

[photo credits to Liz Barry, Keith Knipling, Doug Sullivan & Doug Macluskie for the eye candy to help folks get thru the entire story]

“You don’t have a spirit. You are spirit. You have a body.” – C.S. Lewis

November 8, 2010. It’s day two. You know – that second day when muscle soreness is supposed to bare its teeth and chastise you for asking more of your body than it was trained to do. And sure, I’ve got a little tension here and there – hip flexors, lower calves – but it’s barely worth mentioning. I haven’t hobbled. I haven’t groaned upon standing. I feel good. I feel rested. I feel inspired. And I’m going to hit the mountain for another run today.

The thing is, 51 weeks ago, this would have been utterly unfathomable. 20+ miles of the Mtn. Masochist course, at any pace, would have left me debilitated for days. I can chalk up my current state to a number of factors – the great communal vibe that Horton and Clark facilitate at their events; the ultra community itself, such a great group of folks; the cool temps, blue skies and autumn leaves; the relaxed pace of sweeping a course; the good company along the way; the smiling faces at the aide stations. No doubt these all played a role. But I’ve run no where close to a grand total of 20 miles in the last 6 weeks or more. And so I suspect I can do something now that I’ve hesitated to do for a number of months. I believe it’s safe to say that I am indeed a runner.

Huh.

So it’s taken me a “few” [clears throat] months to get this race ~~report~~ story finished up. I’ve been busy. I’ve been distracted. I’ve had other things, and more importantly, people, in which to invest my time, keeping me from knocking it out. (I’ll admit pride has factored in a bit too as, sure, I want its reading to be worthy of your own time, but I make no promises. So proceed accordingly...but I suspect the timing is just right. Like the porridge.)

For me, revisiting this document infrequently since last April has been cathartic. I’ve never been one to journal. I write very sporadically. But it’s been a rather transformative few years, so I’ve been putting thoughts to paper in order to order them before reinsertion into my brain.

So for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, with shrugged shoulders, humility and a grateful heart, I give you this:

2010 Promise Land 50K

It took a village (and about six months).

Prelude (October 2009):



This story really began exactly 6 months prior to the PL50K at the [Run Forrest Run Run](#), hosted by our very own [Doc George Wortley](#) and [Larry Watson](#), one of the best storytellers unknown to man. (Click [here](#) for my pics from the RFRR.) Many a tale was told that weekend, including those of Doc & Larry’s trip down to Copper Canyon, Mexico to work with the Tarahumara Indians, a.k.a. the Rarumari. Doc handed me a freshly made

blue corn tortilla with beans, hot-out-of-the-skillet sweet potato fries, a glass of [chia fresca](#) and his copy of the book [Born to Run](#). I couldn’t put the book down and I read it in 3 sittings. It made me want to go for a run. (imagine that.) Now I normally got about two, maybe three, true hankerings for a run per year. Knee pain, bunion pain, flat arches all had minimized motivation, and ability, in the past. Historically speaking, running was a discipline required for training my feet to



tolerate the hours upon hours they would encounter in my [adventure racing](#). And no, being an adventure racer does not automatically equate to being a runner. They are different animals. Any one of my AR teammates could testify to my turtle-like “abilities” that mildly resembled a jog. Got the picture? Good.

So I went for that “inspired” run in some shiny new Inov-8 RocLite trail runners that I’d won earlier in the season. Lucky for me, they are designed in a way that facilitates the very style of running that McDougall references in the book. It was fun; it was just a few miles; I didn’t hurt the next day nor the next one.



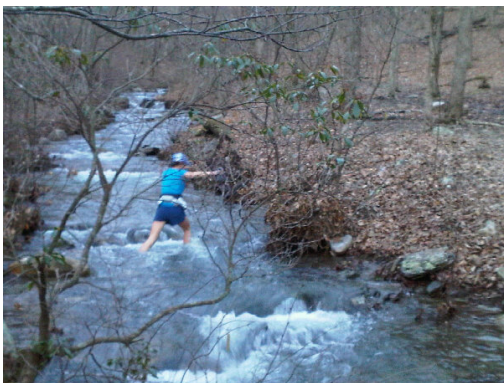
Now I’d had two major mountain biking wrecks earlier in the ’09 season and biking still aggravated my “remodeled” elbow. Until it healed fully, an adventure or a biking race on the calendar as a motivator was out of the question. (I need that elbow - as a massage therapist, I utilize that elbow and arm on a daily basis.) Yet I needed an event to shoot for; a goal. Sadly, my own health and wellbeing do not provide sufficient motivation for me to exercise regularly; races do - especially when I have teammates counting on me. Perhaps I should shoot for a trail race?, I thought. Perhaps an ultra? It really was just a joke at first, but eventually it simply made sense. I theoretically had ample time to train intelligently. I could gradually increase mileage and see if my body would “cooperate” before I committed. So...I ran more.

Now my first “long run” couldn’t have been more than 5 or 6 miles total. I added a few barefoot runs in the grass and felt like a kid again. Again, no pain. I highly recommend dewy clover. It’s lovely. Avoid dry crabgrass. Not so lovely.

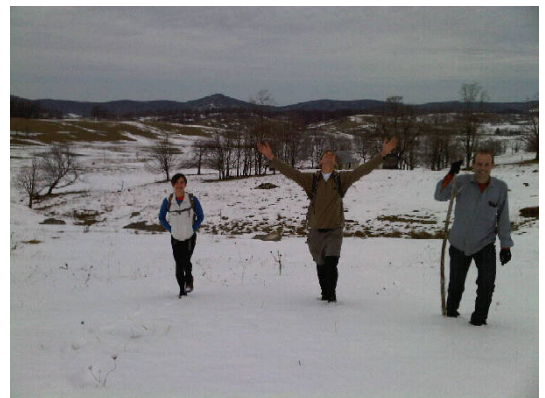
Fast forward a couple of months and I’m creeping towards the lower double digits in my mileage. I picked up several great running partners that weren’t afraid to post-hole in the snow or get up for 6 a.m. training runs. They rock. They have snow angel skills. If you didn’t stop to make snow angels during your runs this past winter, then shame on you.



I also picked up an informal running coach of sorts. He’s good lookin’. That didn’t hurt. I sought bits of wisdom from experienced ultrarunners and I read a couple of articles, but I intentionally did not lay out a stringent training plan nor read any other books on the topic. That would have stolen a measure of joy and freedom that I needed to have in this process.



This running thing seemed to be agreeing with me. Very strange. My knees hurt less. My bunions talked back only when I torqued my feet at odd angles for miles in the snow. The simplicity of minimal gear and lack of 20-30lbs of weight on my back were a welcome respite. Time in the woods is food for my soul, regardless of the catalyst for my being there. Thoreau said it well: “We need the tonic of wildness...” Tonic indeed.



“We can never have enough of nature...We need to witness our own limits transgressed and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.” – Henry David Thoreau

Coach recommended I work into the 20 mile range by February. In the mean time, I ran a couple of sub -10s during the week, threw in a bike ride or two as my reward, and shot for a longer run on the weekends. But looking back, only 6 of them exceeded 10 miles, starting in January: 14, 19, 18, 17, 20, 25 miles. Each time I increased that number, I hit a personal record (PR). Each long run came with a new symptom, but demonstrated the resolution of another from prior runs. It was all uncharted territory and the nerd in me found it interesting to observe, especially when the change was so significant over the course of a week. I left 10 pounds and 5% body fat out there in the woods somewhere. I left other things out there too, but they're best reserved for sharing over a pint or two of stout.



“If you wish to travel far and fast, travel light. Take off all your envies, jealousies, unforgiveness, selfishness, and fears.” – Glenn Clark, writer

Race Goals:

*“You're better than you think you are and you can do more than you think you can.”
Ken Chlouber, founder of Leadville 100*

Our training group originally set the goal of finishing comfortably – meaning we wouldn't be pressed for time on cutoffs and would take the time to soak in the views along the way. Toeing the starting line with the knowledge that we could do this would be a great accomplishment. Actually *doing it* would be an *incredible* accomplishment for our rookie group. I distinctly remember being anxious about whether I could make that Cornelious cutoff of marathon distance in under 8 hours. The pace required, with this course and its elevation, seemed so out of reach for me. In the past, I had regularly struggled with pulling out multiple 10 or 11 minute miles on flat terrain. **“Flat” is not in the PL50K glossary.**



But after a strong showing at a couple of our longer runs, we each quietly started to shift our goals in the direction of finishing times faster than 8.5 hours. (Runners are given 10 hrs to cross the finish line officially.) Liz was making great time on her long runs with plenty of energy to spare. She was waiting longer and longer for me at intersections. I just knew she was going to smoke the course. On my end, my strongest training day yielded 17 elevation-packed miles of the course that I knocked out in 3.5 hours where I pushed but felt great and knew I had at least another dozen miles left in me. That's when Jim told me he believed I'd finish in under 7. Impossible!, I thought. But could he be right? My goodness that just didn't seem *reasonable* considering my background and timeframe. But this man almost obsessively crunches numbers. Part of me wanted to believe him. **What was I really capable of?** I'd joked with the boys at the bike shop that I'd have to aim for a 7:33 – just 1 minute shy of Brandon's time, but I didn't believe for one second then that I would come even close. It was merely fun, empty smack talk. And yet...time and time again I have witnessed folks of all shapes, sizes, fitness levels and backgrounds surpass their imagined limitations. Heck, I'd done it again and again myself over the last 5 years, crossing a couple of big adventure racing milestones just last season. I am stronger and fitter now at 32 than I was in my early 20s. So I started hoping for a sub-8 finish (and dreaming of a sub-7), a seemingly attainable time – IF all was dialed in just right on race day. My goal had shifted. I wanted to test my perceived limits and was intrigued to see what would happen – and hoped I could be fully present in all of it. And...I was suddenly anxious. My race nerves shot up those last few weeks. I suspect this was primarily due to the fact that I had never invested so much time and energy into training and preparing for any other single event - including

nonstop adventure races that spanned 2 and 3 days. (I share this with sheepish apologies to any and all of my AR teammates.) With this shift in mentality, it would be a wounding blow to fail.

Those 6 months of training absolutely constituted a team effort, but I knew race day was all up to me. Me me me. Ugh. This was too much “me.” I remember talking with Liz about this after a training run had us running late in meeting up with friends. It can be a tough balancing act to train adequately for this kind of event without it inadvertently becoming a selfish pursuit. I knew I needed to crawl out of my own head and make this attempt about more than just myself. I decided I needed to do this for some of the folks that had come to mind over the miles and countless hours of training.

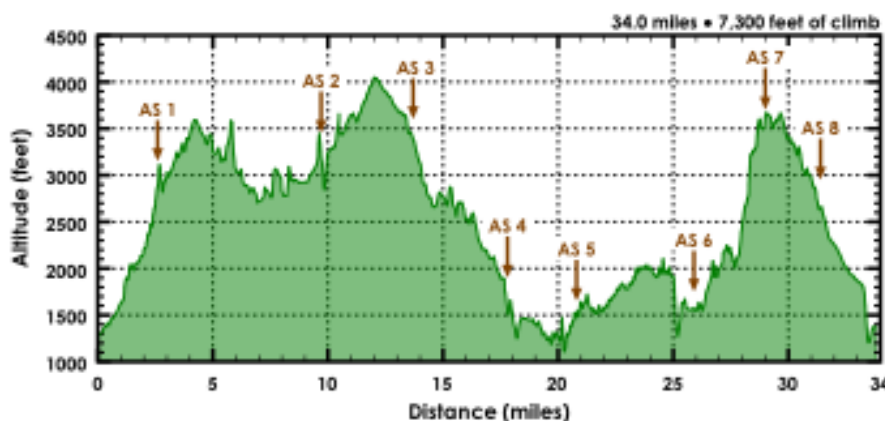
[Journal entry from one unseasonably hot training day: “It was 90-something percent humidity and 90-something degrees. I’d been running under 10 minutes and already I felt just plain nasty. A layer of sweat, salt and pollen had begun to cover my skin and make it crawl. I didn’t feel like running any further. I wanted to stick my head in a creek. I was listening to a podcast: A U.S. soldier was being interviewed about a horrendous day in Iraq...] **It reminded me of one of the reasons I was running, in spite of not feeling like it: I can. I have the privilege of the choice. I have the privilege of wellbeing. So I kept going. Not to could be an insult to those who may lack that very choice.”**

“Whatever you do, do it wholeheartedly” Col. 3:23

One step I took was to become an [ImONPoint volunteer athlete](#). It was a natural fit as so many of the members of my extended family in the off-road endurance community are retired or currently serving in various branches of the military. [ImONPoint](#) helps disabled service members participate in several types of competitive events. Rehabilitation, equipment, mentoring, coaching and beyond are provided to get the service member from the front line to the finish line. Take a moment to consider why it is that you train and compete. What does this bring to your life? Now please help ImONPoint make those same things tangible for service members by [contributing](#) today. And as I told each of them before race day - for what its worth my friends, Lisa, Jeff, Travis and others, this was for you as much as it was for me. Thank you for challenging and inspiring me along the way.

The Course (10th Edition):

In RD David Horton’s words, “It is a spectacular course and very difficult and slow. The starting elevation (around 1,300 feet) and highest point (Apple Orchard Mountain – 4,005 feet) and the lowest point (entrance to White Tail Trail – around 1,100 feet) will take you from spring to late winter to spring to late winter and FINALLY back to spring at the finish line!” A full course description may be found at www.extremoultrarunning.com or you may reference ultrarunner [Keith Knipling’s 2008 PL Race Report](#), a go-to reference for me and many others. (his elevation profile below) PL tips the mileage scale beyond a true 50 kilometers. These include the infamous “Horton miles”, which really translate to a grand total of 34 miles from start to finish. (That’s 54.7km and believe you me, that additional 5K absolutely matters!)



[Marked google topo map of race course](#) (thank you Keith for it and the other resources!)

More pics from Doug Macluskie's pre-run of the course, many of which are included below:

<http://macluskie.com/PromiseLandPreRun/promiselandprerun.html>

Pre-race:

Horton was especially entertaining at briefing and in top comedic form. I love the family vibe of his events and this one was no exception. Racers did an exceptional job of filling the tables with treats to share. The oatmeal chocolate chip cookies were especially tasty. Thank you oh talented, yet unidentified bakerperson.

Some nerdy pre-race planning and a solid night's sleep Thursday meant I felt free to hang out and catch up with folks after race brief. Later that evening, I did not opt to jump over the bonfire but we did try on a few yoga poses for old times' sake. (Liz and I were in same yoga class at the Y but never formally met until she posted to [BRTR meetup group](#) for a female training partner.) She and I chatted by the fire about our personal projections/tweaked goals for the race but neither of us dared to say actual times out loud (vs. our orig goal...). Eventually I made my way back to my cushy set-up in the back of the Subaru and laid out my clothing and gear on the dashboard.



I wasn't sleepy enough to sleep yet and multiple aches prompted the unrolling of my mat on the grass. The camp was serenely quiet. The sound of the water in creek was broken only by an ATV rider that made multiple passes around 2am before offering a backfire as a finale. Thanks. A half moon lingered above but the clouds captured and diffused the light. No bugs nipped at exposed skin for blood.

The stretches hit the spot and soon enough it was time to try to sleep. I was more than ready yet annoyingly alert. So I prayed. I prayed about my fears and my doubt. I gave thanksgiving for the healing I had received over the past half

dozen years, the strengthening, the training and preparation. I had come a long way from the days of fibromyalgia, adrenal dysfunction, sleep disruption...the list goes on. I thought of Jeff M, Lisa G, service members, TREX and family. I requested God's provision for my physical, spiritual and emotional needs for the day. I requested enough to have an outpouring of encouragement to those around me.

Sleep didn't seem as though it would ever come.

And then I woke to flashing white lights, cow bells, and shouting only to realize that **a)** I actually did finally fall asleep – great! **b)** I didn't hear my watch alarm nor my phone alarm **c)** it's 4:30 a.m. and it's GO time. I was incredulous at how well rested I felt and was completely at peace. No jitters to speak of. None. Amazing. I'd had them for 3 weeks! Thank you God!

I dressed quickly knowing I'd need a solid 10min just to prep my feet and "dress" them. (final filing of the toenails for glide, layer of tincture of benzoin, layer of bag balm, sock liner, sock, shoes tied just right, gaitors to keep debris out of the shoes.) I checked my mp3 player and was given the message "cannot play media files while phone is active." What?! Ugh. So much for music. On with race prep.

I had already decided on a simple phrase to accompany the names written on my arm. Apparently my body was working better than my brain because I wrote "I am thanful" on my hand, realized my error, added an arrow pointing to a "k" and just laughed at myself. Repeatedly. I suspect my neighbors were a bit concerned about my mental state. (What else is new?) Silence from me next door and then another unexplained bout of laughter. Gratefully I am more readily amused than irritated when sleep-deprived.

The RACE!

"Great things are done by a series of small things brought together." — Vincent van Gogh

Start to Sunset Fields (0 to 13.7 miles)

Fiddling with the phone + my later rising meant I didn't have time for the 5:10am 5 min warm-up jog I'd hoped for. (I know I know it's a 34 mile race but it starts with a long, steep climb.) I'd have to warm up during the first leg of the race.



A gathering of the tribe at the starting line, a brief prayer by Horton and it was Go time. I settled into the back of the middle of the pack. I was mildly deflated about the no music prospect but not going to let it bring me down. I eased into a comfortable, easy pace of running from the start but my heart rate was sky-high... 172. 176. 179...but body, legs, mind all felt at peace. I backed off a bit but trusted the feedback from the latter, respecting the voices of the seasoned ultrarunners I'd trained with, warning of going too hard too soon, especially on the first climb and descent.

I love dark race starts - the stream of lights snaking up the road; the sounds and smells of the woods; the quiet conversations of other racers around me. I saw Jim and offered woots of encouragement. I took lots of commentary on the trekking pole and joked about using it to keep the competition at bay. "When do we start climbing?" was the teasing question thrown out periodically - an absurdity, really, as the road becomes a virtual wall of a climb as it becomes steeper and steeper and steeper still. And yet the first aide station (AS) came faster than expected. I had no need to stop and was able to comfortably pass a few folks on the rest of the climb up Onion Mtn. I surprised more than a few when they found out it was my first ultra. "You're ahead of schedule," exclaimed one racer, leaving me wondering whether I was or not, wanting to race intelligently but also really wanting to push my perceived limits. I soldiered on.

The dirt on the trail was softer and cushier after the recent rain - much nicer than its surface during the training runs. Not too slick either. The air was humid and we all saturated our shirts within the first hour.

It was great to see Doc Wortley at the turn down Onion Mtn., chillin' in a lawn chair, looking a bit surprised to see me and promising a Tarahumara cookie next time I saw him. (His race and other videos are on the "oardoc" YouTube channel.)

Whee! Nice long mossy downhill after that turn. (If you don't periodically say "whee" when descending a hill, then shame on you again.) I enjoyed the self-generated cool breeze in the damp air. I entered the grassy field and smiled at the memory of passing through here before. I knew the knee-friendly grassy road with vistas was just ahead. The ascents still slowed my pace more than I would have liked so I decided to go for it on the descents, despite the multiple warnings I'd received. My training theoretically demonstrated that I could do so without much discernable consequence. I'm a slow climber. The descents were where I could make some good time. Hooking in with Snipes and crew, I thought to myself that it could be a good or bad sign to be dosi-do-ing with that group. I knew he'd raced a lot of ultras and thought I remembered that he's pretty quick. I chatted with various folks on the



climbs, swapping positions as our various paces led us ahead or behind the others. This rolling section was lined with flowering garlic mustard, goldenrod, and green green everywhere. I snagged just a cup of water at the aide station and was outta there, forgetting to leave my headlamp. My priorities: cup of water, thank the volunteers and get out. My plan was to refill the bladder in my pack only twice all day. I was a woman on a mission to lose no time in aide stations! AS efficiency required no additional running speed nor energy output on my part - the math is easy. I saw Phil coming in as I left and high-fived him as we passed. He looked relaxed and strong. No surprise there. I thought I saw sideburns Jaime just coming up the road below and remembered he and his friends

were shooting for an 8hr finish so I started turning my legs over a bit faster to chase down that sub-8 hour finishing time.

The mossy section on this part of the course makes me happy. I cannot explain why moss makes me happy. It just does. No I've never smoked it. My legs didn't feel as peppy on the climb up to Apple Orchard and I took a bit longer than I'd have liked but the section still seemed to pass more quickly than in the 2 training runs. And then, there was the old bunker landmark. Sweet. The parkway was close!

I whooped at the parkway crossing. 1st big climb was done. I moved pretty well on the gravel into Sunset Fields and don't recall any knee discomfort. Amazing. I mentally reviewed what I needed to do at the AS and sailed in feeling strong yet disappointed to see it was at the 3hr mark. (I just did the math now and realize that 13min miles are pretty respectable considering how much climbing the half-marathon entailed. At least that was respectable for me, Miss Non-runner 6 months prior.)

Sunset Fields to Cornelius Creek (Miles 13.7 to 17.8):

I snagged cache 2 and 3 of my fuel for the day from Caleb (Thanks Caleb!), swapped out, got my bladder refilled, and sat on my heels, ramming the left into my glute – my hip was acting up. I'd had the problem before at another event and wanted to head it off before it became debilitating. There were still a LOT of miles ahead.

I bounded out of the AS and felt pretty good outside of the nagging discomfort in the hip. I had smooth sailing on the singletrack with no ankle turns. (No small miracle there.) I saw Doc again at the turn onto the doubletrack onto the Cornelius trail and he greeted me with a smile, word of encouragement and a cookie. Woohoo! My half-marathon had earned a cookie. I stashed it in my shorts pocket and decided to enjoy it later. (Unknown ingredients can make for less than desirable results in the belly.)



I love seeing older runners make sketchy sections of trail look effortless. I never tired of seeing just that on race day. I laughed at the memory of first hearing [5lbs of possum](#) and [O death](#) on my soundtrack during this section weeks prior. Even better, it was followed by [this](#). The randomness of my music mix made me laugh often all day.

I passed a good number of folks, really concentrating on light, efficient movement as I picked my way through the rocky trail and received a kind compliment from another female along here: “You’ve done this before,” she said. “It looks like you’re tip-toeing along!” Thank you for the encouragement! I smiled at the rock piles in the creeks for a makeshift bridge: more evidence of the extra touches of course cleanup and prep that was done. The trails were in amazing shape. Much better than I’d seen them several weeks prior. Thanks so much to all of you that worked to prep the course and the camp!

I rolled into the AS and looked at my watch. Whoa. I just did that section in 35 minutes, including my stop to fertilize a patch of woods. I think Jim and I did it in 55 when training and that felt like a fast pounding. **Then it hit me.** I’m at 3:40. [Keith’s report](#) said you could double your time at this point and, if you maintain a comparable pace, that’ll be your finishing time. 7:20? 7:20! That’d be incredible. I shook my head thinking back to that conversation last fall with the boys at the bike shop about Brandon’s finishing time of 7:34. I was in position to “chick” him. This was highly motivating. I yanked out my “section 3” fuel bag to pick up later at the shared AS location, grabbed another cup of water, and headed out into the unknown.

“Is there anything better than to be longing for something when you know it is within reach?” – Greta Garbo

Cornelius to Cornelius Loop (Miles 17.8 to 25.9):

This is the only piece of the course I hadn’t seen and I looked forward to some new terrain. From input I’d received, I knew I just needed to settle into a good pace and keep some in the reserves for the climb up the falls trail. Mentally I was comparing it to an 8 mile loop on Candler’s Mtn (local and on



the edge of my hometown) to which a speedy local duo introduced me. It's got a good mix of descents and climbing and I'd recently knocked it out in 75 minutes. Pretty good for my slow self. Now I didn't expect to move that quickly on this leg of the course, but believed I could make good time on the loop. Right on. Let's roll. 100 yards later...hip said I don't think so Susanna. My left glute and hip seized up in painful synchronicity. There was a good sized rock on the side of the road and I planted my left cheek on it, gently rocking my leg side to side, trying to get the glute to release. Kind souls checked to make sure I was ok as they passed by. Yes, thanks, just a tight muscle. Here came another runner – it was time to get moving again and test my self-treatment. Hmmm 'twas a skosh better so we'd see if the level terrain will help work it out.

Nope.
I had to stop 2-3 more times. I found my trekking pole worked beautifully. Place tip of cork handle in glute, lean into it and roll leg. No doubt it looked strange. It abated enough to keep going but it seemed evident I'd have a gimpy hip for the rest of the day. Bummer. Oh well... Moving on. Pavement. Ugh. I always run and bike slower on pavement than I do on trail. My mind and body, almost instantaneously, rebel when I hit it. My mood drops. My bones, my joints ache more. My muscles protest by showing me where they feel betrayed by the change of surface, sound, and the very air.

Then the sun poked through the clouds for just a few seconds and it felt glorious. I turned my head back while running so I could feel the sun on my face and got a little choked up. Once again, I was hit by how thankful I was for so many things. I got passed by Barbara Isom, 30 years my senior, who looked simply radiant and offered a smile and a few words of encouragement. She is inspiring! She dove into the woods onto the white horse trail. Yes trail! I exclaimed. I wasn't able to turn over my legs like I'd have liked to have but soaked in the shade and change of terrain as my music drove me forward. Really lovely section of trail here - cushy pine needles and leaves; rhododendron and a quiet small creek meandering alongside. My bladder cramped a bit. My efforts to empty it yielded a pitiful output. I was dehydrated. Very dehydrated and I'd no clue until then. This may partially explain the not-quite-cramping but very unhappy left hip.

I had to "sit" on my pole again as the course emerged onto doubletrack. A kindly runner offered a salt tablet but I knew my electrolytes were dialed in. I take them religiously every hour. The AS – mile 20.8 - wasn't too far ahead. They tempted with popsicles as they handed out water with big grins. They sounded delicious but I'd have to wait for the finish line to hit the simple sugars. These plus Hammer products = acid reflux. I learned this the hard way during an adventure race eons ago. I took only water.

I looked at my watch sometime after that and saw I was at 4:45...with over 13 miles to go. I was in even greater awe of Clark's 4:30 *finish* time of this same course. Incredible. Unfathomable. My priority now had to become getting rehydrated. I needed to drain the water bladder in my pack before I got back to the Cornelius Creek AS. I mustered and willed my water-starved organs and oxygen-deprived muscles to carry me forward. Sheer willpower got me to run the flats and downhills at a pace far faster than I felt like moving.

"I like to say that 90% of ultrarunning is mental.

And the other 10% is ...mental." – Scott Jurek

[I'd argue that a large % is spiritual too. The Mabie quote at the end expresses this well.]

After pulling out a surprise 6th place finish at Hellgate, Micah said he had kept telling himself, "It's supposed to hurt.." I didn't care for the "supposed to" part of that mantra but did remind myself multiple times that it was going to hurt irregardless so I might as well pick up the pace. **Suck it up and pick it up. You can do this. You will do this.** I repeated these every time my legs lost motivation and slowed. I made up some time on the downhill portions and even managed to pass a few folks. I got passed by a fun trio that had kept me moving for a few miles as they approached from behind. They made up a new motto within earshot that I wish I could remember now. Thanks for the laughs! They got my name and willed me to be pulled along by their energy but ultimately left me behind.

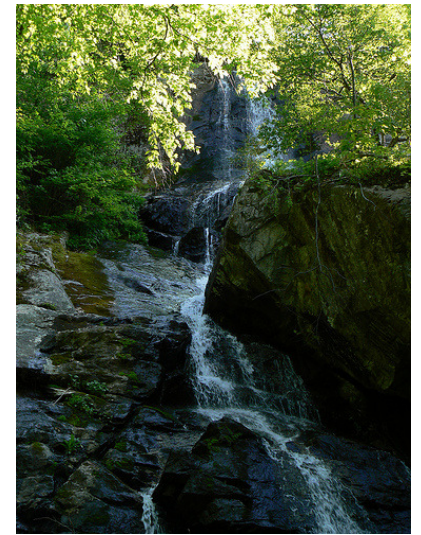
Where on earth was that aide station? Surely I must have been getting close! This was an ennnnnndless road. Finally I heard the sound of a creek. This had to be a good sign. And then I was beside the creek itself. Then I could hear the sound of folks cheering from the other side. Then the trail just kept going right past the sound of voices. No! So wrong, David, so wrong. And then it crossed. Thank goodness. I'd drained my bladder about 10 minutes prior and was getting concerned I'd get too low on water again.



Seeing runners on the double-back portion and exchanging smiles and a couple of high fives helped me to reset my mental perspective. At last I came into the AS and saw Christa “Danger Girl” Fields! I’d coerced Christa into the [adventure racing](#) world years ago and she and I have shared many adventures since. It was a great surprise and mood-lifter to see her there. I dropped to the ground to stretch out the hip, still feeling a little wobbly overall. Time to refill the bladder, snag the fuel for the last leg of the race and get out. I felt a little unstable but didn’t want to waste any more time in transition and didn’t sense I was in grave danger, despite my increasing discomfort.

Cornelius to Apple Orchard climb up to Sunset Fields (Miles 25.9 to 29):

My abdomen was telling me I needed a pit stop. I left at 5:40, I think, found a good spot to pull off the trail and got nothing but a couple of drops of honey out of my own bladder. (Apologies to those of you for which this is TMI. I’m afraid it’s a common topic amongst endurance athletes.) This was not good. I was *still* really dehydrated. Sigh. I apologized to my body, my kidneys, got back onto the trail and kept drinking. The abdominal pain was growing. I focused on encouraging the runners I passed that were coming in towards the aide station. I knew all too well what was coming up down that trail. I’d seen it twice in training. 60-75 minutes was the original goal for this leg up the falls trail climb. I couldn’t imagine that I’d be able to knock it out that quickly but gave it my all, keeping a close eye on my body’s feedback – knowing I was pushing the line with my current dehydration. I had no chills though and I took that as a good sign. I jogged the flats, even if they were 15 feet long, to help offset the steep grade ahead. It felt the same, if not better, to jog than to walk. I just kept a few fingers in contact with that left glute either way and it kept the pain at bay. I did a bit of math on the numbers. I felt I’d be lucky to do the falls trail in 90 minutes at this rate, probably more like 105. That would put me at Sunset Fields at 7:10 (elapsed time) at best. It took me about an hour and fifteen minutes to get from there to the finish in the last training run, having walked multiple times on the way down. My calculations had me a little disappointed. I didn’t think there was any way I was going to finish in under 8 hrs. If I had been using my own water bladder, I would have been kicking myself for having gotten dehydrated. But I knew it was an innocent mistake. Same frequency of intake...just much lower rate of flow from the valve of the borrowed one. Zoom out to bigger perspective again. This was still above and beyond what I’d originally hoped for when I first considered training for PL. And every step I took at this point became a new PR. I’d never run this far before in one stretch. Maybe I could still get an 8:30? When did I shift mentalities in the last 6 months to start looking at time more closely? I was not in a mental space where I’d be OK with just taking it easy from there to the finish. I knew I’d be disappointed in myself for not testing and pushing my limits. This is unlike me, but nonetheless the mental space in which I dwelled.



I made liberal use of the trekking pole on the trail. A young couple passed, looking like they were out for a stroll but moving 3X as fast as I was. I remained conscientious about taking in the beauty of the place; of being present. I negotiated and renegotiated deals with myself about where I could stop to treat the hip again and give my body a short break. There was a man at the falls cheering enthusiastically. I heard him from a ways down and he pulled me upward and beyond the falls. (Thank you!) I rewarded myself with a stop at the viewing platform just above and went straight into plow position. It felt great on the legs and spine but my abdomen revolted. My guts were staging a full-force coup. I laid back with my feet up on the wall and arms spread wide eagle. I was seeing a few spots but knew that 3-5 minutes with eyes shut and feet up can do wonders. I’ve seen it happen time and time again while adventure racing. The mud in the brain clears up a bit and the legs lighten. I assured the kind passers-by that I was ok. Just needed a few minutes. I attempted to empty my cramping bladder again

with pitiful results but the brief rest on the platform served me well. I was able to turn my legs over much faster on the steps. I'm certain my grasp with both hands, plant the trekking pole in the middle, pull up and semi-straddle method looks ridiculous, but it kept me moving on those steps and steeper portions when traditional methods yielded a slower crawl of a pace.



Incredibly it wasn't too too long before I came to the intersection of road and trail with the sign that reads 0.9 mi to the parkway. I can do this. I can do this. This was almost the last of the climbing on the course with just one relatively short hill on the way back down to camp.

A few minutes later I could hear cheers from above. They were a long way off but managed to pull me to the top sooner than I'd expected. I saw Charlie, a long time volunteer and fixture at these events, at the trailhead. "Thank God!" I exclaimed. "literally, thank God!!" Loads of smiling faces. I'm pretty sure I was grimacing while holding my abdomen with one hand and hip with the other.

"What's wrong?" asked Charlie. I gave him a quick answer as I made myself keep moving past, wanting to plop down right by beside him, pass out and die. Wonderful cheers and encouragement streamed from the volunteers and spectators. I'm afraid I reciprocated with sincere thanks but only a meager smile.

"Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved."

~Helen Keller

Sunset Fields to the Finish (Miles 29 to 34):

From here, I knew it was a mild grade downhill to the grassy opening – a good piece on which to “recover” and open up the legs, but I had to stop once again to stretch my hip. I sprawled out in the grass and in the sun and contorted, willing my hip to release. “Are you pulling out?” a passing racer asked. “Hell no!” I responded instinctively. “I AM going to finish this thing.” “You bet your arse you are,” I told myself.

Ok Susanna. You can do this. I looked at my watch. 7:07. Really? My brain started churning again, remembering hearing about racers pulling 6 minute miles on the last descent. I didn't expect to do *that* but wondered what kind of time I could make. I did a fair amount of walking on that last training run, but knew it was unrealistic that I'd shave off too much time by running it out. (It took 75 min then) But what if I could come in before 8hrs? What if? That became the new goal. I did NOT feel like running anymore. I was over it. I wanted to be done. Right then. Yet just getting past AS6 was a PR for me in both consecutive distance and time for running. Part of me could have been content with that. The other part of me knew I'd have major regrets if I didn't cross that finish line without having pushed and run that last leg with all I had left in me.

Don't accept mediocrity, to have success you need to have high expectations for yourself. -Howard Gauthier

Ok, one more pee break. I emerged from the woods and saw Robyn Burgess, looking great. We exchanged greetings and our shared sentiment of being ready to get it over with. We ran together for a bit but she was able to pull away on that last climb. I last saw her at the turn off the mossy doubletrack and shouted for her to go get it! I proceeded to inform myself that I would be running in about 50 feet. About 3 minutes later, my [Imogen Heap album](#) came up on the playlist. It couldn't have been more perfect timing. Imogen asked if I had it in me. I picked up the pace.



The music drove me forward as I picked my way through the rock-strewn singletrack, memories of the morning's passing of these same sections and of the racers that were around me passing through my mind. My body screamed WALK for a bit. My mind said GO. I got a little choked up as my legs, my knees, my core all followed my commands and turned over again and again. I turned an ankle and went down, but the damage was minimal and I rolled on. Into the last AS faster than I'd expected, I looked at my watch after asking how much mileage was left – 2.5mi. I was gonna have to fly if I

want to chick Brandon! Well... my watch said 7:21. I needed to run sub-6 minute miles all the way in – possible, but unlikely... But maybe I could pull off a 7:40! I gulped down a cup of water and took off. I still can't believe I didn't bite it on that hill. Somehow I betrayed the laws of physics and remained upright as I forced my legs to keep up with the momentum that the gravity on such steep terrain brought.

I passed a number of folks, including Barbara, and felt incredibly rude for not offering more words of encouragement to any of them, but I was wholly tapped and every ounce of energy was being funneled into getting down that hill as quickly and safely as possible. It's incredible - I was just mere miles from the finish line and found myself constantly bargaining with myself over when and if I could take a break and walk. Where on earth was that darn odd giant iron roadside squirrel?! I knew that "art" was just a few miles from the finish. I was so done with running that no analogy serves my memory of that last leg well. The waves of pain and chills coming from the epicenter of my abdomen sucked the joy right out me. Move. Go. Run. It will be over soon enough. I succumbed to the internal mental pestering for a walking break and Barbara caught up to me. Barbara thank you. Your arrival was the kick in the rear I needed to start running again. We weren't too far from the one mile mark, painted across the road in blaze orange. I cannot possibly describe the relief I felt when I saw it. I think I told myself it couldn't be more than another 9 or 10 minutes before it was all over with. (Not really the glorious epiphany I'd hoped for.) I don't know if that mile was measured accurately or not but it was most certainly a Horton mile, at least for me. Pavement again. Ugh... But then you pass a slight bend in the road and the finish line is in sight, maybe 150, 200 yards away. My body was still begging me to walk. Ridiculous! Suck it up and pick it up. You will smile when you turn into the camp. You will enjoy this moment. You are actually going to finish. Move!

Just as I approached the gate into camp, I heard Barbara behind me say, "Good job guys!" I didn't even look back. I knew exactly what her comment meant and there was no way in hell nor Virginia I was going to get passed in the last 100 feet of that race. Only pure unbridled adrenaline can account for the surge of strength that enabled me to kick it so hard and quite literally sprint those last feet into the finish line. I didn't look left or right. I didn't look back. I wasn't my goofy happy go lucky self. I just was not going to get passed.

And I didn't.

I collapsed just past the banner, flat on my back, choking back tears of relief and tears from the waves of pain. I never got my hug from Horton. I didn't get a proper finish line pic. But I did get tackled and hugged by my training partners Phil and Liz, and truly the best-tasting popsicle I have ever had in my entire life. Actually, I got an awful lot more out of all of it, but in that moment the relief and pain dominated. Miraculously, in spite of my hip, the severe dehydration, and the abdominal coup, I arrived at Promise Land camp in 7 hours and 44 minutes and 11 seconds. Stanley and Kenneth arrived 5 seconds behind me. Boys – thank you and I offer sincere apologies for not being in the frame of mind to turn around and shake your hands. Same to you Barbara. Thanks so much.



"The wilderness will take hold of you. It will give you good red blood; it will turn you from a weakling into a man...." - George S. Evans



Only a third of the women that placed ahead of me were in their 20s. This fact is inspiring! I landed right smack in the middle of my age group and on the backside of the middle of the full pack. This and my finish time far exceeded my original and tweaked goals and I am so humbled by all of it. I have always had a great amount of respect for the folks in the ultrarunning community, but my PL experience has added color, depth and breadth to it.

That unexplained abdominal pain didn't leave me until well into the next day, leaving me thinking another ultra race won't be worth it if I am to

anticipate the same again. But I recognize that many of the factors that were at play that day were circumstantial, and only long training runs into the high 20s and beyond can answer the nagging question that lingers internally to this day.

"Man has held three views of his body. First there is that of those ascetic Pagans who called it the prison or the "tomb" of the soul, and of Christians like Fisher to whom it was a "sack of dung, " food for worms, filthy, shameful, a source of nothing but temptation to bad men and humiliation to good ones. Then there are the Neo-Pagan (they seldom know Greek), the nudist and the sufferers from Dark Gods, to whom the body is glorious. But thirdly we have the view which St. Francis expressed by calling his body "Brother Ass." All three may be - I am not sure - defensible; but give me St. Francis for my money.

Ass is exquisitely right because no one in his senses can either revere or hate a donkey. It is a useful sturdy, lazy, obstinate, patient, lovable, and infuriating beast; deserving now the stick and now a carrot; both pathetically and absurdly beautiful. So the body. There's no living with it till we recognise that one of its functions in our lives is to play the part of buffoon."

~ C.S. Lewis, from the "The Four Loves"

The End?

And no, this story doesn't end here, but I will bring it to close. A few weeks after the PL, I joined Doc Wortley and David Horton on a trip down to Copper Canyon, Mexico to serve the Tarahumara Indians that inspired this journey. (Pics [here](#) and [here](#). Videos [here](#).) And a few months later, with the help of several generous runners at the [RATG](#), we were able raise enough funds to pay for close to [3,000 meals](#) for the children of the mission school and surrounding tribes. I presented those funds to Doc at this year's Run Forrest Run Run.

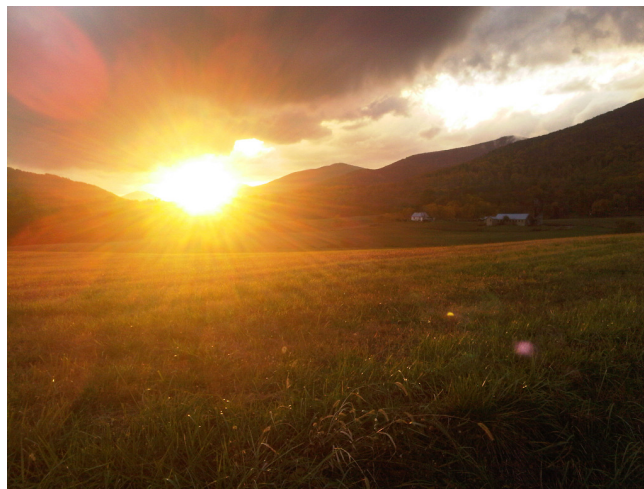


Time will tell whether I'll be wearing a bib again at PL, but I most certainly will return, honored to cheer folks on firsthand either way.

And yes, I've got my sights on another ultra next season in wild, wonderful West Virginia...

*"Many a trip continues
long after movement in time and space have ceased." – John Steinbeck*

More, shorter PL race stories and photos here: <http://extremultrarunning.com/2010%20PL/stories.html>
Full results here: <http://extremultrarunning.com/2010%20PL/results.html>



"Nature has many aspects, and God is behind them all, but the mass and grandeur, the vast solitudes and deep recesses in the heart of the hills, are, in a peculiar sense, the inner shrine where He waits for those who come, worn and confused, from the noise and strife of the world.

Here the sounds of man's struggle are lost in His peace;

here the fever of desire and agitation of emotion are calmed in His silence.

*The great hills, purple with heather or green with moss, rise peak beyond peak in sublime procession;
the mountain streams run dark and cool through dim and hidden channels,
singing that song without words which is sweet with all purity and fresh with the cleanness of untrodden heights.*

Through the narrow passes one walks with a silent joy,

born of a renewed sense of relationship with the sublime order of the world,

and of a fresh communion with the Spirit of which all visible Things are the symbol and garment."

~Hamilton Wright Mabie