

## **Backstory**

I've always been a runner. Ever since I was little my parents got me into running with them, which transitioned to my high school team and a collegiate career. I specialized in long distance events competing in the 5K, 8K, and 10K in cross country then the 3000m steeplechase, 5000m, and 10000m events in track. Outside of collegiate events I'd compete in anything from 5K to half marathon on the roads. I lost my final track season due to the start of the covid-19 pandemic, which was the final push I needed to get myself into ultramarathons. One of my best friends had previously competed in races like the JFK 50 Miler, Brazil 135, and even the Badwater 135. The nonprofit that she started, RunningWorks, is an organization that helps to get jobs and eventually housing for the homeless population of Charlotte, NC through running, life skills, and volunteerism. Every year on Global Running Day they have their annual 12-Hour Run to End Homelessness. That year (2019) I decided I was going to run the whole thing and fundraise for the nonprofit. Race day came and I ended up running 70 miles and raising over \$3,000 for the nonprofit.

## **Moving to Roanoke, Virginia**

After the 12 hour run, I went back to my final semester of nursing school to finish my degree. I had no eligibility to run for my school so I focused on using running as a stress reliever while studying for classes and NCLEX. In January 2021, a few weeks after graduation and passing the NCLEX, I was packing a moving truck and headed to Roanoke, Virginia where I accepted a job as a nurse in the resource pool at the Carilion Clinic Roanoke Memorial Hospital. Moving to Roanoke was the start of new opportunities for running. I started to join the Roanoke Valley Trail Runners on their Tuesday night trail runs. I also finished 4th in the Blue Ridge Double Marathon, one of the hardest road races in the country with 14,000 feet of elevation change over 52.4 miles. In 2022 I did the 12 hour run again and ran 65 miles. I ran the Blue Ridge Double Marathon again finishing 3<sup>rd</sup> and I competed in the Roanoke Non Ultra Trail Series (RNUTS), a series of trail races ranging from 10K to marathon. The final event wasn't until after Promise Land but I eventually finished 2<sup>nd</sup> in the series. When socializing with other athletes and friends after runs and races, everyone was telling me about this one race called Promise Land 50K++. They all told me stories of when they ran it, telling me it was a very challenging course but definitely worth the run. I decided that I would sign up for the race and see for myself

## **Promise Land 50K++: The Night Before**

I was nervous going to the race knowing that the weekend before I had run the Blue Ridge Double and then run every day since then as well. I was also really excited. I was also excited to meet the race director, David Horton, a famous ultrarunner who held speed records on the longest trails in the country as well as winning all the biggest races. I checked in and got my number and shirt and made my nametag. I started talking to Jordan Chang, the Blue Ridge Double course record holder, and told him that I missed his record that I had been chasing. As we were talking, Horton walked by and Jordan said "These guys ran 50 miles last weekend". All

Horton did was laugh and say “then tomorrow is going to hurt a lot sooner for you guys”, something that didn’t surprise me at all after all I’ve been told about him. I went back to the car and set up my tent and campsite and talked to a few more athletes. One of the coolest parts of Promise Land is that the night before almost everyone camps out. Pizza is provided and everyone brings drinks or desserts to share. A massive bonfire is started and competitors socialize and eat as they prep for the next day’s race. Horton does this in order to encourage the communal aspect of the race. A group of trail runners and ultrarunners are the closest thing you can get to a family as everyone is supportive and just wants to have fun. No matter how the race goes they’ll always be there for support before, during, or after the run. I’ve been fortunate enough to make a lot of friends in the community who were at the race. I sat with my friends Connor, Zach, Dan, and my brother Jared while we listened to Horton’s pre-race briefing. He explains everything we could possibly want to know about the race and course plus some. He tells jokes and makes fun of the athletes but always turns it into encouragement. Horton can come across as mean when he’s joking, but you can tell that he’s a great guy that wants everyone to do their very best. After dinner, I hung out at the fire before getting everything I needed ready to go for the next day. I went to bed with an alarm set for 4:00am, well before the 5:30am start time.

### **Promise Land 50K++: Race Day**

I woke up before my alarm and shortly after heard the sound of Horton yelling through the megaphone. I heard him yelling for the “sissies” (the name given to those who chose not to camp overnight before the race) to park in the designated area and for the others to get up and get ready to go. I was shivering with a mix of cold from the mountain air and excitement about what I was about to do. I immediately went to the restroom and then pulled out my water, PBJs, and banana. I also took a few snacks from what was left over from dinner. I filled my bladder with Tailwind, and put 4 GU gels in the pockets. My race goal was to finish as high as I could and beat as many of my Roanoke friends as I could (because you have to have that friendly competition). My time goal was under 6 hours. I decided to continuously sip on the Tailwind and refill it when empty. I was also going to take one GU every 90 minutes so that I’d have a constant supply of carbs and sugar, probably the most important type of nutrient for an ultrarunner. I did some light stretching and drills to get warmed up and switched into my RunningWorks t-shirt, opting for that instead of the singlet to prevent chafing. I put on my hydration bag and met my friends at the starting line. Horton pulled a random runner from the start line and chose them to sing the national anthem. Once that finished, we all got on the line and Horton blew the air horn starting us all on the initial 4-mile climb. I started running and quickly realized my legs were more dead than I thought so I opted to power-hike and run parts of the climb. When I hit the Over Street Falls aid station I yelled my number to them and finally got into the trail. I ran through more technical uphill trails until I started the grassy downhill. This 4-mile descent was by far the most beautiful part of a course that’s already known as one of the prettiest 50K courses in the Eastern USA. About halfway through I took a fall and slide before getting up and back on pace. The sunrise on the course was amazing and it was one of those reminders of why I loved to run so much. After the descent I hit the Reed Creek aid station. Here I took my first GU as well as a few bigger sips of Tailwind. I tried a few smaller

snacks like pretzels to get more electrolytes. I continued on my way to the gravel road downhill. I had grouped up with 2 other runners so I ran with them as we talked about anything to keep our minds focused on anything but the pain. After the gravel road we came across the Sunset Fields aid station, which was the first cut off. The energy around this aid station was crazy because it was the first of the few spots you could have a crew at. We continued through this part together and I grabbed some water at the aid station before heading downhill. The others and I split up as we descended down the last half of Apple Orchard Falls, a climb coming back that I was dreading. This downhill was very steep and technical with roots and rocks and dips. I watched my step carefully allowing myself extra time to avoid a race-ending ankle twist or worse. This was the start of the Dark Side. The next 4 miles consisted mostly of running a long a concrete road mixed with portions of long grassy climbs and descents. Going down this road Josh Gilbert, the RNUTS race director, appeared on his mountain bike and yelled at me as I kept going. This was enough to keep me going for a little bit until the Cornelius Creek aid station. I got some water here and then continued onto the 8-mile loop of long climbs. This was one of the worst parts for me. I was dying fast and my nutrition wasn't seeming to help me. I had to stop a few times for GI issues and walk a lot more than I would've liked due to exhaustion. Thankfully someone was out there giving out popsicles, something that saved me in my past 12 hour runs. I took one and it gave me what I needed to just keep moving. When I got back to the Cornelius Creek aid station for the second time I was becoming more and more mentally defeated as well as physically beat up. I got some more water here as well as took what I hoped would be the last GU before I finished. Josh was there again and encouraged me as I took off toward the start of the climb up Apple Orchard Falls. When I got to the creek I remembered Horton's speech the day before encouraging us to take advantage of the cool water. So I made sure to step in and walk through slowly. If I was already feeling pretty bad there was no way this cold water could make me feel worse. I started climbing up the falls wooden step by wooden step. Usually I'm pretty good at climbing so to be suffering this much on a long climb was making it mentally worse than it needed to be. I was definitely hallucinating and remember looking around and seeing someone directly behind me, someone who was nowhere to be seen after the next turn. I finally got to the top of the climb and went through Sunset Fields. As I got toward the aid station I heard them start yelling at me asking me what I want. The only thing I could think of was something cold so I asked if they had popsicles and they didn't so they gave me some ice. I kept going and immediately took a wrong turn. I started climbing the Blue Ridge Parkway when I felt like something was wrong. I looked back and saw people headed into the trail. Luckily I was running slow enough that I was able to get a second wind and get to the trail before I was stuck behind too many others. I took the 2 miles of trail as hard as I could until I got to the 2 miles of downhill gravel road. I was told by others that going down this road would hurt, but after I climbed up it in the beginning I didn't think it could be that bad. Going down this road was way worse than going up. My legs were on fire and I had to force myself to run slow and ultimately stop on parts. I was just waiting to see the giant squirrel that meant I was close to the finish. I finally saw the squirrel and knew I was minutes away. I ran as hard as I possibly could, which turned out to be just under 6 minute pace, and made the final turn to the finish line. When I finished the only thing I could think of was how bad I was hurting and how glad I was to be done. Horton was at the finish line cheering every single person on as they finished. I congratulated the other runners and thanked those around me for pushing me in. I

got my finishers shorts and some water and waited for the others. I finished in 5:28:58, meaning I had just over 4.5 hours until the cutoff. I decided I wasn't going to leave until the last finisher came in. I watched and cheered on all my friends and strangers as they finished. I ate some more pizza and talked to others until the cut off. After I helped Horton with the cleanup and take down of the race site; I packed up my belongings, grabbed some pizza and snacks, and loaded the car. I went to see Horton and thanked him for putting on the awesome race and talked for a little bit before heading out. I would have stayed longer if I weren't scheduled to work that night as well.

## **Final Thoughts**

I knew that signing up for this race wasn't the greatest idea after running the double marathon the week before and having the Conquer the Cove trail marathon the next week. I signed up because all my friends were running and it seemed like a fun race. The race hurt pretty bad physically and mentally but it was 100% worth it. It's so hard to put together a race report on a race that you mentally were out of. I can't remember all the little details but I remember all the important things. Considering what I ran the week before, I was happy with the race. It was one of those days that I just remembered what my friends and coaches said before my first 12-hour run: relentless forward progress. It wasn't what I wanted at all timewise but all that means is I have something to improve on and I can use this performance as a motivator to do better next time. The course was one of the most challenging courses I've ever run and but also one of the most scenic. There were great views of the mountains, nice wildflowers, and a great waterfall. The pre-race camp and meal were a unique touch that made the entire atmosphere so much better. The volunteers were amazing and enthusiastic whether they were at the start and finish, or along the course and at aid stations. They were encouraging to everyone no matter how the runner was doing. Horton himself was one of the best race directors I've gotten to meet. He makes it obvious how much he cares about the race, the sport, and all the participants. He was also out on the course at multiple points watching and making predictions. The community aspect he encourages brings everyone closer together and makes the experience much more fun. I definitely plan to run Horton's races again including Hellgate 100K in November. Congrats to everyone who participated!