

## Promise Land 2009

By Bill Vickery

I started Promise Land with high hopes. I ran Terrapin and did not get a good time – I was recovering from the family flu bed. At least that's my excuse...

I ran the Mill Mountain 10k the Saturday previous. This race was all up or down and I felt good on the course and ended with a good time. So, I entered Promise Land with high expectations. In fact, I saw Jared Hesse a few minutes before the race and challenged myself to beat him. He is a very good runner but that is how good I was feeling. I read Psalm 45 to start the race. "He anoints my head with the oil of gladness..."

The race starts slow up the dirt road. There is enough light to not trip on the rugged road but dark enough to use a headlamp. When you look behind and ahead of you there is a string of headlights stretching like a snake up the mountain. Expectations rise.

By the time you hit the Glenwood Horse Trail, a long grassy section, it is light out. The morning sun is up casting shadows against the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains. I ran most of this part. I drank 16 ounces of water and had a salt tab up the first road. I drank another 16 ounces on this section. Richard Michael told me this would be race of hydration. He was planning on drinking 40 ounces at both these sections. I joked with him that if I drank that much my kidneys would float away...He had the last laugh.

Down Sunset Fields and the waterfall plunge I made good time. I drank a full cup of coke, refilled my water bottle and ate a handful of Pringles. I passed several people running down the trail after Sunset, even pirouetted off a couple rocks, did one spread eagle, and flirted with a 360. I was feeling great.

Then, the long trail to Cornelius. I like this section, it is more private, people are more separated, and I turned on the music. Dan was just ahead of me. He had stopped to fertilize the maples (sorry, Dan). But, I knew that if Dan was close then my time was alright. Richard snuck up on me at this point and spooked me. Darn! He keeps getting faster at these races! We ran together till Cornelius. Rik also joined us at this point. Then I had my best laugh of the day. Richard and I crossed the creek and he was a few feet ahead of me. However, his foot slipped on the rock. This wouldn't have been so bad except the water hole was particularly deep. Richard said, "I knew I missed the rock and had time to see the deep water just before I plunged in". He desperately lunged for the rock ahead of him but missed this too. His whole body disappeared for a second. At first I was alarmed but then Richard shot out of the water, hollering and yelling, water bottles leading the way. We stopped to check for injury and after hobbling for a few minutes he checked out ok. "Bummer!" I told him. I picked up a sharp rock and offered to cause some bleeding. A plunge like that deserves the Best Blood Award.

At Cornelius I forced myself to drink some Clif. I refilled with water, had 2 more salt tabs. I had finished another 16 ounces of Clif on the way to Cornelius. I was starting to sweat. I also ate four Clif gels, pretzels and a handful of Pringles. The road from Cornelius is a fast section. This is where I planned to make good time and let loose a little bit.

I turned onto Whitetail trail feeling slightly nauseas. I was still mentally sharp, feeling optimistic, on a pace to beat 6 hours. If I kept up my pace through this section then it was possible to get a good time. However, before I got to the next aid station (3 or 4 miles?) I could tell my stomach was starting to rebel. I forced myself to sip some more. At the aid station I poured water over my head. WOW! That felt good. I caught Mark at that point but he left the aide station before me.

Then I lost it. All of my stomach contents came up. This really crushed me. I knew there was no way I could keep the pace without hydration and if my stomach was disagreeable then I was stuck. It took me several minutes before I could convince myself that the race was still fun. I was having fun. Really.

Since, I wasn't going to make 6 hours I decided I should simply slow down and try to get some fluids. This next section was long. The trail keeps turning into the mountain and at each point my memory faulted me. I kept

thinking I must surely be back to Cornelius by now... Each turn left me more disheartened. I walked the hills – which are not steep. I kept drinking more fluids, took more salt tabs, ate gels. But, just before Cornelius it all came up again.

Richard caught me at this point. Rik passed me. Dan was long gone. Six more people passed. Finally, I made it to the aide station. I knew I was in trouble because the waterfall section is long Rik left the aide station just ahead of me. Just after the bridge he turned left off the trail and went down to the creek. “What in the world are you doing?!” I exclaimed. “I don’t care” He replied. “I am going to cool down.” I followed him down to the creek. He fell backwards into the water. I was a bit more hesitant and waded in. Oh! Did that feel good! “Whoo Hoo!” I yelled. We started hollering and had a grand time splashing water on ourselves. I watched people passing by on the bridge above. Normally, this would have killed my competitive spirit. I hate to be passed. But, now...I was in heaven.

We resumed our hike up the trail. Rik stayed a few feet ahead of me. Surprisingly, only one more person passed before hitting the steep section. I was just happy to find that I was still sweating – a good sign. I continued to pour water over my head from my water bottle. Stopped at several small creeks and drank. When we got to the steeper section however, again, the liquid came up. I was not sure how much liquid I had actually kept down at this time but I knew that a lot was coming up...

Halfway up the steep section we passed another small creek. “Hey, Rik” I yelled. “Want some water over your head?” He agreed. I could tell he needed some motivation – as did I. Long before this I had abandoned getting a decent time and although my optimism was still intact, I knew I needed water desperately. We stopped and poured water over each other. It was like getting baptized. I threw my hands up in the air and gave a shout. Three people caught up to us while we were pouring water over each other’s head and basking in the glory of refreshment. Then I remembered the verse, “He anoints my head with gladness”. We were both smiling, feeling much better. We were right in the middle of the trail and the three men behind us were waiting for us to finish. Rik apologized. I didn’t. “Excuse me” I said. “We are having an intimate moment here...” Then I stared into Rik’s eyes. “I love you, Rik...”

John and his tribe passed us after this. I stopped a couple more times and again threw up. My consolation in this was that Rik too lost his cookies and he was still moving. I concentrated on the back of his feet. Step, step, step... I no longer felt sweaty.

A woman and her daughter were walking down the trail. It was Terri!!! A friend of mine. “Hi Terri!” I yelled in a whisper. I was so happy to see someone familiar. She looked at me weird. It wasn’t Terri. Boy, didn’t even really look like her...

Rik went on. A girl passed me and offered me a mint. Thank you. I put it in my mouth but didn’t have the saliva to melt it. It stayed in my mouth like a rock until I finally spit it out. I was about 200 hundred yards till the Sunset Field aide station when I saw Marshall. This time I kept my mouth shut until I was sure. O, thank God! I gave him a sincere hug. He prayed for my stomach, and my increasingly hypovolemic state. Another Psalm came to mind. “The oil of joy, running down upon the beard...”

I drank a coke at Sunset. Charles poured ice cold water over me. I stayed about twenty minutes at this aide station. Charles offered me some pretzels and crackers. Another person brought me a ginger chew. I had never heard of this before but will check this out for later. Finally I moved on. I crossed the road, moved down the fire trail, and turned at the gate. I threw up the fluids from the aide station.

Marianna saw me sitting on a rock. “Are you ok?” She asked. Marianna is one of the kindest people I know at these races and so I lied. “I’m fine” I replied. “Just need to take a break”. Finally convinced I was ok, she moved on. However, this time vomiting hurt. My stomach was in spasms, and I was feeling lightheaded.

I knew if I turned back to the aide station then I might not make it. However, I still had almost two hours till cut-off. Surely, if I stayed for an hour at Sunset then I could rehydrate and move on. I trudged slowly back to Sunset. This was the most miserable point of the day. A feeling of failure enveloped me.

Charlie checked me out, laid me out in the shade, brought over ice packs, told me to drink. These people are so kind. My body started shivering. I had goose bumps all over and I couldn't stop shivering. I continued to sip. Charlie offered me salt tabs. I didn't have the energy to tell him I had a pocketful. I just took it.

I thought of my children and my wife. O how I wished they were with me. I stayed at Sunset for some time, not sure how long. The final straw was when I again lost the water. I knew it would not be safe for me to go on, but I sure didn't want to sit there until the race was finished.

Marshall came up to me all of a sudden. "Want a ride back?" He asked. O my God, YES! Marshall wanted to get to the finish line to see his girlfriend finish. In order to get back to Promise Land we had to drive right by my house. Marshall agreed to stop. I just wanted a glass of milk...

I invited him in. We went into the living room and I was surprised to see all of my children (there are nine of them!) and my wife sitting there. Sarah, my beautiful daughter, blurted out, "Dad! You look awful. Your lips and face are all swollen." I walked across the room, sank onto the couch and asked, "What are you all doing here?" My wife looked at me in surprise. She said, "We have been praying for you." The sweetest words I ever heard... like anointing my head with the oil of gladness.