

Promise Land 50K - 2009

by Aaron Mulder

Overall, I'd definitely recommend this race -- the running surfaces were mainly quite pleasant and it has spectacular scenery. It is a hard race, on account of the elevation (which like Terrapin, is concentrated in long stretches). But it's got a 10-hour cutoff, so I think it would be well worth the trip, even if you end up at a slower pace due to the mountains. (Of course, heat is my nemesis, so I wasn't too happy with the forecast coming into the race; apparently this was the hottest year in the nine it's been held!)

So on to the race. I have mixed feelings about the start (5:30 AM). On the one hand, the less time spent in the heat of the day, the better. I think it was in the 70s at the beginning, in the 80s when I finished, and got above 90 before the race ended. But it was dry -- not humid at all. I didn't feel like I was sweating much, but every time I touched my face there was another layer of salt deposits, so I clearly was.

On the other hand, I ended up having breakfast pretty close to the start of the race. I think that was a mistake. Because...

The race started straight uphill -- 2000+ feet in the first 4 or so miles. I didn't think I was going too too fast, but between the heat and the tough profile, I was not getting any digestion action. This was a problem because I knew it was hot and I needed to be drinking, but whatever I drank just sat there and sloshed uncomfortably.

Still, it was a pleasing enough night run. I wore a headlamp because it was dark at the start and I didn't know the course (and they'd announced that the stretch to the first aid station was unmarked). Next time, I'd probably skip it, because it was up the same gravel road the whole way, which hadn't been mentioned, and it was probably light enough to see the road in any case (even if it got substantially worse immediately following the "End of State Maintenance" sign).

But I ditched my lights at the first aid station (a little under 3 miles, pretty close to dawn), where we switched from the gravel road onto trails. That was nice -- the trail was great. A few rocks in parts, but not too many, and very pretty -- some parts mainly forest, others with little corridors of bushes to go through, and the occasional patch of fallen leaves or tiny creek coming down the mountain. Still uphill, of course, but I didn't yet mind.

After we got to the first peak, there was a down and then up to the highest point of the race, nearly 3000 feet above the start. I did have one little wrinkle with the course markings -- I came to a bunch of streamers, and one long streamer across the path forward, blocking it off. Still, I saw what were at best sketchy paths to either side, and no streamers on them. So where the heck was I supposed to go? While I poked around, another runner came along and thankfully he knew the way (which is, go right up to the blocking streamer and then run parallel to it off to the right).

Anyway, the part of the course between those first two peaks had by far the best vistas, though we were mainly running along the side of the mountain not up at the top. We were running along a grassy road, and you'd look out and see mountains to either side, with long valleys and meadows fading off into the distance. It was really unbelievable, and a great time of year for it too.

We eventually came to the top, and the course had a surprisingly gentle descent from the highest point to the crew aid station at Sunset Fields. That station also featured some amazing scenery, though

I was mainly just happy to see Erin and Caelan. I came in with a smile on my face (which as we shall see was not true the second time I visited this station), and left feeling pretty decent. I still didn't feel like I was able to eat or drink as much as I needed to, but I hoped the long downhill to follow would help.

So out of this aid station, we headed down a steep trail, quickly joining up with a large creek which we crossed here and there just to keep the feet and ankles cool. It was steep and a bit rocky, but I must be jaded after Terrapin because it really didn't seem that bad. I tried to keep from going overly fast, because I remembered how I felt after the long fast downhill at Terrapin, and I wanted my stomach to catch up a bit. There were a couple parts where gravity took hold and I sped up, but overall, it was quite a reasonable pace -- just a long descent.

I came to an aid station after the first few miles and just went on through -- I hadn't had much to drink on the downhill, and it was only a couple miles to the next one. And my stomach was still not feeling much like food, either.

So by the time we hit bottom, we were lower than the start -- we gave that 3000 feet away mighty quickly. And then started up to the next aid station. I had certainly walked parts of the first two peaks, but this one, I felt like I was walking noticeably more, and getting passed more. But what a reward awaited at aid station 5 -- ice cream sandwiches! I figured I needed *something* to get my stomach back on track, so I took one, to the skepticism of my fellow runners.

I enjoyed it as we headed out of the aid station (a couple miles past halfway), and headed up again. This part continued to be tough, but not terrible. It was uphill, but not unpleasantly so (mainly on soft and grassy roads). But I was starting to feel pretty lousy. It was hot, the ice cream didn't really turn around my stomach issues (though happily, it didn't seem to hurt either), and I knew we were going to be going uphill a very long way (until the last 5 miles or so). I was happy they didn't allow crew access at the upcoming station, because I felt like I would have dropped there if I had a handy ride. Well, then I told myself I didn't want to drop because I was in in for the whole series. But I never really contemplate dropping, so this was bad.

Finally we got a nice downhill before returning to the aid station I had skipped before. We were coming at it from a different direction, and had to sidetrack a bit and cross over the creek to get there, but it was worth it -- they had cold water and I dumped some on my head, which felt *great*! I headed back over the little bridge feeling cooler and cleaner than I had in hours, and a lot better. Just 8 miles to go! No more worries about dropping.

I knew we were coming to the last big uphill in the course, but it was only a 3 mile stretch total (doesn't sound so bad, right?) and it started mild. We were in the roots of a tall forest, so the visibility was good and it felt quite open. I jogged the mildest parts and walked the steeper ones. That lasted at most a half mile. Then we got to the *real* ascent.

It was brutal. The saving grace was that it was beautiful. Great trails, through open forest, along a creek, with neat little waterfalls periodically. But occasionally it broke for stairs, or a steep climb over a rocky patch (not so good). I was not even considering jogging any more, but just trying to enjoy the scenery. We got to a spectacular waterfall (though only via a terribly steep and rocky climb), and then headed up some steps on the other side. My legs were dead. We got to a mini-plateau past the waterfall, and it had a bench. I stopped and sat for a minute -- my legs were just that tired. But then I heard more runners coming, and pressed onward and upward.

With the nicest views behind us, the climb really started to wear on me. We left the creek. I was having bad thoughts again. Finally we came to a part that crossed a very wide trail, and I looked at my

watch, did a few calculations, and thought great, we must be just about there. This section was under 3 miles and I figured we'd gone quite nearly that far.

Then I saw the trail sign at the intersection. Blue Ridge Parkway, 0.9 miles. The driving directions to the aid station were go to Blue Right Parkway, drive 7.4 miles, arrive at Sunset Fields. I tried to tell myself it just had a REALLY long driveway, but I couldn't escape the conclusion that I had gone less than two miles and still had nearly a whole 'nother one to go. It had taken a lot longer than I thought to get this far, so there was quite a while left. This was bad.

I must have told myself a hundred times that I would drop at the top, and then no, I would only have dropped if I wasn't doing the series, and then maybe I would just camp in a lawn chair for a while and see if a pending downhill improved my spirits. I finally got sick of this little circle and started counting my steps to distract myself. I figured a step was about a yard, so 5280 would be a mile, but my steps were probably a little shorter on the uphill, but I was already somewhat past 0.9 miles when I started this little game, so maybe I'd count to 5000 and give up if I wasn't there by then.

Surprisingly, this did take my mind off things. My nice cold drinks from the last aid station were warm and not too pleasant by this point, but I sucked them down to the last drop over those couple miles. I heard something that sounded like cheers ahead, but I was only at like 1000 steps, so I figured it was something else, like maybe hikers cheering a runner or something. I really wasn't thinking too clearly. Then I noticed that it was taking me a real long time to get to every 100 steps, and it was going to be well over the time for a mile when I got to 5000, no matter how steep! At long last, I realized that there were not in fact 5280 yards in a mile. That cheered me up, and I started gunning for 1600 instead. That wasn't too far off!

Around 1400, there were more cheers, and the guy I could just make out ahead started jogging again. This I took as a *really* good sign!

Finally, I saw an aid station worker ahead, and the path out of the woods. I emerged right at 1500 steps (after about an hour and ten minutes for 3 miles). I saw Erin and Caelan! Woo-hoo! They bustled over and asked what food or drink they could get me. I staggered over to where they had been sitting and just collapsed on my back on the grass. I wasn't sure what the plan was at this point, but now that I was *done* with that damn climb, I wasn't about to drop, even if I walked every step back to the start. My most excellent crew got me some ice water and an aid station worker came over with a bucket. I sat up to drink and have cold water poured down my back, while someone took a "family picture" of the three of us. I was plenty happy to just plant my butt there for a while, but there was all this talk at the table about bad and lock up and don't let him and all that, and Erin came over and got me back on my feet.

She refilled my bottles and I drank some more from the station and headed out again. (If there was one good thing about that uphill, it's that my stomach was ready to take more liquids again.) I wasn't sure I'd run much of the remainder, but it was supposed to be all downhill, so I said I'd see what I could do. I just walked over to the exit trail to get this last leg underway. Some other guy came by and asked me for directions, which gave me a laugh, but I got him going the same way I was headed and he disappeared. Eventually I tried a bit of a jog, but then the trail turned uphill again. When I slowed to a walk again, my legs felt really tight, like there were cramps coming. Fine time for a walk! A couple more folks passed, but then we got to the steep uphill that lead back to the first peak in the course, and I could see them walking ahead. I certainly wasn't going to jog any uphills! Fortunately this part wasn't terribly long -- we took a different route coming back from Sunset Fields so the climb there couldn't have been more than a couple hundred feet. It was through dense forest though, so we missed all the great views we had on the

outgoing leg. Glad I caught them then!

At the top of that, perhaps 2200 feet above the bottom of the course, it made a hard turn out of the brush and into that nice trail through open forest, down, down, down. I jogged and eventually even got up to a legitimate run on this downhill. It seemed rockier going down, but still not bad, and I enjoyed it. There were a couple mini-creek crossings, just enough to wet my shoes, but it cooled my feet at least.

After a while we got to the last aid station, where the trail ended and the gravel road began. It had been about a half hour, for maybe two and a half miles, so I figured I was going maybe ten minutes a mile if you figured in the bits of climb there. This last station only had water (with ice!) whereas I had Clif (the race's Gatorade substitute) in my bottles, but I let the volunteer fill the mostly empty one with ice water. It occurred to me just after I left that I should have dumped the rest of the Clif so I'd have all cold ice water and could spray it on my head, but I missed the chance.

The last two and a half miles down the gravel road were annoyingly hot, and it just kind of dragged on. I was surprised no one was passing me, because I felt sure other people could run faster. It took a long time (subjectively) to get to the one-mile-remaining mark on the road, but I hit that at 14:52, so at least I had guessed my pace right. I started to hear another runner behind me, and I was a little surprised they didn't pass, but they didn't. Eventually I got to the end of this road and headed the short block down the cross road to the camp. A truck passed me from behind as soon as we got onto this wider road. No runner after all. I made it across the meadow to the finish line.

Horton announced my name with a chuckle. I had given him a hard time about my seeding, and clearly it was true, because I think I was 40 places behind it! Guess he remembered. I just sat on a bench in the shade, very happy to be done. Erin and Caelan came over and visited, and got me cold drinks, and eventually some food.

My plan had been to drink enough that I'd need to water some trees along the way, and eat a gel every half hour (9 or 10?), plus whatever looked good at the aid station. I actually ate three gels, half an ice cream sandwich, about a total of half an orange, and a couple pieces of cantaloupe. I didn't have any liquid to spare until hours after the race (despite drinking pretty much continuously, including 40oz in a 3-mile stretch more than once, and more than 3 bottles of water right after the race!). All that was bad, but I think it was mainly brought on by the heat, or at least, my lack of training in anything resembling that weather. I just didn't feel like I could get anything more down!

Anyway, there was a nice creek next to the start pavilion, but I took advantage of the showers instead, and came out feeling pretty nice in the warm sun. Not so bad once you're not running any more! The finisher's award was a nice set of technical shorts, with the race name and elevation profile. So on the next trail run, I can highlight that long climb in excruciating detail. As if I haven't already. :)

But as I said way back yonder, I'd do it again. Take away the heat, and this would be a great, if challenging, race. But worth every step, even the mountainous ones.