

PROMISE LAND: Best 50K in the EAST

April 25, 2015

By Dr. David Horton

The Promise Land 50K has it all: big climbs, big descents, a spectacular waterfall, beautiful streams, single-track trails, a pre-race pizza blast, a spectacular bonfire, free camping at the start/finish, post-race barbeque, Patagonia shorts to finishers, great Patagonia door prizes, and according to Dr. Gary Knipling, the best wild flowers of any race around.

The last Saturday in April, brings the Promise Land 50K and the arrival of spring to Virginia, usually. The grass is green around the Promise Land Youth Camp and the trees were leafed out. However, at the higher elevations of the course, Apple Orchard Mountain and Sunset Fields still felt and looked like winter. The off and on rain and sleet at the highest points reminded all runners that winter was having its last gasp.

The 5:30 a.m. start had 325 runners begin the race with a 4-mile climb, which would later be the same 4-mile descent. We were down about 30 runners from normal. The Holiday Lake 50K, held in February, was down about 100 runners. What is going on? Is there a decrease in ultra runners? No, I think the major reason is that there are so MANY ultra opportunities out there now. The previous weekend, there were three ultras and one marathon held in Virginia.

For the last two years, we have been fortunate to have Helen MacDonald (Lexington, VA) design the Holiday Lake 50K and Promise Land entrant shirts. Last year, the shirt had a picture of the steps around the [Apple Orchard Waterfalls](#) (176 of them), and this year's design had the actual waterfalls on the front of the shirts. To add some quality, I had this design printed on white polyester shirts.

Commented [NH1]: What's the correct name – you have WATERFALLS or just FALLS below?

The ladies race was expected to be between Bethany Patterson (Richmond, VA) and Robin Watkins (Washington, DC). Patterson had won the first two races of the LUS/Beast Series, Holiday Lake and Terrapin Mountain 50Ks. Watkins had run the Boston Marathon five days earlier in a stellar time of 3:03.

As expected, Patterson took the lead from the start. Her goal was to break 5:30 and possibly get Anne Lundblad's course record of 5:23:50. All day she looked strong and was under 5:30 pace. She took the victory in 5:28:25, setting a course PR by more than 20 minutes and falling short of the course record by just over 4.5 minutes.

I expected the men's race to be a three-person race. Shaun Pope (Black Mountain, NC) won the 2014 Promise Land and had won the Holiday Lake 50K earlier this year. Darren Thomas (Blacksburg, VA) won the Barkley Classic last year and was second at the 2014 Hellgate 100K. Brandon Taylor (a Liberty University student) was second to Pope at Holiday Lake in February.

Thomas and Taylor made it a two-man race, running together through aid stations 3, 4, and 5. Aid Station 5 is Colon Hollow, aka the ICE CREAM aid station. This is where the race REALLY starts. There are two good climbs left to conquer . . . **one is a GOOD one** and the other is a GIANT climb up **Apple Orchard Falls**. Thomas picked up the pace and left Taylor who was having some GI issues and cramping.

From there on, Thomas BLASTED away from the rest of the field, finishing in 4:40:34, the only runner who broke five hours. The course record is 4:25. Sam Dangc (Lynchburg, VA) finished a distant second place in 5:06:50. Fellow Virginia Tech runner Jonathan Ryder took third in 5:07:25.

Daniel Spearin (Crozette, VA) and Michelle Anderson (Crozette, VA) took the Masters titles in 5:27 and 7:03 respectively. David Peterman (Stow, OH) and Martha Wright (Richmond, VA) took the Grand Masters titles in 5:38 and 7:09 respectively. Marlin Yoder (Harrisonburg, VA) and Dru Sexton (Roanoke, VA) took the Super Masters titles in 6:58 and 7:33.

Gene Potter (Charlottesville, VA) started and finished the Promise Land 50K for the 15th time in the 15th year of the PL 50K. I hope he continues to complete in this race for many more years.

As part of the requirement for an Advanced Running class that I teach at Liberty University, the students are required to run and complete an ultramarathon. I had 12 students start the race and all of them finished. In the whole race field, there were 46 current or former LU students who finished Promise Land. Also, four of the top ten ladies were current or former LU students. Manning many of the aid stations were other LU students as well. I hope these folks continue in the ultra world for many years.

Consider coming and running the Best 50K in the East next April 30, 2016.