

## 2011 Promise Land 50K

### Jamie Darling

The 2011 Promise Land 50K will forever be a special race for me. My boyfriend Brenton was driving up from Florida with a few of his good friends to run the race. The night before was cool and rainy and I waited impatiently for their arrival while helping with the check in. When their car finally arrived I was so excited to see Brenton come in that I attacked him with a big hug. He seemed distracted and told me his stomach didn't feel quite right. I asked him why and he responded with "Because my girlfriends going to beat me in a race tomorrow."

I met Brenton Swyers in the running class fall semester in 2009, however we didn't really begin talking until the spring semester. We began training together and running together and it was around the time of the 2010 Promise Land 50K that we were officially dating. Last year we were both pretty well trained and not hurting so we ran relatively hard for being new on the ultrarunning scene. This year would be different. Brenton graduated in the winter and moved back to flat and hot Florida, where a job and internship gave him limited training time. While he was running fast, it was all on flat roads. I have been dealing with ITB syndrome and the pain in my knee stopped my training completely. After Terrapin I barely ran at all and have been doing nearly all of my training on a bike and in the pool. We already decided to run together and just take it easy.

Dr. Horton started the pre-race briefing at precisely 7:10 p.m. Everyone huddled under the pavilion to listen to Dr. Horton discuss the "serious stuff" about checking in again in the morning, notifying the aid station workers if you drop out and getting lost. (Of course, if you get lost, you're "STUPID" according to Dr. Horton.) He called my name and asked me to come up to the front. This was no surprise. Every race he brings me in front of the runners and announces that I am his teachers' assistant and that I make all the mistakes. I don't mind, it's become a "running" joke (pun intended). I started to turn to go back to my seat but Dr. Horton stopped me. "Wait!" He yelled. "This is for you." He handed me a small package. I opened it and saw a green shirt. I thought it was another one of his shirts he gives out, but I was confused that it wasn't technical. Then I saw the words "Jamie, Will you marry me?" on the front. I didn't understand what was happening until I turned and saw Brenton on one knee in front of me with the most gorgeous ring I have ever seen. My jaw dropped. I couldn't think to say yes for the longest time. When I finally came to my senses and did, everything was a blur around me. People were clapping and cheering and taking pictures. Brenton opened his jacket and he had a matching green shirt that said "She said YES!" I couldn't stop smiling and shaking.

Of course, I barely slept at all in a wet tent with two of my Liberty friends. Instead we talked and giggled and stayed up almost all night like we were in middle school. The morning (or night, however you refer to 4 a.m.) was there before we knew it and we ate breakfast and got ready for the race. I don't know what kind of stupidity got into me but something changed in my mindset that morning. I don't know if it was the happiness of being engaged, the atmosphere of the race, the adrenaline of the previous night or possibly the memories of my first ultra, but I wanted to race. I knew I wasn't ready and that I wasn't trained at all. But I thought, "Maybe I can make this the perfect weekend..." I told Brenton this at mile 2. Or something along the lines of "help me make top 5 women" and his response was "Oh great, I knew this would happen."

Brenton ran with me the whole time and somewhere on the trail he got into it too. He wasn't racing but he was helping me race. His pace down the hills was much faster than what I was used to and he left me and that pushed me to fly down. (Then he would wait for me at the bottom) We stayed

pretty steady and consistent. I had a low at the same spot as last year. It was between aid station 5 and 6. This time however, I had Brenton to push me through it. I started going up Apple Orchard Falls I got a second wind like last year. Brenton told me to go on and I did, but only because I knew three things. I knew he would immediately catch me on the downhill, I knew I was 5<sup>th</sup> woman and finally, I knew the 6<sup>th</sup> woman was only minutes behind. On a long switch back I saw Brenton and he motioned behind him and then made a gesture for me to GO! I knew he had seen a woman behind.

When I left Sunset Fields I didn't have much motivation. I was very slow and when I turned to go down the long decent in my head I almost gave up. I was tired and my legs felt heavy. It was only a moment after I told myself to just head to the finish at a slow and easy pace that I saw Brenton coming behind me. "She's not far back, we need to go." He took the lead and we headed down the hill. The single-track trail was fun but roads and I don't get along. Brenton had to really push me. I wanted to cry most of the way, but he encouraged me that the finish was near.

We finally made the turn and saw the finish line. I saw that we were going to run in right around 6:30, which was only 7 minutes slower than last year's time. I saw Dr. Horton yelling and cheering like usual. He said to Brenton "5<sup>th</sup> woman!" (What a joker...) And gave us the famous Horton hugs. I was happy to have given it all I had and to have the opportunity to run it with my fiancée. (!!!)

I couldn't have had a better weekend. It was my last race as a Liberty student, my last race I helped with as Dr. Horton's assistant, and the year after my first ultra. Now Promise Land has even more meaning to me, as it was my first race as an engaged woman! I definitely will never forget the 2011 Promise Land 50K.