

Promise Land 2015 – Freda Spencer

I pretty much tried to ignore the 25th on my calendar. With my second 50k creeping closer and closer, the words “Promise Land” both excited and intimidated at the same time. Finally, I couldn’t ignore it any longer. On Thursday before the race, I stopped at the Aid Station to pick up my bib number and shirt. I also bought salt capsules to try to avoid the painful leg and foot cramps I experienced at Terrapin. I also bought a pair of Swiftwick socks that I KNEW were moisture wicking, - also trying to not repeat a painful mistake from Terrapin.

After I got home, I packed my hydration vest with Honey Stingers, Juice Plus gummies, a Bonk Breaker, Tums (something I also learned I needed at Terrapin), ibuprofen, and a peanut butter sandwich cut in pieces small enough to just swallow, no chewing required. I filled my hydration bladder ½ way knowing I could refill it at aid stations. No use carrying extra weight up all that climbing! I printed the course description (thanks Blake Edmondson) with mileage between aid stations in case I got lost. Hey, I’m new at this!!! Don’t judge.

I work nightshift and have no problem taking a nap in the evenings since I do it before work all the time. I went to bed at 6:30 pm and my alarm was set for 3:02 am (mind game, not getting up at 3 means you are sleeping in..haha). I reminded myself that 3 am is half way through my shift at work and is no big deal. I woke up at 10:30 because, hey, I had been hydrating all week and then slept until midnight. Back to sleep and awake at 1, then 2. An hour power nap was left! I felt GREAT when I got up at 3:02! I made a nice egg and toast breakfast, showered (oh yes, I did, makeup, don’t worry about hair so much with a hat and was out the door to meet Janet Vickers and Susan Anderson. I had driven to the camp on Thursday to make SURE I wouldn’t get lost and they were following me there.

We were ON OUR WAY!!!! WOW!!! I was really getting to run Promise Land! I loved hearing all the stories from friends and they all told me it was hands down their favorite race (they are warped). I watched closely for deer and had to slow down to almost a stop twice for them. On Centerville Road I thought maybe my eyes were deceiving me because I was driving so early. A car coming towards me looked like it was in my lane. IT WAS! What in the world????? Paper guy almost ran head on into me and then cut in front of Janet and Susan. That got the adrenaline flowing and I just knew I was going to have a stellar day! Cool weather, favorite race of friends, had stuff for no cramps, no nausea. Yep, it was going to be good.

I pulled in the camp and saw all the poor schmucks who had tried to sleep in cold tents. Maybe next year I’ll be a schmuck too! Porta potty had no line...bazinga! I went to the pavilion and checked in and saw some of the Blue Ridge Trail Runners. I was just SO excited to be there!!! This was REALLY happening!! Then prayer, national anthem singing (everyone needs to keep their day jobs, they can run, not sing) and then we were off!!!!!! AHHHHHH!!!!!! I couldn’t find Janet or Susan so I just ran. First across the grassy field, then the road...not bad, not bad at all. Todd

Thomas ran by me and told me it was going to get steep, to run when I could and walk when I had to. Gotcha. I was going to be just brilliant with my run 50 steps, walk 50 steps. (mind game, think positive thoughts) I saw a house. People LIVE out here??? Wow.... Then Alissa Keith ran by me. I kept up for about 20 steps and then she got smaller and smaller as it got steeper and steeper. Pretty much everyone was walking at that point. I felt I fit right in there in the crowd. Hey, I wasn't going to finish last this time! 50/50 kept happening. We kept slogging up, up, up. Four miles up is, well, just UP! I drank two cups of water at the first aid station and avoided anything with sugar in it. (didn't want a repeat of sugar crashing at Terrapin) Then we turned right onto a trail. Yay!!! I was running/walking with a headlamp among really great people. Unreal! Still riding high! Arg.....it was still a whole lotta up. Donna Elder had said PL was no joke and I was feeling the reality a bit sooner than I wanted. Then I saw Dr. Wortley! Wow, out in the middle of nowhere. Very cool! At the next aid station I dumped my headlamp (Walmart special but I had my name on it four times - hey, I'm a cheapskate, don't be a hater). Then.....ping, ping, ping. Well yeah!!!! It was sleeting! Weather.com keeps it's record of being pretty much wrong all the time. It was supposed to start raining much later in the day and it was SLEETING. I like the sound of sleet on the leaves and watched it bounce off my arms. Way cool. I was running in sleet on PL and truly enjoying it. It just felt surreal! Sam Price went zipping past me. See ya Sam! When we started going down, a bunch people passed me. I was quite impressed with myself on how many people were behind me on the 4 mile climb but not impressed by how many were passing on the down hill section. This is when it just gets a bit blurry. I remember running on trail for a long time and trying to keep up with taking a Tums and then a Honey Stinger every hour. I failed miserably at that! My GI system shuts down when I get stressed or run long and I have a problem taking in nutrition. By the time I got to the aid station on the parkway, I was hitting wall #1. Right before I got there, I pretty much decided to quit. Why do this for TWENTY more miles? I had failed, I was a failure and I would never fulfill my dream of being a PL finisher. I looked at my watch and realized I was switching over energy systems (around 2 hour mark) and I always feel like crap at that point, more so when I've not kept up with eating. The aid station had an ANGEL at it! REALLY!!!! Alicia Roberts. Man oh man! She ran up to me and asked what I needed. A new freaking body, that's what. Sense enough to know I can't do this, that's what. A good bawling cry somewhere, that's what. But all I said was "I don't even know!" They had ORANGE SLICES at the aid station which I can always tolerate and it's like adding fuel to a fire! I felt GREAT about 10 minutes later! Oh yeah!!!! I was going to do this or die trying. I was NOT GOING TO QUIT! Thanks Alicia, aid station volunteers and orange growers! Trails, streams, rocks, roots. I looked up once and wow! I was surrounded by a forest of beauty. There were flowers covering the floor and tall trees. Ok, enough of that. I needed to keep moving. The WHOR loop came and it was so foggy I couldn't see the round tower thing towards the top. Janet ran past me there. She SAID she was dying but was running strong. A familiar sight, I watched her get smaller and smaller as she ran farther away - repeat of Terrapin. I really loathe sucking at these races. I am smiling on the outside (mostly) but on the inside, I'm trying to muster positive thoughts about myself. I saw Cheyenne at the out and back and knew it

was a matter of time before she too left me in the dust! At the aid station by the gravel road and stream (I don't know what everything is called), she, Wade Stout and I started running together. It was SO nice to run with someone and I was going to try to stay with them as long as I possibly could. Alicia met us there and we ran past Chelsea and Alexis in their cars. They yelled encouragements and it was just wonderful!!!! Once again the surreal feeling and exhilaration of actually running Promise Land flooded back. I was loving this!! The woods were greening up, the sound of the water rushing was refreshing and I was with great friends. Life was good!!!! I ran with Alicia, Chey and Wade down the road, up a single track trail and then to a grassy road that oh..my.word. started going up, up, up again. Death to me....ugh. Chey asked me when I had last eaten and I couldn't remember. The orange slices? I think so. I gagged on a Tums and then almost hurled on a Honey Stinger. I kept thinking about the peanut butter sandwich in my pack and knew it would help tremendously but the thought of putting it in my mouth, no way. I kept sipping water because I knew I had to. I was so thirsty but drinking made me feel gaggy again. Leslie Mcphatter ran past at a steady pace, never varying. I watched everyone get smaller and smaller as I fell farther behind. I began the self pep talks again because I was pretty much hating my weakness. Then came comic relief just at the right time. I had been very very sick two weeks before the race and was still producing buckets of, well, sorry to just say it, snot. I always made sure everyone was out of range and "got rid of it". A college age guy ran by me and said, "Wow, you do fantastic snot rockets!" HAHHAHA! Wow. I have NEVER been told that!!! We had a conversation about snot (yes, really) and then he ran on. Nice one guy. You made me laugh when just moments before I was hating life, myself, the world and the day.

Fast forward to the climb to the falls. It is so long!!!!!! Daggone!!! You just keep going slightly up a trail with roots and rocks. I knew everyone before me had ran this part and I wanted to run it SO bad. I could run in small spurts but not too much. Then you climb rocks up next to the falls. Wow! I kept thinking, "This is DANGEROUS!!!" Haha! Wobbly legs, slippery rocks (it was raining steady by now) well, yeah!!!! A person (me) could pretty much die doing this part! Then....the platform across the falls. There were three girls that stopped for pictures and I was NOT going to stop since I had taken pictures on a training run but oh well. It is THE Promise Land 50k. The falls were beautiful. Now the stairs. I had worried about the stairs but they felt amazing! I scooted right up them. What in the world? HOW? I do not know but I loved the feeling of the firm flat wood under my feet. I scaled them in no time flat. Loved it!! :D That was the highlight, then came the hell. The next section is a steady, not horribly steep climb back to the parkway. But it is done on tired legs. It is really not that long but feels like it will never end. Ever. I hit the wall here, HARD. I told God if He wanted me to have a massive heart attack and take me to heaven, I was fine with that. Really. This would be over and my name would not be shamed. I resolved to be a great volunteer at an aid station and never EVER put myself through something this stupid again. I resorted to using my hands to push my poor legs down with each step. It helped a lot! I finally FINALLY could see cars (Oh thank God in heaven!) and then OH MY WORD!!!! Alicia!!!! I choked back tears when she told me she was going to run the rest of the way with me. No way.

No stinkin' way! How did I deserve such a sweet friend? I didn't, pure and simple. Sometimes God gives you blessings just because He loves you and shows it in wonderful unexpected ways. There were no more orange slices at the aid station but I ate a couple of potato wedges and a ¼ of banana. Stopping briefly was enough time for my legs to think I wasn't requiring anything else and they did NOT like it when we started those last miles. Alicia is a wonderful conversationalist and kept my mind occupied. She told me if I wanted to be crabby I could.....hahaha!!!! I plodded along, wishing I could go faster but could feel that if I pushed harder, those horrible muscle cramps would start. Down a sloppy root and rock strewn trail and then to the gravel road!!! FREEDOM!!!! Or not! The steep up of the beginning of the race is the steep down of the end. My left IT band grabbed at my knee and yowza...the pain was raw. I stopped and stretched for a few seconds and then much much slower than I wanted, made my way down the road. Alicia kept up the encouragement and said it would level out soon. It did!!! My watch said 33 miles and I was SO excited!! I only had one more mile to go. Um...no I did not. (insert evil thoughts here) Alicia, as nicely as she could, told me we hadn't seen the one mile mark on the road or the squirrel. The WHAT???? Well, I'd rather know the lay of the land than not. Then.....ok, I'm older but a MUCH older man just totally zipped by me like I was standing still. He said he was sick of being out there and wanted to be done. Good grief! I suck as a runner. I did pass one guy doing the 50/50 walk run thing...sorry guy. Then the glorious mile mark on the road and a huge wood squirrel on a mail box. I saw families waiting for their runners and knew we were SO close! Then...OH MY GOSH!!!! CARS, TENTS, PORTAPOTTIES, and then FINISH. Um....where was it? I had to ask Alicia... "now where am I running?" She told me to run to the tent. I could hear people screaming my name. Yes, hello, SHOCKER, I made it and didn't die!!! WOOP WOOP!!!! I got a big hug from Horton. I told him, "that was SO hard!" and he said it was SUPPOSED to be. I got a most coveted picture with Horton!!!! I was SO excited about that!!! I've always wanted one of those and it was actually happening! Rebekah Trittipoe grabbed me and hugged me and told me how proud she was! YES!!!! She is such an inspiration to me!!! I got a few pictures with friends, hugged Alicia big time and headed to my car. WAIT! I forgot my finisher shorts! Geesh! Then back to the car. WAIT!!! I forgot my headlamp! I think next time I'll write a post race list so I don't keep forgetting things. I totally didn't get a picture with the race director at Terrapin – my 1st 50k. Major fail. Tricia (daughter) has come to all my trail race finishes but she didn't make it until after I had finished (yay for being done earlier than they expected!) She brought Jay (husband) and he drove me home which was actually pretty nice. My wish goal was 8 hours. My realistic goal was 9 hours and I finished in 9:06. I could have taken a nap out there with the extra time before the 10 hour cutoff! LOL!

I finished with my pack full of food, which is not a good thing. I ate 3 Honey Stingers gels, 5 Tums, 6 salt capsules, 4 orange slices, a handful of Bugles, 3 potato wedges, ¼ banana and the most glorious cup of broth I've ever drank (thanks Helen!) I made myself drink 2 cups of water at each aid station and sipped from my pack. I lost almost 4 pounds (I lost 3 at Terrapin). Yes, I have a problem with eating enough and pay for it dearly.

I am so glad I had the great privilege of running Promise Land. For me it was a race against the clock. I'm not fast, which truly bothers me but I've just had to get over it. Ok, I lied. I'm not over it. I will never be a top finisher but I FINISH. Terrapin wasn't a fluke! I really can run 50k's and finish before the cutoff time! Dr. Horton organized a wonderful event. My great thanks to him, his crew, all the volunteers and my wonderful friends. You all blessed me greatly and I'll be forever grateful.