

Promise Land 50k (2022) race report -- Over the past ten years, several people have said, "Why haven't you run Promise Land, because the race is ssssoooo beautiful?" This year the stars aligned and I decided to sign up. I was a bit nervous since I have not done an ultra for almost four years along and I had recovered from a minor surgery. I wasn't sure how my body would respond to the preparation. After a year of slowly building a base, I decided to commit to a race. If anything, I looked forward to the opportunity to push my body and to see how I would handle the stress of getting back in the ultra-running saddle. My overall target for the race was to break 6 hours.

Friends had recommended spending the night at the campground prior to the race. I am thankful that I chose this option, because it meant that I just needed to wake up at 4:30am versus 3:00am. I arrived at the campground around 8:30pm, which was a bit later than planned. I would recommend arriving closer to 6:00pm since parking/camping spots are difficult to find, and you won't miss Dr. Horton's evening prerace speech. I went to bed at 9:30pm after organizing my race nutrition of gels (Hammer nutrition), gummies (Honey Stinger), and wafers (Honey Stinger).

Going into the race, I knew that the weather would be lower 80's hence humidity and heat would be a racing factor. Fortunately, I spent the last week staying hydrated and taking electrolytes. I carbed up the past few days on pizza and pasta to ensure energy storage. I knew during the warm race that I would need to maintain hydration and keep the calorie intake rolling. I normally use Nuun for long run hydration, but I made sure to acclimate my body to Tailwind since I knew Dr. Horton would be using this for the race.

I woke up at 4:30am. I ate rice cakes covered in Justin almond butter followed by a banana. I sipped on cold coffee followed by some Gatorade. I checked in early to avoid the rush. At the start line, I found familiar faces from past races and training runs. After some laughs, a word of prayer, and the National Anthem sung by the runners, we were off into the darkness at 5:30am. The race quickly broke into multiple packs chasing the leaders. I knew the climb would be fierce in the beginning, so I wanted to start conservative. I settled into a fantastic pace with the P.S.S.B (Patterson, Spaulding, Swyers, and Bernard) squad aka the "Assassin" squad. They have the ability to start in the back, but begin to pass everyone in their path and crush the second half with super human strength. I left this pack and "granny geared" with a few fast hikes to the ridge top in under an hour. At the top of the ridge, I knew I needed to move on the grassy road. In order to get a sub 6-hour finish, I needed to hit the top of Sunset fields at around the two-hour mark. I did not want to burn out too soon, so I paced around an 8:15 mile on the grassy road. I made it to Reid Creek and downed five pieces of bacon and a full grilled cheese sandwich. I "granny geared" to the parkway with a few fast hikes. I paced at around 8:30 pace on the road to Sunset fields. My wife, kids, sister, nieces, and Father were along the road with extra gels and lots of encouraging cheers.

At the Sunset field's aid station, I ate orange slices and dill pickles. I quickly, but cautiously went down the Apple Orchard's trail. I knew that pushing the trail down to Cornelius creek too hard is a great way to burn out the quads. I knew I was behind my pacing time at Cornelius creek. I planned on picking up an extra water bottle entering into the loop since I didn't want to be stranded without drink. I grabbed a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. After handing me the extra water bottle, my brother in law reminded me to pick up the pace. I took off at an 8:15 pace on the road for the next few miles.

Upon entering the loop's single track, I knew this was where the race truly began. I understood that I needed to aim for a 10-minute mile average to have a chance for a sub 6-hour finish. I kept thinking about the "Assassin" squad coming with their ability to move from the back of the pack. After picking up a freezy pop at the Colon Hollow aid station, I switched between running and fast hiking on the uphill and pushed on the downhill. This part of the race requires runners to grind. During this loop, the bottom of my left foot experienced momentary knife stabbing pain. I thought this might be the end of my race, but the pain worked itself out. I found having a wristwatch for mile pacing very useful on the loop. The upside to this portion of the race was the scenery. The flowers brought beautiful colors along the trail however; I did notice lots and lots of leafing poison ivy plants along the trail within the last few miles before Cornelius Creek. This reality encouraged me to move quickly on the center of the trail. I have named this loop the "Poison Ivy" gauntlet.

I had paced with a few runners to Cornelius Creek. I entered Cornelius Creek at about 4 hours and 20 minutes and I dropped one water bottle off at the aid station. I drank water and ginger ale. My stomach felt great and my hydration was on point. I jogged out of Cornelius Creek and braced myself for the climb. I tried to jog the beginning for the Apple Orchard climb, but I fast hiked the majority of the trail. I knew I needed to reach Sunset fields around 5 hours. I fortunately had the motivation of trying to keep up with runners in front of me. I kept moving with the "Assassin" squad in the back of my mind, because the second half was their strong game. I caught a glimpse of a few more runners further up the trail. This encouraged the chase. I just focused on fast hiking the steep climbs and jogging the flats. I summited the Sunset Fields about 10 minutes after 5 hours. I knew the finish would be close. I was hitting a wall, because the two runners that had passed me on the loop were out of sight. I still remember my sister yelling at me to pick up the pace. I rolled my eyes and thought this is going to be rough. I wasn't sure I'd have the gas, but I started down the trail and fast hiked the last little climb. I just told myself it's all downhill from here. As I started the descent, my left knee felt knife stabbing pains, which eventually disappeared. As I continued, I realized I could push the pace and I saw a few runners in front of me, which gave me extra motivation. I realized the sub 6-hour finish remained attainable, especially when I started on the gravel road close to 5 hours and 30 minutes. In the distance, I spotted one runner from the "Poison Ivy" loop and decided to try to catch him. This downhill assault forced me to push a 6:45 mile pace. I wasn't sure if I could hold out, but to my surprise my legs held. I didn't experience any knives in the quads, hips, or knees. My hamstrings and my calves didn't freeze up, which tells me my hydration and my electrolyte intake was on point for the race.

Thankfully, I crossed the finish line right under 5 hours and 50 minutes. I cannot say I was optimistic about my goal achieving odds after rolling in behind schedule at my first entrance at Cornelius Creek. I think I surprised myself especially since I'd been in "retirement" for about four years. Overall I am grateful to have met my over goal of sub 6 hours.

Thank you Dr. Horton. You are one of the, if not the "godfather" of ultra-running in my book. I still remember you from high school sharing your passion and your running exploits to my high school cross-country team in my family's home. Your one of the kind craziness is contagious. You are part of the reason why I have found the joy in pushing myself at odd hours in the morning on lonely single-track trails in the middle of dark wilderness. I know you put in a lot of time, sacrifice, and energy into these races. The Promise Land 50k exceeded expectations. I look forward to suffering again on this course in the future.

Thank you to all the aid station workers and your bountiful tables, which had an amazing spread of food. Thank you to all my fellow runners who unknowingly pushed me mentally, including the "Assassin" squad and Frank the Tank. Thank you to my family/friends for coming out to cheer and to yell out me into the finish. It was a great race day.

- Matt Day