

The Dark Side of the Mountain Jack Andrish

It has been several years since I wrote a “race report.” And those “reports” were always following my efforts at the 100 mile variety. I would pour my emotions into those sometimes successful and often not successful, but always “mystical” experiences. But stuff happens when one translates from 60 to 70 and this back-of-the-pack runner has had increasing problems with making time cut-offs. So it is that my resurrection of a race report comes after running a mere 13.5 miles.

The Promise Land 50K Ultra is truly one of the Virginia ultra running gems. Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains and not far from Lynchburg, it sports somewhere between 7-8,000 feet of elevation gain spread over 34.5 miles (those are Horton miles), with Nature’s beauty everywhere; up, down, and sideways. My son, Sean, had always told me that if I were to ever run one of the Horton races, Promise Land should be the one. And so in 2012, Sean and I ran together. And as happens, that year what started out in beautiful weather, suddenly turned very foul with a nearly 20-degree drop in temperature and a deluge of rain, thunder, and the dreaded lightening. That year there was only one time cutoff at mile 23.9 and we made that time, but finished the race about 10 minutes over the 10-hour time limit. Still, we finished and I was happy to have made it up the Apple Orchard Falls, back through Sunset Fields and down to the finish. The next year, 2013, I came back with my daughter Shannon and we ran together. That year, however, a soft time cutoff had been added at the first encounter with the Sunset Fields Aid Station, mile 11.94 (AKA 13.5) with the “suggestion” to consider dropping if one exceeded 9:15 AM. We made both cutoffs and together we experienced the ups and downs of an ultra and both finished in “official” times. And then last year I came back for another attempt, although I was hampered by multiple myofascial pains, the most problematic being a pain in the butt; and all secondary to the initiation of statin medication for control of cholesterol. Eventually, I discontinued this masochistic therapy and the pains have, as expected, ceased to exist. That said, it hobbled me last year and for the first time at the 50K level, I missed a time cutoff (Sunset Fields) by a lot!

So this past year I have ceased the statins and returned to running as time has allowed. It has been good to run again with only the “usual” aches and pains of adulthood. My plan was to return to the Promise Land 50K, but only if I could demonstrate to myself that I could at least make the first time cutoff at Sunset Fields. I would make a special trip to Virginia in March and run the first part of the course. If I could make it within the allotted time frame, I would send in my entry form and register. If I couldn’t make it, then I would accept that it was now beyond my capability. And so, Sue Ellen and I made the drive. On a March Saturday morning she left me at the Promise Land Camp and waved to me as I started my “run” up and over and around Onion Mountain and then down to Sunset Fields where she was there to time me. I made what I thought was within one minute of the time cutoff (9:15 AM; 3:45 into the race), but I had struggled up the

final climb onto the Parkway crossing. That said, I thought that was good enough to go back and “train” and prepare for the race. I made out an official entry.

David Horton often has a way with words and his description of the course beyond the first encounter with Sunset Fields is “the dark side” of the mountain. And so my goal this year was to finish, but especially at least to get to the “dark side” of the mountain. I was going to the “dark side!”

But the night before the race I found a real problem. Reading the “runners packet” I found that last year the time cutoff at Sunset Fields had been reduced to 9:05. I had been thinking of it as the 2013 time of 9:15 (and that was a “soft” time cut off at that). Now I had to reduce my time by another 10 minutes over the 13.5 miles.

The conditions for the race this year were perfect for running an ultra; cloudy, intermittent light showers, with temperatures in the forties. Perfect. My strategy was to maintain the best pace I could carry and run at every opportunity and work the uphill with a steady pace. And I did. And this time when I crossed the Parkway following the final climb, I felt good; no struggling this time. And then for the 1.7 miles downhill into Sunset Fields, I ran as fast as I could; and I could! In fact, my Garmin watch recorded a maximum speed of 9.9 MPH! But as I entered the aid station, I was greeted with the dreaded “you missed the time cut off by 10 minutes” and there are no exceptions. “You are out of the race.”

Now I am rather experienced at being timed out in races, but it has always been mostly a blessing because I had been struggling with the proverbial “death march.” But this time I felt good; really good! I was not tired. I had no pain. I was metabolically intact. And I REALLY wanted to get to the “dark side” of the mountain. But I could not persuade. “We have observed that 10 minutes over at this time in the race translates to an hour over the cutoff on the rest of the course, and no one working an aid station wants to work until 4 PM.”

And so Sue Ellen reluctantly drove me back to our room at the Peaks of Otter Lodge (a great location, by the way, for accommodations for this race) and after a snack, we went out together and hiked to the top of Sharp Top Mountain (the second highest peak in Virginia). All in all, it was a great day for us. But of course I was bothered by my DNF. I was disappointed not to see the “dark side” of the mountain; and confused. I was confused because I felt so good. Too good? Is it just time to forget running ultras, or at least to forget mountain ultras? After all, I am 71 years old and as a famous ex-quarterback of the Cleveland Browns (Bernie Kosar) found out from an ex-head football coach of the Browns (Bill Belichick), “diminishing skills” comes with age. And the sensible thing to accept is to eliminate the mountains. The relentless climbing required is not the most enjoyable thing to experience. It’s tough and all too often a struggle. But then eventually the struggle does end and the other side of the mountain is downhill!

So after a good night’s sleep and a drive back to Ohio with time to think, I now understand. Sure, the bad news was that I missed the time cutoff; but the good news was

that I did climb the mountain and I felt good! I felt strong! I had experienced relentless climbs and some wonderful extended downhill running as well. I was so lucky and fortunate. And then I had completed the day by climbing another mountain with my wife. Nothing bad about any of that!

So what are my plans for the future? I will continue to run as long as my body and mind allow. But I will be happy with whatever pace I can put forth. And I will not necessarily do it in a “race,” but I can make my own events at my pace, self contained or otherwise. I will enjoy and be thankful for the opportunities. And I will return to Virginia in the spring and begin my “race” at the Promise Land Camp, and I will climb the mountain; and I will go beyond the Sunset Fields and I will see the “dark side” of the mountain.

Jack Andrish

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