

SPRING/WINTER/SPRING/WINTER/SPRING----2013 Promise Land 50K by David Horton

The 13<sup>th</sup> annual Promise Land 50K, starts at the PL Youth Camp at 1,200 feet in spring conditions, trees leafed out, green grass everywhere, and flowers blooming. However, by 10 miles, the course takes you to the Blue Ridge Parkway and Apple Orchard Mountain (4,002 feet) and winter conditions, very little green, and NO leaves on the trees. The course then descends to the Dark Side and the lowest elevation (1,100 feet) at White Tail Trail where you run into spring again. After a loop through Colon Hollow and a LITTLE climb up Apple Orchard Falls Trail, runners make their way back to the Parkway (3,400 feet) and encounter winter once again. With a final 4-mile descent back to the finish line at the PL Youth Camp, runners returned back to spring.

Promise Land is the third race in the Lynchburg Ultra Series and probably the MOST ENJOYABLE event in the 6-race Beast Series. The event begins on Friday night with probably over 75 percent of the runners camping out at the Start/Finish. After a pizza blast by Dominos, cooked fresh and hot at the camp, we had a pre-race meeting where we gave out some great door prizes courtesy of Patagonia and UltraAspire. Then we had a big bonfire and stories were told until late at night.

We have always had bathroom and shower facilities at the camp, but they were in dire need of repair and remodeling. Bob and Kari Anderson of Woodbridge, Virginia, made a VERY generous donation last year to cover the cost of totally remodeling the facility. Runners were pleasantly shocked and surprised by the great new facilities.

One very unique aspect of Promise Land is the number of college students running the race. I teach a running class at Liberty University and one of the requirements for the advanced class is to complete an ultra. The beginning class just has to complete a 5K. ALL of the advanced class and 4 students from the beginning class completed PL this year. All in all, there were around 20 present or former students who ran the race. The Virginia Tech Hokies also had around 15 runners complete PL, with 5 of their runners in the top 15.

Another one of the main reasons for so many runners camping out at the start is the early starting time, 5:30 a.m. Why do we start so early? The first 2.5 miles to the first aid station goes up an old forest service road and gains over 1,000 feet. At this point you turn off on a single track trail and continue climbing to the 4-mile point in the race at which point daylight arrives and you start the first downhill.

With the top two runners from the 2012 PL not returning this year, local runners Frank (The Tank) Gonzalez and Sam (Slanted Eye) Dangc were seeded 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. Shaun Pope, formerly of Ohio, had moved to Black Mountain, North Carolina, and had raced well at PL previously but now had some REAL mountains on which to train.

A large pack of runners stayed together through the first four aid stations. Pope had forged a short lead by aid station 2, but the crew at that aid station had got

lost and was not there. This caused Pope to go off course for a short period of time allowing the pack to catch him.

I've always told the runners that the REAL race starts at the Colon Hollow aid station (19 mile). At this point Pope, Dange, and Gonzalez checked in at 8:24 a.m. They were also joined by local runner Jordan Whitlock. One minute behind them was Brian Schmidt (Leesburg, VA).

Pope told me on Friday night that he was looking forward to the big classic climb up Apple Orchard Falls Trail (23 to 26 miles). Even though Gonzalez, Pope, and Whitlock had checked into the base of the climb several minutes ahead of Pope, Pope blitzed the climb making up the deficit and gaining a 3-minute lead by the top of the mountain. Pope maintained his lead to take the victory in 4:55:26. Gonzalez edged his running buddy by 2 seconds finishing in 4:58:57 and Dange two seconds later. Whitlock took 4<sup>th</sup> place in 5:10:50, his highest finish at PL. Rudy Rutemiller (a Hokie from Blacksburg, VA) took 5<sup>th</sup> in 5:11:26.

Emily Warner (Winchester, VA) had been racing very well and was seeded first for the ladies. Alison Bryant (Elkin, NC) was a veteran ultrarunner with several ultra victories. Martha Nelson (Washington, DC) was also a veteran ultrarunner who had a chance for the victory as well.

Bryant took the lead right away and by aid station 6, and the foot of the Apple Orchard climb, had a 7- minute lead over Nelson and Warner. On the climb, Warner closed the lead to 3 minutes by the top of the mountain with Nelson fading back. The lead was down to one minute at the last aid station with 2.6 miles to the finish. Bryant held on for the victory finishing in 5:48:57 with Warner 66 seconds later in 5:50:03. Nelson took 3<sup>rd</sup> in 5:54:42. A BIG surprise was 4<sup>th</sup> place finisher, Renee Orth, one of the students from my running class competing in her FIRST ultra, just missing a sub 6-hour time finishing in 6:00:08. Taking 5<sup>th</sup> place in 6:02:26 was Robin Watkins (Washington DC).

Brian Schmidt and Ruth Ann Helfrick (Elysburg, PA) took the Masters titles in 5:14:53 and 6:46:54. John Robinson (Roanoke, VA) and Martha Wright (Richmond, VA) took the Grand Masters titles in 5:54:20 and 6:55:05. Marlin Yoder (Harrisonburg, VA) took the Super Masters title in 6:37:12.

Sub-10 hour finishers received a GREAT pair of Patagonia running shorts. The top 10 men and women and age group winners also received an embroidered pack made by Patagonia. Each runner also received a bright entrants shirt designed by one of the PL runners, Helen MacDermott of Lexington, VA. Helen has designed our last two PL shirts and our last two Holiday Lake shirts. Thanks so much to you Helen.

A hamburger/hot dog lunch with all the fixings was provided for all the runners and those wishing to indulge. This seems to be the highlight and a great finish to the day!

In the 13<sup>th</sup> year of PL, I am very glad to say that the course has NOT changed a single bit. What has changed is the level of competition. In 2001, the first year of the race, Greg Loomis ran 6:19 and finished in 16<sup>th</sup> place. This year, Loomis

finished in 6:20 but took 66<sup>th</sup> place!!! In 2002, Martha Wright finished in 7:23 for 114<sup>th</sup> place. This year, Wright finished in 6:55 for 120<sup>th</sup> place. These runners are getting older and faster but moving further back in the pack.

Hellgate 100K was recently named by *Outside Online* as one of the 10 races on a bucket list of runners to do sometime in their lifetime. If there was a bucket list for 50K's, I have no doubt that Promise Land would be on the list. If you don't believe me, just ask ANYONE who has ever run PL for their opinion.