

Promise Land 50k, April 26, 2014: Greg Mu

About two and a half months ago I got it in my head that I wanted to run an ultra this spring. Mistake number one. When your last experience running more than 10 miles ended in hobbling around on a bum foot for two weeks, you probably don't want to start training for a 50k and attempt to run said 50k in the same season.

After an email to Zpora for recommendations I hear something from the TrailHeads (of Carrboro, NC) about cats' asses and the best 50k on the east coast. Mistake number two. When ultra runners talk about the best race here and the best race there, always replace 'best' with an adjective like 'hardest' or 'most suffer fest-ish.' Or just ignore them altogether.

With the exception of a solid long run in the Roans 8 weeks ago, all of my training for Promise Land was done in Orange County, NC. Mistake number three. The highest point in Orange County is 850 feet. The opening 4.5 miles of Promise Land requires over 2,000 feet of climbing.

I am hard-headed. Mistake number 4. Despite being fully aware of the challenges posed by mistakes 1 through 3, I convince myself that a goal of 6 hours isn't necessarily out of the realm of possibility. And then my dear friends Leighton and Zpora doubted it could be done.

I pulled into the open field that serves as campground and start/finish lines for Promise Land a little after 5pm Friday. With the Blue Ridge directly to the west it wasn't long before it cast a shadow over the valley. It looked imposing. And judging by the topo in the race packet, it was clear we'd be running up and over the thing right out of the gate. Orange County was looking really flat at this point.

Even after chatting with some past runners and getting an idea of what to expect, my strategy stayed the same: walk the steep uphill, jog the flats and push an easier fast pace on the downhill. Sounds simple, right? Erin and I sorted through gear, separated out what she would hand off to me at mile 12, and turned in early.

I found myself in the middle of 360 bobbing headlamps at 5:30am as we left camp and immediately started climbing. I kept my pace under control over the opening 5 miles and felt energized as the climb gave way to grassy doubletrack with perfect views of the rising sun. This course is awesome! The crowds thinned and I began leap-frogging with the 20-30 runners I'd see for the next 3 hours. Leaving the second aid station at mile 8.5 we continued along the doubletrack, climbing another 1,000 feet over 3 miles to the highest point on the course. I met Erin for a refill on water, gels and a big scoop of coconut oil at mile 12 on the Blue Ridge Parkway and started descending.

When I saw the topo for the first time what stood out most was the massive 6-mile descent starting at mile 11. Runners lose 2,900 feet before reaching the low point of the course, where the race director claims the race really starts. I felt strong when the descent turned to technical singletrack that follows a beautiful steep creek and started passing runners. One runner caught me and we paced each other for a couple miles. Kevin was running his second Promise Land,

last year's being his first ultra. Over the next 12 miles Kevin offered lots of strategy and moral support while we leap-frogged and kept each other in sight.

The last mile and a half or two of the descent ease off to follow a -2-3% grade. I went from feeling great on the steep downhill to begging for another climb. Everyone around me looked solid while I felt like mistake number 1 was about to take its toll. Did I have enough training miles in my legs to hang on? We bottomed out and immediately turned uphill. Alternating between power hiking and jogging I started to get a little back. Kevin came up alongside me and offered the best and worst advice: "the next 10k are the crux of the race. Everyone suffers on the final 2,000-foot climb but if you can keep pace here you'll put yourself in great position." Enter mistake number 4.

I had a vague idea of what it would take to break 6 hours. Hitting the bottom of the descent at 3 hours gives you a pretty good chance and I wasn't far off. "Keep it solid for these 10k, power hike the 2,000-foot climb, and then let loose and hold on for dear life over the final 5-mile descent to the finish," was what I kept telling myself. That 10k stretch was a lot of fun. I was hurting just like everyone else but slowly I began passing runners that had been out ahead of me all day. Four hours in I passed a woman getting in her final long training run before the Massanutten 100 miler. She was impressed when I told her I'd eclipsed my longest run one hour ago and told me I was running strong. Things were looking good. I kept on top of my nutrition, knowing how quickly things could unravel this late in the race. All I had to do was hang on.

At the base of the final climb I stopped at the aid station to grab some fruit and water and dump the mud out of my socks and shoes. I shuffled back onto the trail and started jogging uphill. In an instant both quads seized and I had to grab a tree to keep from falling down. My stopwatch read 4:40. DNF was the first thing to cross my mind. I had 8 miles to go with 2,000 feet of climbing and 2,200 feet of descending.

I hobbled for the next 15 minutes, doubling over with pain every other minute, until the cramps subsided. An older guy passed and was complaining of cramps in his calves. Misery loves company. I fell in behind him and we slowly hiked uphill without another runner passing. Then the trail got steep. Any motion that isolated my quads locked them up immediately. I tried bouncing up with my calves and that seemed to help until we hit the stairs. The final 500 feet of the climb traverses what felt like two stadiums of stairs. Those 500 feet were a blur. All I could think about was getting to the top, hoping there'd be pitchers of pickle juice at the final aid station.

Somehow I managed the climb in 1:05. I was at the final aid station in 5:45 with 5 miles to go. But my prayers for pickle juice went unanswered (someone was passing it out at mile 19-- WHERE WAS IT NOW?!?). I downed more water and fruit and convinced myself running downhill wouldn't be as painful. Jogging on flat ground was tolerable but as soon as the singletrack tilted downward my legs seized again, this time with my right hamstring and both hip flexors getting in on the action. There was a good chance I actually wouldn't make the finish line. Again, I put my head down and kept shuffling.

One mile into the final descent runners started passing me one after another. The pain from cramps and the pain from getting passed was too much. I was pissed. Desperately trying to find a rhythm I tried short strides and long strides and everything in between. With 2.6 to go the descent leaves singletrack and follows gravel to the end. There was light at the end of a very long tunnel. Even though I was still getting passed from both sides I was successfully cramp-free for a solid 15 minutes. Then I got a pat on the back. Bill was also running his first ultra and he caught me with less than 2 miles to go after I had been away for the previous 3 hours. He was looking strong but hung with me and said something about finishing together. I thanked him but told him to go on.

As Bill easily pulled away the grade began easing off bit by bit. I started gaining more confidence in my legs and kicked it up just enough to keep Bill in sight. I was closing the gap between runners who'd passed me at the top when I heard huge footfalls approaching from behind. Before I could turn around I was passed by the tallest person I'd seen all day--who couldn't have been a day younger than 65. He looked like he was having fun. Nothing in the last 2 hours had resembled fun for me but something about this guy rejuvenated me. I jumped in right behind him and started running hard as I crossed the '1 mile to go' line. It felt like I was flying when I caught Bill a half mile later. We pushed the pace to the end and crossed the line together in 6:43:12, 116th out of 345 runners.

I grabbed my fancy finishers schwag (nice Patagonia running shorts appropriately short enough for Leighton's approval) and collapsed in the grass to watch other runners finish. In spite of two full hours of pain and suffering, within 30 minutes of finishing I was already talking about next year's race. I don't have much to compare it to but I was blown away by everything from the camping to the food and volunteers and overall friendly spirit that surrounds the ultra-community. And the race course was spectacular. I think I might be hooked.

Lessons learned: 1) Mistakes are good. I learned a lot about ultra racing in the past few months, mostly over a 7-hour period yesterday, and even though I can barely walk today I had a blast doing it. 2) Always interpret your friends' wise suggestions about your capabilities as a direct challenge. It's fun to push up against your limit. 3) Carry more pickle juice/vinegar. I bought a little 1-ounce Nalgene specifically for apple cider vinegar but went through 2 ounces preventatively before cramping (it seems to be the only thing that makes my cramping subside). That, or train more. 4) Racing is a lot of fun.

Thanks for your support along the way!

Thanks again David. Best of luck in surgery and recovery! There is no doubt in my mind that I will be back for PL next year.

Greg Mu