

Promise Land 50k

April 26, 2014

I ran my first ultra on Nov 4, 2000: the JFK 50 miler. One and a half years later I ran my first Horton race, Holiday Lake, on Feb 13, 2002, with Promise Land 50k just 2 months later, on April 27, 2002. Since then, I've run a total of around 67 ultras. Promise Land 50k is still my favorite race. 2014 would be my 10th finish at PL50k. This seems like a good time to reminisce about PL50k.

What makes it such a fun race?

First of all, it is a tough race. There are definitely some hills to climb as well as some long down hills to trash the quads. The weather can be pretty variable- we've run it in hot weather (like this year), in the pouring rain, cold weather, cold pouring rain . . . The scenery is beautiful: we have expansive views as we run on the forest roads and up close views of a majestic waterfall, if you have the energy to look!

The start is perfect. Most of us (mid-packers, at least) will walk up significant sections on the initial gravel road, a great way to get warmed up. There are plenty of competitors, but with the start on a gravel road, runners spread out enough before the single track so you don't trip over each other nor get stuck behind a long line of slower runners. And of course, you really don't need a light- you just leach off of someone else's light and the sun peaks out right before you hit the single track and need better light. To be completely fair, I'm not so fond of that gravel road when I'm on my way back- it's a quad killer and I always get passed by a few people on it.

As in most ultras, the camaraderie on the trail is great. Runners joke back and forth or get reacquainted with old friends. And even more importantly, make a few new ones! If only I could remember all those names!!! The scenery is great with spring clearly set in at the lower elevations but just starting to arrive on the tops of the mountains.

And of course the volunteers . . . They are always so cheerful and helpful. They've given up their weekend so we runners could go play in the woods. Thanks to all of the volunteers!!!!

And then there's Dave. While his mockery and harassment may irritate a few thin-skinned people, most people recognize it for the good-natured banter that it is. I remember being amazed that after just running a couple of his races, he remembered my name. He always seemed truly happy to see everyone who shows up at his races, and he eagerly cheers them on at the finish line (after harassing them a little on the trail, of course). Dave has devoted so much time and energy over the years to helping us runners enjoy (or suffer through) a day of running through the woods. Thanks Dave!! And of course he is helped by Nancy, who is often behind the scene helping out, possibly helping with registration, or possibly cooking for 500 runners. Thanks Nancy!!

I have realized that my PL50k finishing times have been fairly consistent. My PR of 6:27:01 was in 2008 and this year I ran a 6:36:04. My slowest PL50k was in 2004 when I finished in a 8:46:30 running with my beautiful wife. One Promise Land has been enough for her, though.

I knew that this was going to be fun when I got to the start and realized that I forgot my hand-held water bottles. I happened to have a regular water bottle in the car, so I figured I'd make do. Since I'm cheap, I slept in my car the night before! I started the race as I normally do, trying to keep a good steady pace near the beginning, but definitely not pushing. Once I topped over the first big hill I tried to let gravity help me and just opened my stride a bit (at 195 lbs, I'm not a BIG runner, but I'm definitely not one of those slender waifs gliding over the trails). Unfortunately, too much food the night before sped through my digestive track (or was too slow by about 1.5 hours), so I had to make an unscheduled pit stop. Unfortunately my emergency equipment (TP) is normally with my handhelds, which were at home, so I had to utilize what nature provided. After sanitizing my hands at the next aid station (thanks again volunteers!!) I felt comfortably back in the race. From here on I was just enjoying the race. I try to run strong near the end, and I take pride in not being passed as we climb up past the falls. This is of course easier to do if you start out fairly slowly like I usually do (all the fast people are way up ahead by the time we get to the falls). After that little climb, we just had a downhill to go. And as usually, while I ran the down hill single track fairly well, only being passed by one runner, once I hit the steep, quad killing gravel road I was passed by several runners. I was happy to finish my 10th Promise Land 50k in a time of 6:36:04, and to be congratulated by Dave Horton at the finish line, of course.

Thanks to all the runners that I enjoyed talking with on the trails, all the runners who motivated me to push harder, whether you realized it or not, and special thanks to all the volunteers who made this possible.

Kevin Townsend