

The Promise Land Paradox

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Promise Land 2012 was my 57th Ultra. I have now been an “official” ultrarunner for 12 years. I have Factor V for which I take a daily regimen of Coumadin – a blood thinner that leaves me weak, stiff, and red blood cell deprived. I have entered the Beast Series 2012. I have had a hip injury since the Shamrock Marathon. I missed the Bull Run 50 miler because of a super dead battery and the unavoidable circumstance of not having a back-up plan to get me to Manassas.

So, which one of these facts led me to still show up on the morning of April 28th to run the beautiful, but brutal, Promise Land 50K? I am not sure. In fact, for most of the race I felt as if I was constantly in the middle of opposing, at odds, forces. With all that said, here is my story:

Let me start with Wednesday, April 25th. I am psyched about Promise Land. I am feeling good and the 1.5 hour run was without any hip pain. Thursday – I could barely walk, much less mimic a running gait or fake a shuffle. Friday – I was able to ride my bike back and forth to work (I commute 3-4 days a week now to the middle school where I teach English). Would Saturday bring a “barely walk” pattern?

Now, it’s Saturday morning, early. I was out of the house by 2:30. I have not been late, or almost late, to any ultra this year. The 2 hour drive is uneventful. I arrive at Promise Land, find the perfect (almost) parking spot, get my number and shirt, grab some breakfast snacks, and head back to my car for a nap. I half-heartedly rest and then around 5:10ish, I emerge from my car for a bit of warm up. I have to warm up for every race, or I end up suffering through some annoying initial stiffness. I make a bathroom detour; I am ready to go.

But what is my strategy for today? Do I race? Do I just finish? Therefore, I set two goals: one, run as much as possible, two, be faster than 2010. I simply have no clue how my day will go with longer distances now. It is all chance due to the side effects of my medicine.

5:30 am. The interesting singing is now over, and the race has started. I head out onto the road and begin to enjoy the climb. I keep running and shuffling and running and shuffling. Before I know it, it is time to turn right, run over some rocks, and head towards the horse trail. I found myself in a groove of sorts – not pushing too hard but pleased with my pace. These pleasantries continued until I reached the super green and robust horse trails. I found myself cruising along; I ran with Bethany for a while but I was trying to stay conservative.

I reached aid station two feeling good and interested in snacks. I munched on some M&Ms, etc. as I headed toward the parkway. I thought, “I am going to run this whole climb.” Everything felt great. I starting running, but my legs had other plans. The stiffness came on like a torrent. I went quickly from slightly worried to angry to downright discouraged. By the time I reached the Parkway, I was dreading the descent to Sunset Fields.

I wanted to pick up the pace and work out the stiffness, but nothing helped. I crawled (not literally, but mostly) into the Sunset Fields aid station. Every one there was nice and cheerful, but I was wallowing in my dread of miles 11-16. I hate down hills, and given my current state of affairs, I was distraught. Luckily, I was not having any other issues – no rumbling tummy, no fatigue, no injuries, etc. I moved onto the trail and began my embarrassingly slow maneuvering of this section. Now, my hip was hurting. One runner passed me, then two, then eight, then three thousand, and finally six million. I arrived at the 16ish aid station in a funk, to say the least.

Then David Horton, in all his pleasant fashion, said “You look like you are really hurting.” Someone else (I don’t know who) decided to challenge David’s inspirational degradation with a comment like “Man, you look worse than anybody else so far.” I did not take it personally. David seems to inspire that sort of inspiration in all of us. However, one thing was clear. I had a second half of a race to run.

I left that aid station at a miserably slow pace. More runners went by, but I kept going. Soon, I discovered that my stiff and unresponsive legs had one gear, no matter the terrain. I kept running up hill, downhill, and on the flats. I started to pass people back, not that I was counting, but it did boost my spirits a bit.

Historically, this part of the course (16ish to 22ish) is a nightmare for me. However, I felt powerful in my new pace. I managed to run just about every portion of this part of the course as I headed back to Cornelius Creek to prepare for Apple Orchard Falls. I actually started to pick up the pace a bit.

I was psyched. I headed up Apple Orchard Falls, mostly running, and reeling others in. I was looking forward to the crest and finishing. With such a positive vibe, I arrived at Sunset Fields. I had noticed that the temperature was dropping, but I was trying to will the storms away. Oh boy, was I wrong.

As I left Sunset Fields, the sky opened up with a vengeance. Within moments, I was cold, soaked, and stiff again. I kept going. I was pounded by hail, some small and some big enough to crack the face of my Timex GPS watch. I kept going. I was frozen.

Here I have to be honest. I hate lightning. I am scared of lightning. I am a wimp when it comes to lightning. Lightning was everywhere; it made me jump, and it made me whimper. But my pace remained steady, if only to stay ahead of the worst of the lightning.

I reached Overstreet Falls frozen, stiff, and fast. Again historically, I am not very good on this last downhill section. But on this day, I was rockin’. I kept getting faster and faster as I headed to the finish. I was running away from the nearby lightning and thunderously scary booms that followed. In fact, my last mile felt like the last mile of a road race. I turned in to Promise Land and headed to the finish – 3 down and 3 to go.

I did run faster than 2010. Was I completely pleased with my result? Maybe. I was not sick or nauseated; I even ate a hot dog. But I did spend twenty or so minutes in my car trying to warm up enough so that my hands could untie my shoes. I was so stiff on Sunday that I could barely walk.

The paradox was that what was bad was maybe not that bad. Maybe the good was better than I gave it credit for. Now, it is time to think about Grindstone, or at least train for it.