

HOT YEAR AT THE PROMISE LAND-----APRIL 25, 2009-----BY David Horton

The Promise Land 50K is the third event in the Lynchburg Ultra Series (LUS) and the Beast Series. It is the final so called easy event in the Beast before the fall onslaught of tough events: Grindstone 100, MMTR 50 Miler, and Hellgate 100K. This year, PL was NOT an EASY event. All week long weather forecasters had called for temperatures in the mid to high 80s. Surely, it could not be that hot at this time of the year in Virginia? On Wednesday when we marked the course, it SNOWED and SLEETED on us, three days before the race. Typical temperatures for this time of the year is a high of 60 to 65 with lows in the 40s. Race morning was hot and humid with a temperature of 70 degrees reaching all the way up to 90 degrees during race day. Many suffered more than normal for a 50K.

The Promise Land course is a beautiful and challenging course taking participants from a starting elevation of 1200 feet to 4000 feet, down to 1100 feet, back up to 3700 feet, and finishing back at 1200 feet. It is the MOST BEAUTIFUL 50K course on the East coast. There is over 7400 feet of elevation gain with spectacular springtime views. The Start/Finish is at the idyllic youth camp in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains (no cell service). Most of the runners camp out in tents for the early 5:30 a.m. start. Were the runners ever glad that we started early this year!!!

On Friday night, there was a pre-race briefing with lots of door prizes given by the sponsors: Frank Villa, Smartwool, Montrail, and Patagonia. Ninety pizzas were bought and MANY runners brought their favorite desserts for all to share. Boy was it good! That was followed by a huge bonfire and lots of talking late into the night.

Promise Land is noted for the camping, the sunrise on the green road, running by Cornelius Creek, crossing it several times, the climb up the awesome Apple Orchard Falls, the 176 PAINFUL steps above the falls, the great Patagonia shorts to finishers, and my wife's fantastic grilled hamburgers and hot dogs and all the fixings. What more could you ask from a spring day? How about a nice cool mountain stream to cool off in after you finish? Oh yeah, we have that too! Many took advantage of that cold mountain water to help revitalize them!

There were four ladies who I expected to run well and they did. Heather Fisher (Blacksburg, VA) had finished a strong second place at the Holiday Lake 50K in February and had won the Terrapin Mountain 50K in March. Amy Sproston (Washington, DC) was just coming off her win at the Bull Run 50 Miler from the previous weekend. Local runner Donna Elder had run with Fisher for most of the race at Terrapin ending up in second place. Bethany Patterson (a.k.a. Phat girl of Richmond, VA) said she was just there to have some fun and enjoy the race. Right! We've heard that before.

The men's race looked to be a three person race and it was. Sean Andrish (Leesburg, VA) had won the 2008 PL. Jordan Whitlock, a student at Liberty University, had won the Terrapin Mountain 50K in March. And Jeremy Ramsey, the winner of the 2008 Hellgate 100K, was looking for his second ultra win.

As expected, Andrish, Ramsey, and Whitlock jumped to the front and took the lead through AS 1. From AS 1 to AS 2, Whitlock used his young legs and speed to leave Andrish and Ramsey 3 minutes behind at AS 2 (8.6 miles). By AS 3, the lead had grown to 6 minutes over the trailing pair. Whitlock lives and trains with Sam Chalanga, who was second at the NCAA cross country meet in the fall of 2008 and recently ran 27:22 for a 10K. Whitlock does not have that kind of speed but training with someone like that doesn't hurt you.

On the way to the next aid station, Whitlock missed a turn and ran on a section of the course to later be run on. By AS 4 (16.1 miles), Andrish had a 2 minute lead over Ramsey and 3 minutes over Whitlock. Andrish found out at this point that he was in the lead and you could see the change in his attitude to one of having a chance to win. By the time that Andrish got back to the Cornelius aid station for the second time, his lead was 4 minutes over Whitlock and 6 minutes over Ramsey. One could see that Whitlock had paid a price in trying to catch up quickly after getting lost.

The next section is the infamous climb up and past Apple Orchard Falls and back to the Parkway (a climb of 2.8 Horton miles, which is more like 3.5 miles, and the toughest part of the course). Ramsey checked into the Parkway aid station (26.7 miles) for the second time 7 minutes behind Andrish. Ramsey passed a fading Whitlock going up the falls.

Andrish took it on home (much of this section is downhill) for his second straight victory at Promise Land, finishing in 5:02:17. Ramsey took second place in 5:09:19 with Whitlock finishing third in a time of 5:15:09.

As expected, Heather Fisher took the lead from the start. By AS 2, Fisher had a 5 minute lead over a group of 3 ladies, Donna Elder, Amy Sproston, and Bethany Patterson. It stayed the exact same way through the next aid station at Sunset Fields.

By Colon Hollow (19.3 miles), Fisher's lead was 3 minutes over Patterson, 4 over Sproston and 6 over Elder. At this same point, Andrish took charge of the race. Patterson, who only was here to run and enjoy herself, took charge of the race as well. Victory was in her sights and she could smell the blood.

By the time the ladies got back to Sunset Fields, Patterson had the race in hand, with a lead of 9 minutes over Sproston, 12 minutes over Fisher, and 15 minutes over Elder. Patterson took it on in to claim her first victory at Promise Land in a PR of 5:50:10. This was a great time for her on a very hot day with her first ultra victory in quite some time. Will there be more to follow?

Sproston took second place in 6:00:54, with Elder (46 years young) slipping by Fisher (23 years very young) to take third place in 6:11:25, with Fisher finishing in 6:11:55. Who says you have to be old/young to race well?

John Cassilly (Glen Allen, VA) and Donna Elder took the Masters titles. Herman Richards (Stockton, NJ) and Vicki Kendall (Arlington, VA) took the Grand Masters titles in 6:27:36 and 6:49:05. These are two VERY tough grand masters runners.

The Super Masters titles went to Bob Anderson (Woodbridge, VA) and Barbara Isom (Silver Spring, MD) in 8:04:05 and 7:32:12. This was a VERY impressive performance by Barbara.

I teach a beginning and advanced running class at Liberty University. There were 19 students competing in Promise Land from these two classes with 17 of them finishing. Many had finished the Holiday Lake 50K and Terrapin Mountain 50Ks earlier this year. I LOVE seeing runners complete their first ultra and I love seeing someone find ultras at a young age and having FUN with it.

We had 273 starters and 257 finishers for a finishing percentage of 94 percent. I attribute this to good work by the aid stations, as well as the runners taking advantage of the many stream crossings. I heard reports that in every pool of water, there was at least one runner and sometimes more.

Dawn Mugford (Ontario, Canada) designed a beautiful t-shirt this year and I had it put on a safety green shirt. If you ever see this shirt, you can't help but see it, you will know what race it came from. Dawn also designed our shirt for Holiday Lake this year as well.

Next year (April 24, 2010) will be the 10th year of Promise Land. I am looking for ideas for 10-time finishers, as well as t-shirt designs for the special year.

I hope many of you can come and join us for the BEST 50K in the EAST next year.