They think it's fun and a chance to be kids." His eyes lit up, "Oooohhhh, I see!" Indeed, we all had a great time.