

PROMISELAND 2022 50K++ Ultra Marathon Race Report for Marty Winn

BACKSTORY

It's hard to know where to start. Probably not as far back as I'm going to. I've labeled the sections, skip ahead to the race or the rescue for the exciting bits.

I entered my second year at Georgia Tech in 1989 weighing 239. I made a bet with my dad as to who would lose the most weight by the end of the 11-week quarter. I lost 40 pounds, down to 199. I lost another 25 the next quarter. The guitar never did me any good, but the effort did. I ran 23:00 in the 1990 Gasparilla (Tampa) 5K race my only other official race. I ran roads occasionally for the next 4 years and generally maintained fitness until I got married in 1994. I slowly or quickly gained weight after marriage. I had a job, we had 3 kids. I kind of forgot fitness was even a thing. In 2006 we moved from Clearwater, FL to Roanoke, VA for my career. It was good to live on a mountain. I took some small hikes. By 2012 I had started doing some longer hikes with my church friend Ed Page. I surely weighed over 280 pounds then. Ruth started getting into weightlifting and joined an online contest called Burn the Fat, Build the Muscle run by a body builder/author named Tom Venuto. She encouraged me to enter the contests. I did but with no real success.

But something happened that stuck with me. I was on the longest hike of my life from McAfee Knob to Tinker Cliffs. It's 14 miles and 3000' elevation gain. We are half-way through this exhausting hike and this guy in shorts blows past us. Running. Stupefying. I had no idea that someone would or even run this far, this high, on a trail. There was no shortcut to get here. He was in the middle of a run that had to be at least 14 miles, maybe more. What a legend. This must be the most amazing thing I had ever seen. Later as I was going down the steep steps of Andy Layne trail a group of at least 4 runners comes flying down the steps. Lunacy. I didn't forget them.

In 2014 I had to move to Georgia for job reasons. I hated it but a great thing happened. May 2016, I joined a BTF challenge. I weighed an all-time high of 305 pounds. In 98 days, I lost nearly 50 pounds. I got 3rd place. I started running 5Ks in my neighborhood. We did everything we could to move our family back to Roanoke/Salem, Virginia in 2017. It wasn't much longer before I got my weight down into a zone of 210-240. Now back in Virginia I was all about hiking. I remembered those crazy people I saw running on trails. I wanted to be one too. I started trying to run trails. Figured out that you shouldn't wear boots. I turned my ankles constantly, but they got stronger. I figured out that you don't have to run all of the uphill's or even most of them. You can go further on a hike if you run it and see more incredible things.

RVTR

Somehow, I found a Facebook group called Roanoke Valley Trail Runners. They had a contest that was basically who can do this 11-mile 3000' section of North Mountain 50 times first. Insane. Who would want to? I asked why don't we do all the trails once instead of one trail 50 times? I was told it was too much record keeping. No one would be willing to track that. I volunteered, was made an administrator and in 2020 ran the contest. 30+ people participated. 4 finished the 207 trails. I got second place. Somehow, I let my weight get back up to 240. I entered another BTF contest and won it. Got my weight under 195 for the first time in 30 years or so. I had lost 110 pounds total. I'm now running another RVTR challenge to run the top 100 local trails in the Roanoke area. But that's all backstory. Possibly unnecessary.

Ed McKeown has been my greatest trail running encourager. He started filling my mind with legends of local races. He told me about Promise Land. That was too much. He told me about an unofficial race he directs, the Mountain Miserous race that goes through North Mountain and Carvins Cove. I showed up to see the celebration at the end of the 2020 race but did not participate. In 2021 Ed asked me out on a run and we did a 21-mile group run from 311 to 220. It was exhausting but I made it. In November 2021 I completed the 50K (32.8 mile, 6000' race). I was a broken man at the end, we had people cheering us to the finish and I was overcome by emotions at what I had done and about the friends who encouraged me and got me to this point. I decided I was ready to try Promise Land. I knew it was tougher, steeper, and had a time limit. I signed up as soon as they started taking entrants. I trained hard.

INJURY

On March 10, about 6 weeks ago I went on a trail run out my back door to the ridge of Fort Lewis Mountain, down the other side, back up, and home. Almost 9 miles and 3000'. Exactly the kind of thing that Promise Land finishers should be doing. But something went wrong. I didn't feel the moment, but I aggravated a 3-year-old injury in my right heel. Plantar fasciitis. It was bad and it was in no hurry to go away. I could have completed Promise Land before that day. I had a dilemma. Rest it and lose fitness or run through it. I split the difference. My wife Ruth has gotten into hiking with me and trail running too. This was kind of perfect so we can spend time together but also because her pace was pretty close to my new injured pace. Maybe I was getting better slowly. Each run was punished with a couple days of limping around. Every trip to the bathroom at night required hobbling. I saw a chiropractor and got his advice on treatment and stretches. I did those. I also experimented with different combinations of orthotic inserts and heel cups. This might have caused even more problems. I went back to relatively cheap and flexible inserts and a plastic right heel cup.

RACE PREPARATION

I took 3 different trips out to the race site to become familiar with the beautiful trails, so I wouldn't get lost, so there would be no surprises. To plan. No one ever planned like I did. Probably others planned smarter, but surely not as much. I broke the trails into segments and decided how fast I needed to run each part. I still believe Horton is way off on some segment distances. The segment to Reed Creek is 7.3 miles, not 5.9 miles. The next segment to Sunset Fields is 4.0 miles, not 3.39 miles. From Colon Hollow to Cornelius Creek is 5.5 miles, not 4.63. And most painfully the trip up from there to the Sunset Fields the second time is closer to 3.65 miles than 2.79 miles. I recognize that Strava exaggerates but not that much and these particular segments are particularly badly estimated. But I compared Strava to Gaia to Horton and I went in knowing his numbers were wrong and I needed to play by actuality. So, when he said I need to do the first 11.94 miles in 3:45, I knew he meant 14.2 miles. The second cutoff was at 23.89, but really 27.04 in 8 hours and the finish was really 35.64, not 31.75 in 10 hours. But I knew that and planned for it.

On April 12 I had an online chat with my race coaches Ed McKeown and Greg James. I listed my Promise Land Race goals: 1) Make it home alive at end of the day 2) Don't be injured in a way that is not gone after a week. 3) Finish the course 4) Don't get DQ'ed, finish the course in 10 hours 5) Have fun 6) Don't be a cripple at the finish line (heel or cramps or utter exhaustion or blisters) 7) Maybe finish faster than 10 hours 8) Don't win stupid award. 9) Don't win best blood award.

I took 6 days off leading up to the big race April 23. I'll skip ahead and say that for whatever reason my heel did better than I could have ever expected. 2 days before the race I got a bunch of sleep. Well, done. I know I had to be up at 2AM the next morning to get to the race. I spent Friday after work cooking bacon, making sandwiches for the race, having everything in place to minimize my time in the morning. I don't sleep well in tents. I decided 4 hours in my bed was better than what I would get on site. I needed to be there at 4:30 to register for the 5:30 race. It was a 69-minute drive that I had done once before. Working backwards I needed to wake at 2AM to leave at 2:50, to arrive at 4:00, to be safe.

PACK

Almost everyone tells me I'm making a mistake here. Part of it was that I can't or didn't trust the aid stations. I don't like water bladders. I like 2-liter bottles that I can freeze and have cold water. Yes, I have to slip the pack off and get the bottle, but I do that when I'm hiking uphill. I'm a big guy and I need a lot of water. At the end of Mount Miserous I had bad leg cramps. I've been experimenting with Crystal Light lemonade packets that have electrolytes and caffeine in them. As best as I could tell that had been helping but then I don't go over 20 miles to test it very often. So, I eventually decided on three 2-liter bottles 40% full of frozen water with 2 packets of lemonade powder dumped in. Last second, I added water to fill one bottle. As I came to aid stations, I added water to the ice bottles. I started with about a gallon of water. 8.4 pounds. I also carried a 9-ounce phone charger. If it doesn't get on Strava it didn't happen. My phone has proven it won't make it. I packed 5 oranges. 4 of them were gone by mile 10. I had other light stuff, windbreaker, hat, spare socks, medical supplies, TP, Vaseline, band aids, more

lemonade, tape. Jellybeans were a mistake, so also was a cookie and nuts. I had heard stories of people struggling to ingest food and I experienced that for the first time. I packed 2 pot roast sandwiches and a cheddar sandwich. Did not touch them. I allowed myself to have candy and chocolate for the first time in 6 years as a race day only thing. Figured they were available at the aid stations, and they would convert to energy faster than sandwiches. I also packed a bunch of bacon - salt and calories but ended up not having much. Instead of wearing a sleek water bladder backpack I have a bulkier high schooler looking backpack. It doesn't actually weigh more empty but it can carry stuff. David Horton drove past me on his way to aid station 1 in the dark and yelled that my pack was too big. What does he know anyway? :) He's only finished the Barkley Marathon's and held the AT and PCT time records. So, yeah, I can probably improve here.

Weather. Just a couple weeks ago it was snowing/sleeting on us. Race day was far and away the hottest day of the year. Don't know what it got up to locally but in Roanoke it got to at least 86. That didn't help. Honestly, I didn't feel the heat much but I'm sure it took it out of me in terms of how much I sweated, calories burned, and how much energy I had, probably also cramps.

Clothes/body - I clipped my nails. I put Vaseline on my ankles and between toes (no blisters), I did end up feeling the sharp pounding on the front of my feet from the rocks but not too bad, I found corn pads that fit nicely on my nipples and then band aids on those. I'm not sure exactly when those got lost but it was late enough that chaffing wasn't a problem. The thing I did wrong for the 2nd time is that my underwear cut a 6-inch gash in my back at the belt line. Too tight or maybe should be wearing running shorts with no underwear at all. I wore Nike water wicking shorts that are sort of mid-thigh. I smartly wore a wicking top with short sleeves. I've done sleeveless before and had my backpack rub me raw. It was actually 48F at race start so it was chilly, and I had my light windbreaker on until 10 minutes before start. Greg James insisted that I try Swiftwick socks. \$20 for socks, gack. I had sworn my wool socks. I've struggled with heel blisters, but I have to admit that I have had no problems since using Swiftwick. The compression on calves probably helps. Not sure. I get awful poison ivy for about 4 months every summer because I insist on wearing shorts as I hike/run my ivy-covered mountain. But it's just a bit early for that yet. I have experimented with a bunch of different brands of trail running shoes that sell for 2 figures instead of 3. Asics, Reeboks, Fila, and a few others failed me. New Balance Trail Runners work for me. I used those. I also committed to just walking through creeks instead of wasting time and maybe falling trying to find dry passage. The ice-cold water might help my foot and it doesn't take long for the shoes to dry out.

Night before. My oldest son throws a party in the basement. But it is a relatively quiet one. My middle son agrees to pick up my young daughter at work at 10 PM. I fall asleep soon after 10.

MORNING OF RACE

Excited I wake up instantly with my 2 AM alarm. I have a list telling me everything I need to do and pack. It goes flawlessly, even putting in contacts at this time of night was a breeze. I'm ready early. Eat egg casserole for breakfast as planned grab all my trail food and supplies. Leave home at probably 2:45. Navigate flawlessly through Bedford arrive at camp at about 3:50. Discover no one is up to receive me. There are about 50 entire uneaten Dominoes pizzas. The thing that went wrong is that my phone did not charge on the drive. I got back in the car and charged it from 80% back to 95%. I rest. My brain is either working overtime or barely at all. I have no interest in listening to music/podcasts/sermons. I'm with my thoughts. Praying. Horton's voice sounds at about 4:25 waking the tent villagers telling them they need to get numbers and check in. I'm among the first in line. I get my number 325 (of 328). Apparently, I'm not being seeded very highly. And that is fair. I'm a 52-year-old guy that has never finished an official race. I grab a T-shirt. I introduce myself to David Horton. He seems to recognize me, says something about me being the guy who over-thinks everything. Yeah, that's me. I tagged him on a Facebook post about the course. Says he hopes to see me at the finish line. I say high to Zach Davis who did the fastest 50-mile Mount Miserous and just flew past me as I was broken down. I talked to him about his lack of poles. He says this race is too short for poles. I made an effort to Strava befriend a bunch of participants in advance to see what they were up to, be inspired, and maybe recognize some people at the race. I introduced myself to Helen McDermott. Tom Pluim did the same to me before race. 10 minutes before the race they have us line up behind the start line. I finally found my group of RVTR trail runners at the back. Seth Thomas was first; he just did the GJB Podcast (by Greg James). I was episode #35 of that if this was not enough backstory for you. I asked him if his podcast would be inspirational enough to get me through the race. Greg James shows up. He's one of my 2 race coaches along with Ed McKeown (who had to be off in Georgia for the Shadows of the South race), he's been a great encourager and answerer of questions. Also showing up Dru Sexton who turns 70 this week and is just amazing, plus Jack Bugo and Kristen Eccleton who were my 3rd and 4th place finishers in the All the Trails Challenge in 2020. Amazing runners all. Dru warns me that everyone runs at first and then figures out it's a hike. I had planned to walk at the start knowing that it was uphill, and I don't have nearly enough running in my legs to waste it on this part. But I'm prone to peer pressure.

THE RACE

There was a prayer and the singing of the national anthem. I don't remember a whistle or a shot or a lit cigarette, but at some point, we all started moving (but not before kicking off Strava and Gaia). I'm floating along through the campground, onto the paved road that I worried would hurt my heels. I have my headlamp but not on. I have my iPod shuffle but not on. I think I'm by Dru for a bit but I'm not sure. It's kind of majestic this stream of headlamps in front of me lighting the way along the narrow road. Within 5 minutes it turns to gravel, and it becomes apparent that it is uphill and kind of steep. None of this is a surprise to me. It's going to be a pretty steady 2200' incline over the next 4.5 miles. What's new is being packed in and navigating by people carrying poles or who are taking the smoothest route, when do you pass, when do you hang back, why haven't I started hiking yet? As warned, after a mile, we all must get over as 2 trucks, one with Josh from Carilion Hospital (who we get to meet later), and the other with race Director David Horton drive past. Horton picks me out and yells to me that my pack is too heavy. There are many awards given for finishers. Tops in time for age groups and sexes but also won

for Best Blood and the one I was hoping for Dumbest. I was off to a good start. My guess is that there were about 50 people behind me and 270 in front of me as we arrived at the first aid station (2.82 miles, 43:18, Overstreet Falls) which I skipped but called out my number to. I had planned 18-minute miles for this section but did the first 3 in 13:03, 15:32, and 18:04. The elevations gains were 293', 506', and 729'. It was still tightly packed. After the aid station you get on a rocky trail that switches back often up through mile 4.5 which is where the trail forks. (Mile 4 16:18, +459') To the left is where you come from when finishing. To the right is the trail to Reed Creek Aid Station around the mountain. It is also where the downhill starts. It can also be argued that this is the only fun part of the course. Finally get to run, still fresh, the sun is rising and it's beautiful. I came out to this trail at the end of last summer and it was stupid overgrown. 6-foot-high weeds and briars for 8, 10 miles straight. Maybe dumbest run of my life. But in early spring it's beautiful. Weave around the mountains either maintaining elevation or slowly sinking. We go from 3500' down to 2600' over 3.7 miles, then it gradually heads back uphill to the aid station at 3100' 10.1 miles out. A voice behind me says, "Marty Winn" sounds like Greg James who likes to call me by my full name. I say Greg James what are you doing still behind me. Then I bearded guy pulls up with me and I apologize and say, you aren't Greg, he agrees and says it's Will Gray (who was in my All the Trails Challenge and I had met a couple times). I knew he was a better runner than me from that and even if I didn't know it would have been a fair guess. I stayed near him for about 2.5 miles almost to the Blue Ridge Parkway. At one point I surprised him when he was trying to pee by a tree while I had my camera out taking photos. I observed that I was getting passed while running the flat sections or the downhills but if it was uphill, I was passing people or at least maintaining my place. I'm a better hiker than runner. Miles 5-8 were the best running 14:08 15', 11:11 -211', 10:35 -283, and 11:29 -90'. Miles 9 and 10 are mildly uphill into Aid Station #2 14:52 209', 13:46 162'. I wanted to do this section at a 15-minute pace. You might say, Yea Marty, you are going faster than planned but probably that isn't good because I am working through my limited energy too fast. Maybe there was never enough energy no matter how I budgeted it. I don't know.

I stopped for the Reed Creek Aid station (10.13 miles, 2:22:42). A volunteer kid pointed me in the right direction and tried to encourage me with a "good job sir" which mostly just reminds me of my age. I filled up water bottle #2 that already had a block of ice and lemonade in it. I grabbed 2 miniature Hershey bars and an overcooked piece of bacon. Oh, and a banana. In total I would eat 4 bananas trying to get potassium and calories. This was my first chocolate in 6 years. I was quick in the aid station. It was uphill so I was hiking fast. I tried to keep pace by keeping up with Will Gray in front of me for a mile or 2 of this near constant trek uphill. Finally, I could see the shape of the Blue Ridge Parkway above me. I got there and crossed it being mindful that my brain is not at full capacity. There are really no cars coming. This is where you can park to easily summit Apple Orchard Falls on the AT and see the giant golf ball on top. It's amazing how far away this golf ball would look later in the day from about mile 24. We passed through some gates and onto a gravel road that went uphill to the high spot on the course of almost 4000'. Then it was surprisingly steep and long downhill on the gravel road. I mostly ran this portion but mixed in a bit of walking. This was my last "fast" stretch coming into Sunset Fields aid station (#3). I had been somewhat worried about making the 3:45 cutoff for this station but I got there 23 minutes early (14.12 miles, 3:21:55). There were cars parked all along the gravel road from station workers, friends/family, etc. This was the place to come to cheer on the runners. There were a few cheers/words of encouragement for me as I passed by. This is a beautiful overlook. I didn't stay long at the aid station.

I topped off a water bottle, grabbed some orange slices and some banana, I think. I wasn't dead at this point. Mile 11 17:10 284', Mile 12 16:32, 340', Mile 13 16:12 183', Mile 14 11:25 -404'.

Now the descent. It's a shame. You work so hard to earn those elevation feet/points. Now is when you are supposed to be able to cash them in. And the best, youngest, and healthiest runners can do that but if it's too steep or too rocky you just can't run full steam. You should be able to just coast for a long time on this section. But it's rocky and steep. It would be easy to fall and get hurt, the landings are painful. You get some of that here, but you really get it alongside Cornelius Creek. I find that I have to land on my heel running upright to insure I don't fall. This is hard on the legs and is slower than it should be. It's a risk that I'm not prepared to take. This is high intensity time; every step must be watched carefully for the right place to land so you don't slip or trip or turn an ankle. This is where one realizes they can't just be a nature lover/hiker observing the beauty around you. One or the other, not both. I should mention also that I usually run listening to podcasts or sermons. Something that keeps the mind engaged, makes the time pass. But I started the day with nothing in my ears. Eventually around maybe mile 5 I put on music on shuffle. I found that my mind was not clear enough to think about anything. I expected to be taking more pictures as I ran and looking at my prepared charts and GPS programs to track my progress. But my mind was in a limited mode that was doing all it could to keep me moving forward on track, upright.

The course was well marked and really one should not ever take a wrong turn, but I thought the easiest place to go wrong would have been to take a left turn on the AT soon after leaving aid station #3. After .7 miles I turned on Connector Trail. This was my last chance to get lapped by the leaders who would soon be appearing uphill at this same spot on their way to the finish. I was saved the indignity of that happening. I understand Michael Owen won the race again in a time I think a bit under 5 hours. Rachel Spaulding I was told had a rough day and finished merely 2nd among women. I had hoped to see her but never did. Connector trail gets you across a ridge in a mostly downhill way over towards Cornelius Creek. It had some mushy places to cross. It also has probably the hardest, rockiest downhill run of the whole course. It's awful. Fortunately, this is when Greg James showed up. His experience had taught him to take it easy (especially after doing the Blue Ridge Marathon the previous Saturday). He had no business being behind me. He took a minute to let me take a selfie with him and encourage me. There is a spur trail that will take you up to the AT along the way. This may be where Cornelius Creek Trail begins or maybe it is when you actually get to the creek. It's all downhill here. Very pretty waterfalls but the running is so intense that it is hard to notice. There are a few bridges and a couple of spots that need bridges. I had committed to walking through the creeks and enjoying the cold water on my feet and I did just that at least twice. Finally, I pulled into the lower parking lot and the Cornelius Aid Station #4. It also is station #6 on the opposite side. They were very organized, and I was clearly assigned a helper who helped and rushed me out. Told me I was on a 9-hour pace and that I needed to just keep moving. Easier said than done. I got him to fill up a water. I also swallowed a handful of salt, grabbed some M&Ms, bananas, gummy bears, and best of all a popsicle. This station was at 18.47 miles and 4:34:43. I was about 12 minutes ahead of schedule at this point. This was easily the segment with the most downhill. Mile 15 17:32 -635', Mile 16 15:04 -98', Mile 17 17:54 -570, Mile 18 16:35 -528. I had wanted to do 15-minute miles but couldn't/didn't.

This segment was one that I did not look forward to. It's wide gravel road that goes gently downhill along North Creek Road. It's perfect for making record time and the creek that runs along it is beautiful. It's about 2 miles before you turn off the road and back onto a single wide trail and the end of it has asphalt that my joints want no part of. I had given myself permission to walk this part in advance. Well nature began to call in a serious way. No one appeared to be around. I found a pretty wide tree about 20 feet off the road. If you run far enough this is inevitable and I was prepared with TP and grocery bags. As I was finishing my business of course a woman runner shows up. She had the decency to pretend to not notice me. I got my backpack back on and grabbed my water bottle. It was at this moment that 2 or 3 more runners showed up running together. Ed McKeown had told me to look for a friend of his and this was the moment. Apparently, I wasn't looking too hot, Christiann couldn't even tell I was a runner until she saw my number. She made sure I was okay and continued on. I was able to momentarily catch them at the next aid station. I was still able to make a little progress hiking uphill. It's about 1.2 miles from road to Colon Hollow Aid Station #5. I got there in 5:30:22, mile 21.62. Mile 19 16:11 -293', Mile 20 12:47 -150', Mile 21 18:08 -23'.

At this aid station I got more water popsicle, and banana. This next segment just feels like it wanders around on the side of a mountain forever not really going anywhere. It eventually returns to the lower parking lot but in a much more circuitous way. This is another segment that Horton way underestimates. which is discouraging but I knew what the reality was in advance. It was 5.4 miles, not 4.63. I needed to get there by 8:00 which was frankly easy. I really needed to be there by 7:00 to actually finish the race in 10:00. There were plastic ribbons to keep you on the right track and even a guy in a chair pointing the way. The crowds had thinned a lot by now (most everyone was in front of me by now). But still I would occasionally get passed by people who had done a better job pacing themselves. Them running while I was walking. At some point there is a beautiful view up towards Apple Orchard Mountain. It is unbelievably far away. I had been there earlier that morning and I would have to return there and then more if I was to finish the race. This seemed an awesome if not impossible task that laid before me. I did some more self-assessment about how much energy I had left. Basically, at best all my energy was needed just to get there, forget getting there fast. It was all walking and hiking from here. If I was feeling it, I could run some of the last 4.5 miles down to the finish line if I had miscalculated and actually had some running energy left. This was a slog. I wasn't dead yet. But the day that started at 48F was now getting hot. I had long ago slipped on my hat. The trees had so recently been bare did not really have any/many leaves to offer shade. It got up to 86F eventually, not sure how hot it was then but it was sapping my energy. Somewhere in here Strava tells me that I've finished a marathon 26.2 miles in 6:47:13. My 2nd fastest time ever.

There is a point where you finally get to the creek that flows down from Apple Orchard falls and you turn back downhill towards the aid station. It was muddy. Everything was hard. Finally, the wide North Creek Crossing. There used to be a bridge here but not for many years. I had already figured out that I was just wading across. I should have laid down in it and floated to the aid station. But I continued on to the aid station well under the written cut-off time, but it would become obvious that my condition was dire. Aid station #6 was at 27.13 miles, I got there 7:04:54. I've got 2:55 to do 9 miles. A challenge, but

possible (later I learn, and witness Horton was watching and counting people finishing up to at least 10:40 on the clock). Exactly as planned. Except that I planned to not be completely spent at this point. Mile 22 21:52 390', Mile 23 16:00 -45', Mile 24 16:48 225', Mile 25 17:57 185', Mile 26 16:28 -68', Mile 27 18:53 -368'.

I pull into the aid station. 27.1 miles. There is a friendly face Caleb Johnson is there to help me. I get light-headed, and they grab a chair for me to sit in. Both legs go into full cramp spasm. Quads and calves. Caleb starts to rub, and I scream in agony. He stops. He gets me a pair of salt pills and urges me to leave some weight behind. I can't do it. I need all the water that was providing any weight to get up that hill. He tells me I have to keep moving if I can make it. I have been pounding electrolytes all day. For the first time in 6 years, I have eaten sugar/candy/chocolate. Trying to get calories in me. I get him to mix me some new lemonade. I take a banana. This is the worst and the best of the course. 4 miles of the steepest climbs beside a beautiful creek, some beautiful waterfalls.

I get up. Every stair step risks a cramp. I see and speak to a couple of other struggling runners/hikers. We agree this is awful. But I want to finish so bad. Amazingly I did mile 28 in 25:03 233'

I make it to 28.7. Only a half-mile to falls. My heart rate is out of control. Every stair step is cramp inducing. I decide to lay down by the trail. Rest. Get my heart rate into control. Don't become Andy Dalton (a beloved local RVTR runner who had a heart attack and died at the end of a race within the year). I don't know how long I lay there 30 minutes, 40 minutes? I checked my Fitbit heart rate. It slowly dropped from 130 to 100. But this is crazy. I've been resting. Where is my 55-60 bpm? I'm still a bit dizzy. I'm praying. 3 or 4 runners go by and check on me. Sympathize. It becomes obvious that I'm not going to make it. I need an exit strategy. I don't have cell coverage. I know I don't get it downhill at Cornelius and I also don't know if the aid station will still exist. I do know that I get coverage up at the falls and at BRP where I can get a ride. I trudge uphill. Make it to 28.9. Rest a long time again. I wish I knew how long I rested each time, but I don't Strava tells me I was at 28.7 miles at 7:45:35 and at 29.0 miles the time was 8:36:17 so it took me 51 minutes to do 0.3 miles.

I make another push up to the falls at 29.2. There are 3 people there taking engagement photos at the falls. I was able to text Ruth from here. She asks if I'm sure I can't finish, just push on, even if I don't make the 10-hour cutoff. It will be a moral victory. I was surprised this was her response. I appreciated that she understood how important this was to me. I told her that I'm just trying to come home alive at this point, to help her understand my condition better. Finally, I push up the stairs above the falls. It is now an hour after I first laid down (Strava telling me this). I've done a half mile. I finally make it to the upper, smaller falls. If I had it to do over, I would have just gotten in the falls. I heard about someone who did that, revived, and finished. But relatively speaking I was doing well. I pushed on to 30.0. Laid down.

THE RESCUE

It wasn't too long before 2 guys show up from above - Josh from Carilion and another guy. They've got water. I'm not out, but low. Soon #294 shows up with the sweeper. He's being pushed up the mountain. The sweeper was a fit, gray woman, I think named Rebekah. Maybe. He was about 30 and possibly in worse shape than me. Talking about legs locking out with cramps. His wife is waiting at BRP. We go on. I'm faster, the sweeper comes with me and Josh escorts #294 (Greg Sabella). Apparently, #290 (Larry Thibodeau) is out there somewhere too. They have walkie-talkies. Other's DNF but they were wise enough to quit/fail at aid stations or with friends or somewhere they caused less drama. I was faster than 294 and made it up to the BRP. Aid station #7 was being taken down. There was a wife of 294. Before long 294 and Josh show up. The other guy shows up with the truck that was parked elsewhere Parkers Gap Road, I think. I lay down and rest. Safe. Finished. 30.74 miles in 9:48:46. 7281' elevation gain, 6625 calories burned, 7:29:39 moving time. Strava can't be trusted on this kind of thing, but it thinks I spent 2:19 not moving. Mile 29 65:06 486', Mile 30 41:05 691', Mile 31 0.74 miles, 47:23 pace, 545'.

Anyway, Josh drives me back to the start/finish down a mildly terrifying steep/rocky road that eventually hits Overstreet Falls and finishes along the first/last 2.7 miles of the course. We see at least 5 people still in the process of finishing. I ask to be dropped at the pavilion. I thank Josh and warn him that I'm going to scream as I get out of the car because of cramps. I lay down at the pavilion by the finish line and watch David Horton at work. I see a guy finish his 100th ultra. I meet the Coccia twins and talk to them. I thank Horton and ask for a picture. He had told me at 4:30 am that he looks forward to seeing me at the finish line. This time he says he hopes to see me try it again next year. After 30 or 40 minutes of this, I gather strength, limp to the car, and drive home.

TAKE-AWAYS

I was very discouraged at the time. Questioned running, especially ultras. The heart stuff and heavy breathing freaked me out. I did not sleep well Saturday night because of this. Finally, Sunday afternoon I was feeling almost normal again heart rate and breathing rate-wise. This sounds bad but I was encouraged reading about some of the struggles my friends and other runners had on this hot day. I'm not sure what caused my problem, but it was probably a number of things coming together at once. The first hot day of the year, at least 6 weeks of not being able to train like I wanted because my heel hurt my fitness level. Encouraging was that with 6 days of rest my heel did so much better than I could have expected. It was weird (and I have read others say similar thing) my lack of appetite. How I struggled to get calories down me. I had sandwiches that had been great on hikes that made me nauseous to think of eating on the run. Maybe it was eating sugar unusually. I figured that would hit my system quicker than bacon or cheese or some fatty non-carb type thing that I usually eat. Surely, I carried too much weight. I started with 3 two-liter bottles. Each was almost half full of frozen water/ice so that they would melt, or water could go on top of from aid stations. One of these I filled with liquid water. So, at the start, I had a

gallon of water. 8.3 pounds. I had my battery charger that is 9 ounces. I had a light jacket, socks, band aids, my headlamp, a couple sandwiches, some jellybeans and 5 oranges (that were gone by mile 10). After mile 14 I was usually carrying about 2 liters of water. 4 pounds. Yeah, it looks bulky, and it started heavy.

Monday I'm still limping around. Amazed at how tight my legs still are. I always take the stairs at work. Not today. Calves and thighs are so tired. I was able to take a slow 5K 800' hike in the evening but couldn't dream of jogging yet. I've done some stretching and icing.

THANKS & THE FUTURE

Thanks to everyone who put on this race especially David Horton, to the other runners, and friends and family who and RVTR people who have encouraged me. I'm glad to be able to do what I did today even though it was not all that I hoped to achieve. I can now look ahead and see that I want to try again. Next time hopefully smarter, fitter, less injured, and maybe a bit more fortunate with weather. I'll try to participate in a number of free/cheap lower stress 15 mile to Ultra-type distance runs over the next year and to get my body all healed up.