

Promise Land 50K++ Race Report

Background

I have been running since I was in 3rd grade. My parents were runners and they passed on their passion to my twin brother, Jacob, and I. I grew to love running more and more and ran my first race in 6th grade at the 2010 Cooper River Bridge Run 10k. This race led to cross country in middle school and eventually track and cross country in high school. I have met lifelong friends through running and had life-changing experiences I would have never had without the sport. Through my hard work in high school, I earned a scholarship to compete at the NCAA Division 1 level for the University of South Carolina Upstate where I ran cross country and long distance indoor and outdoor track. Cross country was always my favorite because I loved to race over different terrain and in different places. I loved the variety that racing on a track lacked. Throughout my running career it became obvious that I excelled at the longer distances. My dad thought the marathon would be my best distance, but a close friend told me that the ultramarathon would be better. I wanted to try both. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit full blast in 2020 I lost my last season of outdoor track. So, what did I do? I ran a 12-hour run to support RunningWorks.

RunningWorks

Since 2013, I have been a volunteer with RunningWorks which is a Charlotte, NC based organization that uses the sport of running to create visibility and work to break the stigmas associated with homelessness, abuse, and addiction. On Global Running Day they hosted the RunningWorks 12-Hour Run to End Homelessness, which like everything else in 2020 was virtual. My brother and I decided to try to beat the record for most miles run at the event. We told the founder, Meredith Dolhare, and our coach Matt Elliott and they were excited. The day of the event we were awake early and by 6:00 AM we were outside our driveway running the first lap of a 1-mile loop around our neighborhood with the intent to run as many times as we could until 6:00 PM. 12 hours and 70 miles later, I finished and collapsed on the ground. I was physically and mentally exhausted after dealing with electrolyte imbalances, cramps, and extreme fatigue. I was also hooked on ultramarathons. Between my brother and I, we raised over \$3000 for RunningWorks and ran a distance that would have put us among the top 20 North Americans for the 12-hour run in 2020.

Roanoke, Virginia

In January 2021 I had graduated from USC Upstate with my Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree and passed the NCLEX earning my credentials as a Registered Nurse. I moved to Roanoke VA where I accepted a job in the Resource Pool as a registered nurse. I quickly got involved in the local racing scene. My first major race was the Blue Ridge Double Marathon. It was 2 loops of the Blue Ridge Marathon that started at 2:30 am and climbed 14,000 feet. I finished in 3rd place in 8:04. After Running this and many other races, my brother and I began to put our names out there and people started to recognize us as "The Twins". One of my highlights of each week is my Tuesday trail run with the Roanoke Valley Trail Runners. In March 2022 there started to be talk of the Promise Land and I didn't know what it was. I was told about Dr. David Horton and his legend status in the world of ultrarunning and thru-hiking. He

has an incredible record of winning dozens of prestigious races and setting speed records on the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail. The Promise Land 50k++ I was told was one of the most popular ultramarathons in the region. Several of the RVTR guys were running and I wanted to run it too, despite being a week after the Blue Ridge Double Marathon. I eventually gave in to peer pressure and registered. I knew it was crazy and probably stupid, but I had never run a trail ultramarathon before and decided it was a great opportunity to test myself. Blue Ridge Double Marathon came and went. I ran the day after then took the next day off. Then my week buildup before Promise land 50k++ began. Between working 3 nights, running a double marathon, and still having to go about daily life my legs were far from fresh when I got to Promise Land and they felt very tired. I was expecting this so I tried to push it to the back of my mind and forget about it.

Friday Night

The Promise Land experience was one to remember. But I can't write about the race without writing about the events leading up to it. Dr. David Horton is not only an accomplished ultramarathoner himself but an excellent race director who strongly believes in the community aspect of the sport. The race starts at 5:30 AM Saturday morning so he encourages everyone to camp out the night before the race to ensure everyone is there and ready to go. Otherwise, you can join the "sissies" and drive in absurdly early in the morning. Most runners and crew happily camp. On Friday night when you get to the camp you are greeted by Dr. Horton and his volunteers who are checking you in and handing out shirts and bib numbers. Dr. Horton also orders 100+ Dominos pizzas and says if you want to eat then bring a dessert to share. If you are one of his many students, then bring a box of double stuffed Oreos or a 2-liter soda to share. I had several slices of pizza and some awesome desserts. Someone brought a good cheesecake and there were lots of cookies. I baked brownies and brought a few trays and was happy to see them all eaten by the nights end. I saw Jordan Chang, a strong ultramarathoner out of Blacksburg who held the course record at Blue Ridge Double Marathon and went to talk to him. He introduced Jacob and I to Dr. Horton and told him about our race the weekend before to which Horton said, "You're going to hurt a lot sooner tomorrow then".

As the main course was wrapping up, we all sat in a semi-circle in the grass facing the pavilion waiting for the famous pre-race briefing from Dr. Horton. This briefing was a perfect combination of important information about the course, the aid stations, and the conditions. This encompassed about 75% of the discussion. He also discussed important aspects of proper nutrition and hydration for the race. He encouraged us to drink tailwind and take in electrolytes early because we will need it later in the race. Another key point was to not drink too much water that night so we wouldn't be up peeing all night. Dr. Horton's briefing was as much knowledgeable as it was entertaining as he described the weather and the course. It was going to be very hot with temperatures climbing to the upper 70s with high humidity by 11am. This led him to say "If you can run very fast, faster then 5:30 then you will be okay. If you run slower then you will be very miserable coming up Apple Orchard Falls". I can say that it didn't matter if you ran faster than 5:30 or slower than 5:30. Apple Orchard Falls hurts either way. The last 25% of the pre-race briefing was the entertainment. If he was familiar with you, or if you asked the right question or made the right comment then you would be put on the spot and he would roast you. He made sure to call out race favorites and familiar faces like Rachel Spaulding and

Jordan Chang. As well as his former students. Several of the people he called out were past recipients of the “Best Blood Award” for whoever had the worst fall or the “Stupid Award” which went to the unlucky participant who did something stupid. This could happen at any point before the race, during the race, or after the race and nominations were ALWAYS open.

After this pre-race briefing everyone dispersed. Some went to get more food, some went to prepare their sleeping arrangements for the night, and the sissies went home for a few hours before the early drive back to the race site. After a little while the bonfire began. The sun had set so it started to cool off but once the bonfire of dozens of wooden pallets was lit, it became warm as everyone gathered around to talk and make new friends. The fire eventually died down and those of us who were still awake started to retreat to get some sleep. I crawled into my sleeping bag and attempted to sleep. It was about 9:30 PM and I wasn't tired. I just lay there listening to the nighttime sounds and it was peaceful other than the occasional late arrivals trying to find parking and the bright headlights that someone had inconveniently pointed at my tent. I eventually drifted off to a very light and short “nap”.

Race Day

I woke up just before 4am to the sound of tents unzipping, cars starting to arrive, and voices outside. All the nerves and excitement of race morning started to hit me all at once. I unzipped the tent and it was such a cool experience to wake up surrounded by a couple hundred runners all sleeping in various ways including tents, hammocks, RVs, converted vans, and rooftop tents. There was a lot going on. Some people were making coffee, others stretching or racing for the bathrooms, then there were some who were with their friends laughing and talking about the race that was about to start. At 4:30 if you weren't already awake then you would be soon as Dr. Horton got on the megaphone and started to remind everyone that we must check in before the start. I hurried to the porta-potty before the lines got too long and then made my way to the pavilion to check in. I had to stop myself from grabbing a slice of pizza but I wanted to avoid any potential GI distress from trying something new before I raced. I hurried back to my car that I set my tent up next to upon arrival last night. I had everything I needed ready to go. I decided to go with a RunningWorks T-shirt last minute instead of a singlet. It may be a hot day but I didn't want my hydration pack rubbing my shoulders raw for 5+ hours. I took my hydration bladder out of my small cooler and mixed in some Tailwind before throwing it on and packing the pockets with GU energy gels and emergency toilet paper, just in case. I pinned on my number, rubbed bodyglide everywhere, grabbed my headlamp and excitedly jogged over to the starting line. Once there I did a few dynamic warmup drills and eventually found some of my friends. Michael Craig was there running his first ultramarathon. Dan Danko, Connor Siggins, and Zach Davis all from the Roanoke Valley Trail Runners lined up alongside Jacob and I. With a few minutes to go when everyone seemed to be ready to go, someone said a quick prayer then the National Anthem was sang by all the runners together. After a round of applause things quickly got quiet and with this Dr. Horton started the countdown.

The Race

As he counted down, you could feel the excitement in the air. Runners started shuffling to their preferred positions... some pushed back, I squeezed towards the front row. When we heard

“GO” everyone took off to yelling and cheering. 311 runners starting out at a pace that for most of us was probably way too fast while charging by headlamp towards a challenging and steep 4+ mile climb. 3 runners took the early lead and I wanted to go too but I settled in the chase pack with Jacob and Michael, and with Jenn and Rachel who finished as the first 2 females. I didn’t have any expectations or goals for myself but thought that sub 6 hours was an attainable goal. I had never met Jenn before today, but I knew Rachel was bound to break 6 hours so if I stayed with her I would be in a good position. I focused on keeping my effort steady and easy and keeping my heart rate low during the first climb. Rachel told me before the race to not let myself hit anaerobic effort too early because recovery will be difficult. The pack started to spread out and I found myself catching those in front of me. Right before we turned onto the singletrack about 2.7 miles in, I came up beside Joe Darwin, a friend from Roanoke who was running his first ultramarathon. He looked great while training so I wasn’t shocked to see him up in the front. Soon after he picked up the pace and I never saw him again. A few minutes later I heard footsteps behind me and they were gaining. It was George Tolton of Salem and McLane Grow of Roanoke. I knew both were very strong runners and I have lost to George so far in every one of the Mountain Junkies RNUTS race series so I knew they were fit and I didn’t expect them to be behind me. I looked back at George and said half-joking “I’m starting to wonder if I messed up since you guys are behind me”. George and McLane passed me on the first downhill stretch minutes later and took several guys with them at a blistering pace. I held back to try to save my already fatigued legs for later. This next 4 mile stretch of the race was all downhill and in my opinion was one of the prettiest points of the race between the grass fields and the mountain views with the sun poking over the horizon. I ran into my first major issue here. I went to drink some tailwind and I couldn’t get anything out of my hose. I tried everything from sucking hard into it to blowing air into it and reached back to push on the insertion site thinking maybe it came dislodged and I could snap it back into place like that. Frustratingly it didn’t work and I had a trail of runners behind me on the singletrack. The first open field I reached, I jumped off to the side and quickly unstrapped my pack and started wiggling the hose and pushing it back into place. It finally worked so I strapped it back on and took off again. I wanted to regroup with the others who were close to a minute ahead of me after this incident but I resisted the urge knowing I would spike my heart rate and I would not be able to recover quickly once I caught them. I slowly made my way back to the group. I caught 2 guys named Eric and Justin. Justin was participating in the Beast Series and was an experienced ultrarunner and Eric was running his first ultramarathon. Both were running strong, and I enjoyed running with them through the next aid station at Reed Creek. This aid station was stocked with everything we could have needed and more. I saw some grilled cheese, some bacon, water and tailwind, fruit and pretzels to name a few things. I settled for some pretzels because I wanted to keep my sodium levels up. It was also 90 minutes into my race so I slurped down a chocolate outrage GU which I planned to do at every 90 minute interval throughout the race. The volunteers were amazing at this aid station and got us what we needed and helped us to get back on the trail moments later. Onto Sunset Fields!

This next segment of the race seemed to be one of the longest stretches for me but also one of the prettiest. After leaving the aid station we backtracked a few hundred feet before taking the upper trail and we started climbing once again. This climb was a long-sustained climb until we reached the parkway again before taking a long gravel road back down. After a few

minutes I opened a small gap on the group I was running with and I was on my own. I remember after a couple miles the trees started to thin out and I could see the hill starting to become more gradual. I knew I was getting close to the top, when I reached the road I was met by a group of volunteers and David Horton. As I was running, I remember him asking how to pronounce my last name and as I turned the corner, he yelled out something about running on my toes. Not a lot of people run on their toes so it tends to catch attention when I run by people. After crossing the Blue Ridge Parkway I began a long downhill stretch on a crushed gravel state road. This was a welcomed change after climbing for most of the race until this point. I was able to open up my stride and run a few faster miles without exerting a lot of energy. This is the final approach to Sunset Fields and crews are allowed at this point so there were a lot of people parked along the road and waiting for their runners and the crowd support was energizing here. Jay Proffitt was along this stretch taking photos of the runners as we all came down the mountain. Around the next bend was the Sunset Fields Aid Station. Once again the volunteers were amazing and within seconds of arrival I had a cup of water and a few pretzels in and I was being pointed in the direction of the Apple Orchard Falls trail.

We were all warned about this next stretch during the pre-race briefing, we were told it was very technical and steep downhill and that we would want to run it fast but if we did we would regret it later on. When I started down I was immediately met with rocks and large tree roots. This part was an exhilarating rush because I have always liked technical trails. I just focused on staying relaxed and keeping my feet underneath me so I didn't taste dirt. This stretch of the race all blended in together for me. I was enjoying the singletrack and just running at a pace I could maintain. Soon this trail turned off onto Cornelius Creek trail and I followed that until I reached the Cornelius Creek aid station. I didn't expect the aid station to come up so soon and then I hear cowbells and cheering and it opens up to a small crowd. I decided to pass up on any food at this aid station since I was due for a GU in a little while. This next stretch was a lot of fun. It began the 8-mile loop portion and started with a 2 mile stretch of downhill road that started as gravel and eventually turned into some concrete. I opened up the pace, but I was afraid to go too fast since I didn't know how long the flat would last. In retrospect I would have pushed the pace a little faster if I knew how long it was. I was started to get tired at this point and thought I saw someone ahead of me. As I got closer, I recognized Josh Gilbert from the RNUTS race series on his mountain bike. It was nice to see a familiar face out in what seemed like the middle of nowhere. After passing him I started making my way closer to Colon Hollow. I soon reached the aid station and I decided to make a quick stop to refill my hydration pack. Fortunately for me the race was sponsored by Tailwind and I had been fueling with Tailwind off and on for about a year so I was confident it would work for me. The heat was starting to get to me at this point and I was struggling to open my hydration bladder. It was a brand new one I had to buy last minute when my last one broke. The volunteers at Promise Land were among the best of any race I've run. In what seemed like seconds they had the pack filled and ready to go. It must have been longer than I realized as another competitor had caught up to me and passed by the aid station. One of the volunteers told me I was in the top 10 and I was ecstatic. Someone offered me some watermelon and a popsicle and at this point in the race I couldn't say no. The watermelon was so refreshing, and I set off back down the trail with my popsicle in hand not wanting to waste any more time.

I had the other runner in sight, and I quickly caught him. He made a comment about me sneaking up on him and we ran together for a minute or so before he started to walk. At this point we were still on a gravel road, I took my next GU while it was relatively flat terrain. When running along Cornelius creek I started to have some GI issues and I was hoping it was just gas and it would be fine. The feeling passed but the GU brought it back out. Within minutes I knew I needed to poop and being on a gravel road I had no options but to squat on the side of the road. I finished and got back on course only for my gut to return to life. I ran off to the side again and as I was mid-poop the other runner comes up along the course and when he sees me, he thanked me for letting him catch up. We talked for another minute and he said it was his second time at Promise Land and warned me to be ready for a hard climb up the falls. Soon after, I was back on the singletrack almost back to Cornelius Creek. We had a creek crossing that was surprisingly deep. I remembered Horton's advice to take advantage of creeks to cool off so I took my time and crossed in a deeper point getting up past my knees in the cold mountain water. Soon after I saw a Volunteer who pointed me in the right direction and said it was an out and back. Moments later, McLane passed me coming back and I realized I was getting close to him. I got excited. I knew he was strong and I'd run well if I could be close to him. Back at Cornelius Creek I got a quick orange peel and some pretzels when Josh came up again. He said I could probably catch McLane so I made it a goal to catch him. I left the aid station and began the long painful climb up Apple Orchard Falls trail and back to Sunset Fields.

Everyone told horror stories of this part of the course as it was very steep, rocky, and had lots of stairs. I told myself I was going to run it as much as I could until it became too technical then I'd power-hike. The first mile was very runnable with nothing more than an incline with roots, no worse than Mill Mountain trails. Then it became very rocky with large boulders. I started to hear what sounded like footsteps and breathing and I thought someone was behind me, every time I looked, I was alone. I'm still not sure if I was hallucinating or if it was just the sound of the woods. Around the next few boulders, I finally caught McLane. He was obviously hurting and I ran with him for a little while before moving on. Soon after I passed Michael Craig. I had talked to him several times leading up to Promise Land and we were both hopeful and excited for the race. He was struggling with some nagging injuries. The last stretch of this climb was the worst. It was very steep. Every muscle fiber in my legs were aching and burning and with every step I seemed to dislodge a rock or step on a loose stick that would cause me to lose balance. Soon the trees started to thin, and I could see a clearing...Sunset Fields! A volunteer was at the edge of the woods yelling encouragement and asking what I needed. I asked for some water and tailwind. I got up there and they had it ready for me. I quickly drank it down and as much as I wanted to take a break for a second after that climb, they ushered me forward along the course.

After climbing for so long, it was a refreshing change to have a small crowd of cowbells and encouraging words. I missed the last trash can by accident and I was still carrying a Styrofoam cup. I hate carrying things when I run but I didn't have a choice. I started down the hill and no more than half a mile later I hit the last uphill of the course. I was told this often feels like one of the hardest climbs and they weren't exaggerating. It wasn't very long but it was steep. After running almost 30 miles, anything will feel hard. I power-hiked this "speed bump" then started to run down the hill again. I knew McLane was close behind as I reached Sunset Fields less than a minute before him. I was running down the Glendale Horse Trail trying to take

advantage of the downhill when McLane caught me. I made the mistake of looking back and almost simultaneously hit a root and rolled across the trail. I grabbed my cup I dropped and kept going after him. About a mile after I took the tumble, I took the last turn off the Horse Trail and passed Overstreet Falls and hit the gravel road. At this point it is a straight shot down the road back to the Promise Land and a little over 2.5 miles. I planned to push it as hard as my body would allow down this hill. When we were climbing this road in the beginning of the race at 5:30am in the dark it felt steep but coming down after 29 miles felt like I was running straight down! The grade was way steeper than I remembered! After about 2 miles I finally made the pass on McLane and tried to hold him off. I was confident that I had him but then hit a wall. At this point I knew we had less than a mile to go and I was running as hard as I could. We passed the squirrel which I hadn't seen until this point and McLane blew by me like I was standing still. I had nothing left in the tank and it was survival at this point. Within a few minutes I made the turn into the Promise Land camp and the Finish Line was in sight. I found an extra gear and crossed the line in 5:13:32, well under goal time of 6 hours and I was told I was officially 7th overall.

Post-Race

As soon as I could breath, I congratulated the other guys ahead of me for their performances and then I got to choose my Patagonia finisher shorts and I also got a polo for finishing top 10. I Spoke to Dr. Horton about the race as we waited for other finishers. Within minutes, others started to run in. Soon Jacob finished also well under our goal time and joined the circle of everyone talking about their races. The post-race atmosphere was probably just as fun as the race itself. I was very fatigued and starting to cramp so I found some water and a small snack then took off my shoes before walking around the finish area. I knew if I sat down then I'd probably get very stiff and not be able to get up easily. This was my first trail ultra so it was great to be able to talk with the others which of most have had more experience. I heard some others say they were surprised I finished after running the Blue Ridge Double Marathon only 7 days before. I was very satisfied and pleased with my finish. I was experiencing a Runner's High stronger than any I've experienced before. After about an hour when I felt like I could manage to eat something, I went to the pavilion and found some chocolate chip cookies and some pizza and sat down in the grass to watch the finishers. The race had a 10-hour cut off and I wanted to stay the whole time. It was amazing to see all the finishers, some first timers, some who had never run a race before, and some seasoned ultramarathoners all finishing. It's never fun to watch someone miss the cutoff and unfortunately there were 8 people who did. The first one finished only 25 seconds over the cutoff time, so close yet so far. After the last official finisher, I volunteered to help pick up trash cans and course markings from the campground. Before I left, I made sure to go talk to Horton again and thank him for putting on an amazing event. He told me he wanted to see me at Hellgate 100k. I have heard many great things about Hellgate but with plans to run a fall marathon I had to leave it up in the air for the time being. All in all, the Promise Land 50k++ was an amazing experience and I enjoyed every second of it from the pre-race briefing to the climb up Apple Orchard Falls to the post-race atmosphere. This race is challenging and the idea of a trail ultramarathon was a scary idea at first but I'm glad I took the challenge. I pushed myself in ways I haven't before and it opened my mind to the ultra-trail running world and now I am hungry for more. I will be back!