

2009 Promise Land

by Jeff Branin

I never really intended to do Promise Land. Just like I never intend to do the Uwharrie 40. 20 miles of Uwharrie is plenty for me. Running Promise Land would be like doing Uwharrie 40. I like running to be fun. From most of the stories I've read, Promise Land promised pain.

Joey Anderson has raced and written about Promise Land in his blog. That's how I first came to know about the event. Joey also races and writes about 100 milers and back to back marathons. These are other activities I have no attention of doing, although I do enjoy reading the accounts.

In April, I like to run the Brandywine End to End Hike. Most folks obviously hike it, but I find it very runnable. It's 35 miles along various treadways in Pennsylvania and Delaware. I'd run it 6 out of the last 7 years. For some reason this year, Brandywine fell on the same weekend as the Shakori Hills Music Fest. Musical fun and frolic prevailed. As a substitute I thought of doing the Delaware Trail Marathon on the 25th, but then I considered that Promise Land would only take me half the driving time. And I was not getting any younger. If I was ever going to do Promise Land even though I supposedly didn't really want to, now would be the time.

Promise Land is 34 miles. I'm down with the Keith Knipling 2008 report. His data is my mantra. Actually, I'm an idiot. His split time from AS6 to AS7 is 46 minutes. I think I can do it in an hour. Ha, ha. Promise Land will be a fun experience for me except for AS6 to AS7. I will do it in an hour . . . and fifty minutes.

The prerace activities, the camping, the pizza, the course markings, the course marshals, the aid station amenities and aid station help, the hand shake at the finish line, the hamburgers and ice cold Mountain Dew, the plopping in the creek, all were of star quality.

But AS6 to AS7, that was pain. Earlier, before arriving at AS6, I passed by some hikers or birdwatchers and was walking uphill on a road with another runner. He told me that that the upcoming falls climb wasn't as notorious as some made it out to be. Confidence was high. I'd hoped to arrive at AS6 in 6 hours and knock out the remaining 8 miles in 2 hours. 8 hours total seemed reasonable. I ran into AS6 in an elapsed time of 5:40. One runner was sitting on a campchair. He looked broken. Curled up tight against the bonk. I'd seen that same posture recently on another runner, mile 23 of the Umstead Marathon, another warm day race. I looked for potato chips. Had a few at previous aid stations, but none left in the bag at AS6.

I headed up for Sunset Fields. The initial grade was moderate, but I moved slowly and with effort. The race director had extolled us to keep moving. A runner during the Ellerbe Marathon had told me to imagine I was gliding. I glided not. I soon moved not. The creek and the falls were beautiful, but I really dug the trees. I'd pick one that was at least a foot in diameter. I'd get upslope and then back my butt up against it and rest waiting for my leg muscles to stop spasming. I did manage to pass that same runner I had seen curled up at AS6. This time he was curled up on the side of the trail. I moved on to the next big tree. A runner asked how I was doing. I said I was cramping. He offered me an S cap which I declined. I wished I hadn't. I'd been consuming a steady supply of water, E caps, Clif Shots; but sodium, only just those few potato chips.

I passed another runner. She was sitting demurely on some rocks like she was in Central Park watching the swans. She probably felt like crawling under a rock, but she projected an air that I wish I could have floated on . . . further uphill. She caught up to me at the next tree and offered me some salted cashews. I ate two. I think they helped because I actually got to the photographer at the falls before she did. He asked me if I was having fun. I said yes. I didn't know I still had a mile or so to go

to Sunset. The runner with the cashews had the photographer refocus while she herself regrouped and broke into a run. Fun.

Above the falls, The tree trunks were getting crowded. Sometimes two of us, sometimes three, hanging on, sucking it up. The other hangers-on offered encouragement or maybe they were telling me not to hog the rest stop. I wasn't sure anymore. Another runner offered S caps. This time I accepted and took two. A few minutes later I was on the side of the trail, curled up, like the runner at Umstead, like the runner earlier. The bonk honked. Don't make me puke. And suddenly I was puking. And then I enjoyed a good burp and was up and on to the next tree. Soon William Keane was passing me by with good news: Just a half mile to the top.

At the top I was soon running again as if the last section had never happened, as if trees were for leaving and not for leaning. As if the finish line would be all downhill. It nearly was. I followed one runner for the longest time down those last miles. Either he kept running out of his shoe or he was just periodically stopping to remove stones from his shoe. I never figured out which, but it kept me wondering. Now I wonder when I'll do Promise Land again. I wonder, also, if I'll ever figure out what I need to do or take to quit bonking. Oh yeah, traveling back to Wake Forest, specifically on Route 29, I wonder why at the time I didn't appreciate the irony of passing by the town of Hurt.