

Promise Land 2012: The 12th Edition: The Cold Year: The Epic Year

By Dr. David Horton, Race Director

Normally, Promise Land (PL) has GREAT racing weather, but definitely not this year. The weather forecast for Saturday called for a 10 percent chance of light showers with temperatures in the upper 60's . . . not bad! The race started under an overcast sky and was perfect if you were fortunate to finish under five hours. Then the skies darkened, thunder boomed, lightning, heavy downpours, even SLEET and HAIL in the upper elevations (dropping to 37 degrees), and then the inevitable . . . MUD. We had it all! For those that took longer than six hours (the time limit is 10 hours), if you survived what Mother Nature dished out, finishing was a VERY special achievement at that point.

The race start/finish is at the Promise Land Youth Camp and has been for all 12 years of the race. Over 75 percent of the runners brought their tents and camped out in the open fields. We had a big bonfire courtesy of John Cooper and Jason Nuss. Domino's brought out their on-site truck and prepared fresh hot pizza. Runners brought desserts, we supplied the drinks, and everyone seemed to enjoy a GREAT time of fellowship.

Our sponsors (Patagonia, Frank Villa, UltraAspire, and Swiftwick) provided us with all sorts of "give-aways" as door prizes. After a short race briefing (HA – short for me maybe!), runners settled down for a few hours of sleep as the race begins at 5:30 AM sharp!

I'm prejudiced, but I, as well as many others, think the Promise Land 50K+ is the most beautiful course on the East Coast. There are scenic grassy roads, nice single-track trails, gorgeous streams, amazing flowers and shrubs, and a spectacular waterfall, Apple Orchard Falls.

This year's Holiday Lake 50K+ (HL) in February was the biggest Ultra ever held in Virginia. However, Promise Land exceeded that by starting 372 runners with 354 finishing. Next year, the limit for both events will be 400. With the growth of ultrarunning, I think we will reach the limit for both races long before race day, so plan accordingly for next year.

This year, we had the deepest men's field since 2002. That year, Clark Zealand set the course record by racing to victory in 4:30:43. Scott Jurek, Hal Koerner, and a host of other speedsters, were chasing him as Promise Land was one of six Montrail Ultra Cup events in 2002.

When Eric Grossman (Emory, VA) arrived at the camp that evening, I told him he could break the course record and still not win. Eric is a three-time winner of PL and had come within seven minutes of Zealand's record in 2011. Eric was set on breaking 4:30. Kalib Wilkinson (Lynchburg, VA), a 2:19 marathoner, had won HL and Terrapin Mountain 50K's already in 2012. Jake Reed (Lynchburg, VA) won PL in 2010 and had won other ultras and was formerly a Division 1 runner for Liberty University. Neal Gorman (Charlottesville, VA) had run some fast spring races and is known as *Mr. Grand Slam* as he has the fastest time for running the four 100 Milers (Western States, Vermont, Leadville, and Wasatch) in one year. Not to be outdone, there was Frank, "the tank" Gonzalez (Lynchburg, VA), well-rested after not doing any ultras all spring.

The ladies field looked to be a two-person race. Leah Daugherty (Virginia Beach, VA) had won both HL and Terrapin Mountain 50K's this year. Bethany Patterson (Richmond, VA) was a previous winner of PL and had also finished second to Daugherty at HL by less than five minutes.

As expected, Wilkinson and Grossman checked into AS 2 (8.6 miles) close together, with Wilkinson a few seconds ahead. Through the next three aid stations, 11.9, 16.1, and 19.3 miles, Wilkinson gained

two minutes in each section to take a six-minute lead over Grossman at Colon Hollow (19.3 miles). Reed was a distant 16 minutes back and out of the chase.

By the next aid station (back to Cornelius Creek-23.9 miles), Wilkinson was still six minutes ahead of Grossman. Grossman checked in seven minutes ahead of his time from 2011 when he ran 4:37, putting him right on Zealand's course record of 4:30. Wilkinson was even six minutes faster than 4:30 pace!!!

Most folks know the signature part of the race is the 2.8 mile (definitely Horton Miles) climb from there up by the waterfall, the endless steps, and the 1,000 foot climb AFTER the waterfall. Many folks have died and seen Elvis on that particular climb.

I had to literally race in the radio vehicle from there to the top of Sunset Fields (for me it was a 10-mile hairy drive) to arrive before Wilkinson got there. At this time, I thought Wilkinson would break the course record and Grossman might as well.

When I arrived at Sunset Fields, someone hollered that the first runner was coming and much to my surprise it was GROSSMAN . . . NOT Wilkinson! We waited and waited and waited but no Wilkinson. Finally I had to leave the aid station to get to the finish line before Grossman. A short time later, a report was issued that Wilkinson was down on the trail. What did that mean? Later, I found out he really was DOWN. He had not drank enough and had eaten even less and was cramping and bonking. Someone gave him a Clif Shot and he came around and made it on to Sunset Fields, arriving there 14 minutes after Grossman had come through.

Several years ago, Grossman had told me (after several attempts) he was going to break seven hours at the Mountain Masochist 50 Miler. I told him he couldn't do it. But he did, and I was there at the finish line to congratulate him. I told him this year he could not break 4:30 at PL. But, I was there once again to shake his hand as he crossed the finish line in 4:25:55, a new course record by almost five minutes! When he crossed the finish line at the MMTR last year, and now PL this year, there were tears of joy in his eyes as well as mine. I was overjoyed to see him achieve these two MAJOR goals. I am honored, and my hat is off to Grossman and to Zealand as well, for holding the course record for a decade. Great job to two well-deserving ultra greats!

One side note . . . it is really special for me to welcome each one of you as you cross the finish line at any of my races! I want to be there to see your face and experience your excitement in accomplishing a great feat! I can always tell when a finish means so much to you, and I LOVE celebrating it with you.

Wilkinson revived enough to take 2nd place in 4:44, 19 minutes behind Grossman.

By Colon Hollow, Gonzalez and Gorman had caught up with Reed. All three checked into Cornelius Creek (23.9 miles) the second time together. At Sunset Fields (26.7 miles), Reed and Gonzalez were still together with Gorman one minute back. From Sunset Fields, except for one small hill, the course is nearly all downhill. Frank, the TANK, can run downhill, as he soon proved.

Gonzalez, in his most competitive field, ran his best race ever, finishing 3rd in 4:48, Reed, 4th in 4:50, and Gorman taking 5th in 4:52.

As expected in the women's competition, Daugherty took the lead immediately. By AS 2 (8.6 miles), she was joined in leading the field by her friend, Nicole Terry (Arlington, VA). Patterson checked in four minutes later. At Sunset Fields, Daugherty and Terry had increased their lead to six minutes over Patterson. Patterson pushed the downhill on the dark side to catch them at Colon Hollow. By the time they got back to Cornelius Creek, Daugherty and Terry had a one-minute lead over Patterson.

On the classic climb up Apple Orchard Falls, Patterson ran out of gas in her chase with the other two cresting the top with a five-minute lead. From there in, Daugherty pushed the pace to pull away from the others taking the win in 5:33:16, winning the first three races in the Lynchburg Ultra Series, the first time this has ever happened. Terry took 2nd in 5:37 and Patterson was 3rd in 5:39, a PR on the PL course.

The Master's winners were Grossman and Ragan Petrie (Arlington, VA). Petrie is 46 years young and finished 42nd place overall. The Grand Master's winners were Dennis Kelleher (Potomac Falls, VA) and Marty Lindemann (Manassas, VA) in 5:57 and 6:57. The Super Master's winners were Gary Knipling (Mason Neck, VA) and Dru Sexton (Roanoke, VA) in 7:16 and 7:13 respectively.

Many runners suffered with borderline hypothermia with all the rain, sleet, and dropping temperatures. But runners warmed their bodies up at the finish line and enjoyed the LEGENDARY burgers, hot dogs, and fixins' prepared and served by my wife Nancy and her fantastic kitchen crew of volunteers.

Also, a big thanks to all our Aid Crews who did a phenomenal job in terrible weather! I've only heard great things from the runners about our crews as they displayed incredible enthusiasm, servant attitudes, and encouraging words. Thanks to our radio crews as well—great job! A HUGE thanks to all! You make these events successful . . . I couldn't do what I do without you!

Finishers were excited to receive their Patagonia 9 Trails running shorts at the finish. Being a teacher at Liberty University, I was so proud of the 30 Liberty University students and another 25 local runners finishing (many attempting PL for the first time). That is a LOT of ultrarunners from this area. Note of interest: six of the first eight finishers were from Lynchburg, VA.

What will Promise Land 2013 look like? I don't know, but I think the toughest thing will be denying runner entries because we may reach the mandated limit of 400 runners set by the National Forest Service. All I can say is: Enter early, especially you local runners.