

## 2018 Promise Land Report: Joel Brenny

Suffering. Probably a cliché intro to any race report for an ultra marathon. For good reason. 2018 was my second year running Promise Land, 365 days after the 2017 race. Last year was my first ultra and a milestone for me, so I thought this go around would be easier than last. But I was wrong.

My senior year at Liberty University I was on the triathlon team. We trained shorter distances, but large volume. In the weeks before the 2017 race, I was joining Dr. Horton and his running class when he told me I couldn't volunteer the race but I could run it. Despite some fear of the unknown and lack of training at that distance I signed up. In 2017, I did not suffer much. Clearly, my training paid off, with a 6:19 finish time and minor suffering only during the last 5 miles of downhill. But we're here to talk about this year's race.

I had not been running much at all post-graduation, but 3 weeks ago I saw a lot of commotion about PL 2018. I knew I had to do it, because I was planning on moving soon after. I began putting in some miles- as many as I could handle safely to get my legs ready. I got shin splints. Some rest and easy miles the 2 weeks before the race and I was confident that I would finish well. Horton told me he wanted my to go under 6:19 from my previous year. I knew last year had some of the worst weather conditions on record, and I was sure I would finish well, even if slightly slower than 6:19.

Camping out was a blast as always and hearing the banter between runners, Horton, and the stories being told added to the race atmosphere. The morning of, I was off to a good start. Little breakfast was not helping, but by AS 1, I was feeling great. Ultra runners are a friendly population, so I made friends as I ran. The downhill following the initial climb really jars it out of you. I took a pit stop the same place as last year around mile 5. By AS 2, I was extremely thankful and ready for the food- I took as much as I could fit in my hands. By about mile 12, my glutes began to burn. "Strange", I thought. "I've put in training runs longer than this in the last few weeks and felt fine. Maybe it'll go away". But it never did. By mile 15 I was suffering because my glutes were shot, and I already wanted to quit. The shorts for finishers at the end were too cool though (and I'm not a quitter) (and I knew Horton would NEVER let me hear the end).

At mile 18-19, I sat down on the trail after finishing the gravel road. Last year I CRUISED down that flat gravel road. This year, I walk-ran. I planned on allowing myself 2 minutes to recover, when a guy I met last night named Colt pulled me to my feet and said let's go. We hung together a while as I could tell he wasn't feeling great either. Better than me though. At the mile 21 AS, I wanted potatoes to restore my energy. They are my favorite food out on the course. They gave me some greasy hashbrowns which I found repulsive, but I thanked them and went on my way. I told Colt how at this point every minor annoyance feels tremendous such as having fried potatoes instead of boiled. Oh well. The segment from the mile 21 AS to the mile 26 AS felt like it took me 2 hours. I was alone for most of it, sat/laid on the trail several times, and had people dragging me along (figuratively). It was so strange- last year this part was a jog in the park and this year I did not know if I would even finish. I wanted to drop out.

When I saw the marathon-marker aid station from a distance, I almost began to cry. I had not seen people in so long, and I had nothing left in me. Some randos asked if I was okay, so I sprayed my water bottle on my face and grunted "Yeah, just tired". Oddly enough, it was like times square in there.

People everywhere, food everywhere, a refreshing wet towel for my shoulders. It recharged me and I actually had a nice hike up Apple Orchard Falls. Same as last year- I guess that's my strong suit.

Upon reaching Sunset Fields, I was expecting to get a little something and fly down the hill to the finish. False. I sat down and ate and drank for a minute. Then the downhill began. What I expected to be smooth sailing turned out to be the hardest part of the race which was not helped by the unsettling zebra cakes that had tasted so good 5 minutes ago. I hate running downhill and tell people openly. All of my muscles were gone at this point and had been for a long time. After pounding my way to the gravel road, I thought I was almost there. The gravel road felt like an eternity. People were passing and one dude said "I know you hate downhill running" as he passed me. I think I had told him the night before. Thanks for the encouragement. During these last 3 miles I felt like I moaned with every step and literally did shed a few tears at one point. My mental exhaustion was at its peak in addition to my physical.

Finally I saw the squirrel and knew I was home free. As I made my way to the finish across the campsite, Horton busted out the loudspeaker and asked if I had stopped to take a nap or got lost. Nope. Just stupidity. Classic Horton. I jumped across the finish line, giving him, my family, and friends a hug. 7 hours and 49 minutes, and about 5-6 of that were suffering. After finishing I told him I would come back to run well next year. "Did you learn from your mistake?", he asked. "Yep. Sure did. I suffered a lot this year". The theme of this year's race was false expectations and suffering. I was out of shape and it showed from mile 12 and beyond. I'll be back next year, PREPARED, and ready to enjoy another day at the most beautiful race on earth.