

## **The 2014 Promise Land 50K Experience From the Perspective of a 1<sup>st</sup> Time Ultra Runner**

By: Jessica Grieves

- Age: 34
- Running Since: 2007
- Typical weekly mileage: 30-40
- Half marathons: numerous, all road (PR 1:41)
- Marathons: 3, 2 road and 1 trail (PR 3:49)
- Ultra-marathons: 1 (2014 Promise Land 50K- 6:46)

I have lived in exceedingly flat places for most of my running career and only started to run hills when I moved to NC a year ago. 100% of my runs were road until I joined a group for an outing on the trail last summer. My interest in road running quickly waned and I found myself living for long weekend trail runs. Because the majority of the trails in this region of the country involve significant climbs I am now a much stronger climber than I was last summer. That sure came in handy at PL!

In the 4 months leading up to PL I ran a few mid-distance trail races (25K, 20 miles, 24 hour team race in which I ran 33 miles in increments) and ran 18-24 miles on the trail virtually every weekend. Two weeks prior to PL I ran a challenging local trail marathon that included 4000 feet of climbing bliss (Pilot Mountain Payback Marathon, race founded and course designed by Abran Moore, an amazing ultra runner and an 8-time PL finisher).

The week before PL I focused on consuming extra calories, hydrating and resting. I set my alarm for an earlier time each morning so that by the Friday before the race it went off at 4:30 am. I hoped that this would reset my internal clock for the early wake up call on race day. That strategy paid off big time. When the wake up call came on Saturday morning I was up and ready to get going and my system was set for an early nature call (an absolute must for me!). The day before the race I drank plenty of water and ate less fiber than I usually do (I am a vegetarian).

I traveled to the race with Abran Moore and Dale Fleckenstein, both of whom have run the race several times. Conversation in the car was focused on the race itself, race strategy, and nutrition. I really appreciate all the advice these two experienced ultra runners had to offer. When we got to the campground we drove up the gravel road that serves as the first few miles of the race. Seeing even a small part of the course calmed my nerves and made me feel a bit more prepared for what was ahead. After a few pieces of pizza and the pre-race briefing we chilled by the fire for a bit then headed to our sleeping quarters. I slept much better than I expected, but probably only got 4 hours of sleep total.

The morning of the race I was only able to eat half of a dry bagel. It tasted dry and terrible and nerves made my stomach a bit queasy. I also had a few Clif Shot Bloks and preventative acetaminophen. The weather was beautiful (in the high 40's I think) so a t-shirt was plenty, especially considering the first 4+ miles would be entirely uphill. My outfit also included ¾ tights, a half buff to keep the sun off of my head, and Inov8 x-talons. I wore a fuel belt with three 8oz bottles and carried a 12oz handheld. The handheld and one of the 8oz bottles contained water and two of the 8oz bottles contained very dilute HEED. I also carried salt capsules (graciously provided by Abran), Jolly Ranchers, three caffeine-laden gels, and toilet paper (which I never needed, but always better safe than sorry!). I decided not to wear a headlamp because I knew that many others would have one and that there was very little trip hazard on the gravel road to the first aid station. That was a good decision. I had no problem seeing where I was going and the sky was lightening up by the time I got on the single track.

I tend to have an unsettled stomach on long runs so usually do not consume much (liquid or solid). That may work for a marathon, but I knew to make it through PL I would need to take in more than usual. I made myself sip water or HEED every 15 minutes or so and had a Jolly Rancher at about mile 10. I LOVE jolly ranchers on long runs – it's a distraction for a few miles and I get a slow infusion of sugar that sharpens my focus. I had a few more Jolly Ranchers later on in the race. I didn't stop at aid stations 1-4, but by aid station 5 I needed a water fill up. I had a portion of an ice pop at that point as well. I stopped at aid stations 6 for more water, a few gummy bears, a few saltines, and a Mountain Dew. I had never taken

salt capsules before, as I don't tend to cramp, but was strongly encouraged to try them so I took one at 2 hrs, 3.5 hrs and 5 hrs even though I never felt like I needed them. They didn't hurt my stomach, which was my main concern about taking them. I would definitely take them again if I ever do another ultra. I felt good - great even- until the climb up Apple Orchard. I just kept getting slower and slower and I had nothing left to push harder. Negativity set in and I kept thinking, "If this were a marathon I would be done already!" I know I whimpered softly (okay, not so softly) a few times. I was so drained that I worried I would not be able to open it up in the final downhill miles - something I had been looking forward to all day. I ate my first (and only gel) of the race halfway up the stairs and perked up almost immediately (lesson learned - eat a few gels BEFORE mile 28!). I was still hiking more slowly than I wanted to and was passed by 20 or so people on the climb, but at least I was back in the game. I FINALLY made it to aid station 7 (it took me 70 minutes to get from aid station 6 to aid station 7!) and stopped for more water and a Mountain Dew. I turned and admired the view from there - the best of the race, in my opinion. I would have totally missed it if one of the volunteers hadn't encouraged me to turn around and look. After a few seconds of admiring the view I took off and, to my surprise, my legs were eager to fly down the single track and the gravel road. I passed many of those that had passed me while I dragged myself up Apple Orchard. I finished solid and feel good about my performance overall, even though it could definitely be improved upon.

Thanks to all of the wonderful, cheerful volunteers and to David Horton for putting on such a great race. I would be remiss if I neglected to acknowledge Nathan Kreeger - we passed each other back and forth for most of the race (until he smoked me on the Apple Orchard climb!). I would have spent most of the race alone if it weren't for Nathan. The chitchat and the mutual suffering helped the miles pass by and made the race more enjoyable for me.

As I write this, my quads are still destroyed, but it was SO worth it!!! If I ever run another ultra I will seek out a Horton race for sure!