

My Promise Land 50K

I am not an avid runner; I am a challenge seeker and an athlete who enjoys exploring the boundaries of his physical fitness. With only one marathon and a couple halves on my resume, I quickly realized I was committing to an overwhelming task when I first laid eyes on the elevation profile of the Promise Land 50K. The advice I received around the water cooler at work spanned the spectrum from simplicity, “just put one foot in front of the other and don’t stop,” to a highly technical training regimen complete with nutritional intake recommendations and gear suggestions. Of course, you always hear from the ones that don’t get it, “you have a car... why are you running so far?”

Needless to say, the performance anxiety I felt and the curiosity surrounding the trail peaked on an hourly basis the weeks preceding race day. I had made it clear to everyone within earshot but most importantly, I established an interpersonal contract, my goal was to basically finish the race. With that promise in mind, I threw caution to the wind and decided I would employ the same concept that has gotten me through every other physically demanding endeavor I’ve faced previously, keep it simple stupid (K.I.S.S.)!

I planned to run with a good buddy that is a veteran of the course from a few years back. The narrative he shared with me of his experience made Frodo Baggins’ journey through Middle Earth appear easier than prom night. His accounts started to get to me and the urge to buy the ergonomic water bottle, those sleek toe socks and that revolutionary performance powder defeated me. I’ve always found it easy to poke fun at specialists and their mono-dimensional gear but to my dismay, I was now taking my position amongst the ranks of pure runners.

Now its race day and I’m hyped up. Despite my buddy’s futile attempts to lighten the mood by repeating the joke, “I’m so ready for this 5K!” to every passerby, I am feeling serious jitters. A bagel with peanut butter, a banana and two cups of coffee; I’m ready for this damn race! All the gear I’ll need is in its proper place, I begin to visualize the sense of accomplishment I’ll feel when crossing the finish line but I’m alarmed by the combination of positive energy coupled with tense apprehension that’s emanating from the runners in my vicinity.

Dr. Horton’s distinct voice booms over the bullhorn, ripping through the darkness and bringing an extra chill to the air. This signals that the time for runners to gather at the start line has arrived. After the pledge of allegiance and a prayer, the pack takes off up the first climb. Everything feels good and I’m excited to conquer this beast of a course. During the march up that first peak, I strike up a conversation with a salty runner that recommends I stick to running my own race and further cautions me to not feel the need to stay with anyone. I heed his sage advice and pull ahead of him after the first water point.

Somewhere between mile 3 and 4, my buddy decides to shed his windbreaker but I continue on the trail fully expecting him to catch up with me shortly. I feel I kept a steady pace, a determined forced march up the inclines and an average speed on the downhills and rare level stretches. At about the 9 mile mark I was invincible and filled with vigor yet my conscience reminded me that I wasn't even a third of the way through the course. I'd been hanging around a group of what appeared to be accomplished runners so my ego was well fed. That changed abruptly while negotiating the rigorously technical decline of the Dark Side. Suddenly I found myself alone and unafraid but prepared to tackle the last half of this monster.

Fast forward to mile 24, the cramps began to capture my attention and my mind was questioning my justification for attempting this. Still, I continued forward and managed to smile and carry on with the exceptionally helpful volunteers at each aid station. Legs were shot and my spirit was bruised but I trudged up the "steps" and rocks along the waterfalls. Cursing and the false impression that I was near the summit made this phase bearable. When I laid eyes on water point 8, I thought it was a mirage. Oh what a welcome sight it was though, this meant that I was nearing the end and the remaining trail was mostly descending. I love you gravity!

Approximately 4 or 5 miles out, I am walking on a level surface. I hear a friendly voice approaching with jubilant inspiration. It was my running partner, just the jolt I needed to get me through the last few agonizing miles to the finish. We were both in noticeable pain but refused to succumb to the torture this last stretch presented on our bones and muscles. Several times we incorrectly spotted the hard surface road, which turned out to be so incredibly debilitating, but it was all so worth it for that moment when we made that last right turn by the bathrooms. Our running posture proud and our souls cleansed by sweat and hard work as we crossed the finish line together.

Such an emotional moment for me to complete this race amongst some truly incredible athletes. I was humbled with every step I took to now be known as a finisher alongside each and every one of you. I joke around about runners in this memoir but that is mostly to add levity and entertainment value to a community that I wholeheartedly respect and admire. No disrespect is intended in these words; rather I voice my deepest appreciation for you and your crazy craft!

Thanks to all of you,

Jose Vengoechea