

A DECADE OF PROMISE LANDS-APRIL 24, 2010

BY DAVID HORTON

This year marked the 10th running of the very special race—Promise Land 50K. Since George Wortley, Mike Sandlin, and I designed the course in 2001, there has been no changes to the course, NONE. I hope there never are any changes. The start/finish is at the beautiful Promise Land Youth Camp. It sets in the valley below the Blue Ridge Mountains and very near Apple Orchard Mountain and the Peaks of Otter in Central Virginia. The view of the mountains from the camp is very imposing.

I would guess that 80 percent of the runners camped overnight in the field at the camp. The tradition of a huge bonfire continued with fireworks and fire jumping added this year. Don't ask what fire jumping is, you don't want to know, you will have to come and see next year.

The runners feasted on 90 pizzas and deserts brought by many of the runners on Friday night. No one went away hungry on Friday night. No one went away hungry on Saturday either as my wife Nancy cooked over 300 of her infamous hamburgers and over 200 hot dogs. She is known for grilling the best hamburgers around, but I heard rumors that the job may be relinquished next year.

The Promise Land 50K is the third event in the Lynchburg Ultra Series (LUS) and Beast Series. Many believe that the PL course is the prettiest 50K course on the East Coast. Who am I to argue? Because of these two factors, we had our largest starting field ever, 290 runners. That is a pretty astounding number when you consider that on the same day, less than 30 miles away in Roanoke, there was a marathon. On Sunday morning, there was also a very large triathlon in Lynchburg. Central Virginia seems to be a hot spot for endurance sports.

The men's favorites were Jeremy Ramsey and Jordan Whitlock. Ramsey is a local runner and Whitlock is a student at Liberty University. Both had tied for first the previous month at the Terrapin Mountain 50K. On Thursday of race week, a student walked into my office asking if I needed more help in the race. His name was Jake Reed. He runs on the Liberty track and cross country team. I asked him what his event was in track and he said the 10K. He told me his best time in that event was 31:05, a sub 5 minute per mile pace! He said that he had always wanted to try ultras. I immediately asked him if he would want to run the PL instead of helping. He said he would love to do that. I had already seeded the runners prior to that, and as a result, he got number 276. I did not tell the other runners about him but the word got out. I figured he would make things very interesting and he sure did!

The ladies race seemed to be a two person race. Justine Morrison (Washington, D.C.) had won the first two events in LUS, Holiday Lake and Terrapin Mountain 50Ks. Eva Pastalkova (Ashburn, VA had come in second place in the Bull Run 50 Miler two weeks earlier.

Reed and Whitlock took the lead and separated themselves from the field by Aid Station 2 (Reed Creek-8.6 miles) with Reed just ahead of Whitlock and Ramsey

only 3 minutes back. On the climb to the Parkway and Apple Orchard Mountain, Reed pulled away from Whitlock as well.

Reed's lead continued to increase to 3, then 4, then 5, then 9 minutes at the next 4 aid stations. However, Reed was facing the signature section of course, the climb from Hades up Apple Orchard Falls trail, gaining over 2,000 feet up some very rocky terrain in 3 miles. Reed did suffer a lot at this point and lost three minutes of his lead. But he was able to pull it together and cruise in for a victory in his FIRST ultra, clocking the 10th fastest time ever on the course in 4:49:27. Whitlock finished just over 5 minutes back in 4:54:47 taking second place. Jonathan Bryant took third in 4:57:52. The first three runners were all 22 years of age. You would not have seen something like this a few years ago. I think it is a very good trend to see more young runners running ultras. It is a sign that ultras are becoming more accepted and mainstream. I think this is a good sign for the future of ultrarunning.

Pastalkova took it out from the start and ran strong all day long. The only question was if she could get in the top 10 overall and set the ladies record. This was the first time on the course for Eva even though she made it look like she trained on it all the time. She finished 12 overall in 5:27:13 clocking the 2nd fastest time ever on the PL course. Her time was just 4 minutes slower than Ann Riddle Lunblad's course record. Justine Morrison took second in 6:02:06. Amy Albu (Roanoke, VA) ran her best race ever to take 3rd in 6:08:49. Sara Dallman (Wilmington, OH) a master's runner took 4th place in 6:13:16. Fifth place went to my 21-year-old secretary Jamie Darling in 6:25:57. Jamie was running in her first ultra.

Brian Schmidt (Leesburg, VA) set a new masters course record of 5:08:34. His overall 6th place finish was very good considering all the fast young guys. No one over 40 years of age has ever run faster than he did. Ken Gregorich (Castro Valley, CA) took the 50 to 59 age group win in 5:51:42. Jack Broaddus (Harrisonburg, VA) set a new 60 and over record finishing in 6:45:22. Local runner Rebekah Trittipoe set a new 50 and older age group record of 6:45:51. The weather was perfect for the race resulting in a high percentage of finishers and many personal records.

There were three very special finishers: Grattan Garbee (Lynchburg, VA), Jay Finkle (Roanoke, VA) and Gene Potter (Charlottesville, VA). These three men were awarded an embroidered Nike Dri Fit shirt for finishing all 10 Promise Land 50Ks.

Each sub 10-hour finisher received some of the best shorts ever made, the Patagonia Nine Trails shorts. The top 10 men and top 5 women also received special awards in addition to the shorts.

One thing that pleased me a lot was that 29 of the finishers were Liberty University students. There were 11 more finishers who were graduates of LU that also finished. Ultrarunning is an admired and respected activity at Liberty University.

What does the second decade of Promise Land hold in store? I don't really know except definitely more runners. If you want to run the prettiest, most special, and one with a down-home atmosphere, come and run the 11th annual Promise Land 50K on April 23, 2011.