

I only started running about 10 years ago. At that time my eldest child was two and after playing with her on the floor I would have difficulty getting up because I was so out of shape and overweight. My family was at the beach in Florida for two weeks and I started running there hoping to improve my health. I remember running on the beach and on some paved trails and being lucky to make it 200 yards before I was out of breath, by the end of the two weeks I could make it maybe half a mile without stopping. The good news is that when I returned home to Roanoke I kept it up. I remember running on the greenway, the absolute flattest place to run in this area and thinking how hard it was to run on compared to the paper flat Florida coast. Yesterday, the day after finishing what may or may not have been my first 50k ultramarathon, I was right back to square one. I got down on the floor to play with our 5-month old foster baby and it took everything I had to return to my feet, just like before I started running, of course I had run a lot farther than 200 yards.

Well was the Promise Land 50k my first ultramarathon or not? Last November I ran a 32 mile run that was organized by a friend here in Roanoke, Ed McKeown. The race used our local trails, it was self-timed, there were no cut offs and you could start whenever you liked. It was unsupported except for one aid station that was put together by some wonderful friends at mile 20. There was a finish line and there were people there cheering and congratulating the finishers. It was a blast and at the time I considered it my first ultramarathon, it was definitely the first time I had ever run over 26.2 miles. As I got closer to Promise Land race day it got fuzzy in my mind whether it counted or not. When Dr. David Horton, the race director, asked participants if it was their first ultramarathon, I raised my hand. I was quickly corrected by a friend who said it wasn't my first. Regardless, Promise Land 50k would be my first "official" 50k ultramarathon. Whether it was my first ultramarathon or not, I am extremely inexperienced at running long distances. Also, because of the aforementioned 5-month old foster baby, not to mention my other three kids, I didn't have a lot of free time to dedicate to preparing myself for this race. Not exactly the prime ingredients for successful ultramarathon preparation. Still I took my naivety and excitement and dove in somewhere between whole and half heartedly and the following is what occurred.

If you have never run the Promise Land 50k or hiked or run the trails of Bedford and Botetourt counties around Apple Orchard Mountain where the race takes place, you should make an effort to come and check them out, they are quite simply amazing. Simple math tells you that if a 5K is 3.1 miles then a 50K should be 31 miles. Well this race is 34 miles, almost 10% longer, it's practically 55K. This course is breathtakingly beautiful, especially in the spring. The word that comes to mind when describing the course is verdant, which is just a fancy way of saying green. There is beautiful green flora everywhere you look. I did some digging and determined that the English word verdant is derived from the French word for green "vert." This is particularly appropriate because this course in addition to being green also provides over 7400 feet of elevation gain, so in addition to lots of French vert (turns out this is pronounced "vehr" but I'm from the south so give me some grace here) , there is also lots of good old fashioned American vert as well. Almost twice as much as I have ever done in one day.

Even though I live relatively close to the start and finish line of the race, I decided to camp out the night before. As soon as I arrived I headed over to the shelter to register and get my race bib. Then I returned to my car where I was sleeping that night. Upon closer inspection I realized that I had parked directly on top of a deer carcass that had been chopped to bits by the bush hog or mower that had recently mowed the field. It appeared to have been fully decomposed so there was no smell, but there were bones of all shapes and sizes spread out over my whole area. I then headed back to the shelter and made it for the tail end of the pizza dinner, just in time to hear Dr. Horton's famous race briefing, which is half roast/half necessary information and all fun. Post briefing most of my friends that were racing headed back to their campsites. Before our group broke up I jokingly asked these friends if they thought my deer carcass was good luck or bad luck. I could tell they were unsure but they were kind and all said it was good luck. Back at my car, I made my final preparations for race day, organized my pack, pinned my bib on my shorts, and got everything in order for sleep and race morning. I then sat out for a while and chatted with my neighbors who were from Richmond, two of whom were also running their first Promise Land.

I went to bed relatively early for me, around 9:30 PM and I was surprised at how quiet the camp was considering how many people were there. My car is about 2-3 inches too short to stretch all the way out, and this combined with my nervousness ensured a fitful night of sleep. When my alarm went off at 4:16 I felt like I had just fallen asleep. I quickly fixed my cup of coffee and got my race outfit on and headed over to check in and to use the bathrooms. I had forgotten to



download any music for the race but the song "Fill Me Up" by United Pursuit was echoing in my head as I made my way to the facilities. I love that song and just mumbling it quietly to myself got me pumped for the day ahead. The lyrics were very appropriate as I would certainly need to be filled with some supernatural energy to complete this race. The Roanoke Valley Trail Runners had planned to meet at 5:15 to take a group photo so I made it to the start line for that photo and then before I knew it the race was about to begin, we prayed, sang the national

anthem and off we went.

I had been nervous in the days leading up to the race, but race morning I was too busy for nerves. The time between 4:16 when my alarm went off and 5:30 when the race started flew by

in a flash. I had lost all my friends in the frenzy of the start so as we headed up Overstreet Creek Road I was by myself (in a crowd of 300+). Dr. Horton had warned us that if a truck came up the road behind us it would be him heading to the aid stations and that we should move to the right to let him pass, if we didn't move over there was some threat of being hit in the head by a stick or goad or cattle prod or something (this may or may not have been a joke). To avoid this, I tried to stay as far to the right as possible (I have no recollection of a car ever passing). Eventually I spotted one of my favorite running friends, Dru Sexton, as she passed me on my left. She would go on to complete her 15th Promise Land and the first ever by a woman over the age of 70. In addition to being a huge inspiration to me, she is also one of the people who most strongly encouraged me to sign up and run this race. She had so much more confidence in me than I did and I am so thankful to her for her wisdom and support.

I ran with Dru for the next couple of miles, and as always they flew by as we talked. We met up with some other Roanoke area friends during this time; Keya Price, Heather Stokes, and Matt Warner. When we hit the first aid station our little group got split up as we went from the wide gravel road to single track trail for a couple of miles. I did manage to stick with Keya and Heather for the remainder of the initial climb. This was also Heather's first ultramarathon, but Keya has run a bunch, even a 100 miler. Though she was the youngest of the three of us, she has by far the most experience. I don't know if they had planned to run together ahead of time but somehow I attached myself to their group and we worked together for most of the rest of the race. They really pushed me the whole way, they are both such strong runners. I knew from Strava they were both ready for great races. I don't think I would have had anywhere near as good of a day (performance wise or enjoyment wise) without them.

After the initial climb things level off for a bit and we picked up the pace on grassy gravel fire roads. It was about this time that I hoped we would have a beautiful ridgetop sun rise, but the weather made that nonexistent. It was cool to see the misty fog as we climbed toward the highest point on the course near the summit of Apple Orchard Mountain. We had been told beforehand that aid station number 2 wouldn't be there today, so we were not surprised when we got to the short out and back where aid station 2 usually resides and it wasn't there. There was one runner slightly in front of us that was surprised, because rather than touch the gate and turn around like you are meant to, he kept going along the road past the gate and out of sight. We were screaming for him at the top of our lungs to no avail. One runner, I believe it was Ryan Minor, took off after him. He passed us later in the day, and said that he had caught the runner and got him to turn around. I told him how amazing his actions were. I think he represents the best of what trail running and trail runners represent. So many are willing to sacrifice their time and performance to help others out, show them a new trail, support a long run, make helpful suggestions, volunteer at an aid station (thank you so much to all the volunteers, you guys are amazing) or run at full speed an extra $\frac{1}{4}$ mile to stop someone they have never met from making a huge mistake. This race has an award for the person who makes the dumbest mistake, and the person who won this year is a friend who had made a similar mistake to this gentleman but was not stopped before it was too late. They should also have the most selfless award for the person who sacrifices his or her performance to help someone else. This guy certainly qualifies, but many others do as well. Rather than running their fastest possible race,

they assist and encourage other less experienced or talented runners helping them make their way through the course for the first time. There were countless people who did this for me and I can't thank them enough.

Not too long after this we passed over the Parkway and hit the new and improved aid station 2, I refilled my bottles, drank some pickle juice, ate a few chips and a hunk of potato dipped in salt and off we headed. From here it was a mostly gentle downhill of about 2 miles to aid station 3 at Sunset Fields which is at mile 13. I didn't need much at this aid station because it was so soon on the heels of the last. We quickly headed off into what has been coined the dark side of the course. The dark side begins with a tricky, technical downhill run on rocky, rooty trails. Some parts are extremely steep with treacherous footing. Even though it is downhill it was still not possible to run particularly fast. This part of the course is incredible, these are some of my favorite types of trails to run and this trail is particularly great, because it is especially beautiful with all of the plant life and the moss that is everywhere you look and on everything you see.

Eventually we got to the trail that runs along Cornelius Creek. It was less treacherous but still just rocky and uneven enough to make running fast a challenge, we had certainly picked up the pace a bit though. This might be the most beautiful part of the whole course in my mind, following and at times crossing Cornelius Creek with its many pools and small waterfalls and cool rock formations. Eventually we made our way to the Cornelius Creek aid station at about mile 18. This was a great aid station; I had chips and potatoes again and also a grilled cheese. I refilled my bottles and off we headed on a gravel road following a beautiful mountain stream. This eventually became a paved road and we were really able to run at a decent pace for this stretch as the rain began to fall.

My longest training run for this race was slightly over 20 miles and we hit that point right about the time we took a right off the paved road and began climbing what in my mind was a short loop with a little bit of climb back towards the Cornelius Creek Aid station. This is also the point where the thunder and lightning began, accompanied by heavy rain. The trails became slicker by the minute, but we trudged on. After a mile or so of slow, slick climbing we made our way into aid station 5 at Colon Hollow. The notable thing about this aid station was that they had ice cream and icy pops. I got a Powerade icy pop which was a fantastic treat at this point in the day. We soon continued on but as I suggested before I wasn't prepared for how much climbing there was on this part of the course. I had mentally prepared myself for the initial long steep climb and for the climb up Apple Orchard Falls, but somehow I wasn't prepared for how much climbing there would be at this point in the course. It just kept going up, and did I mention that the trail was extremely slick and muddy. My shoes felt several pounds heavier than they did at the start. Most painfully for me, there was lots of poison ivy on this part of the course, and I am terrified of poison ivy. It is the bane of my existence and my over exaggerated reactions whenever I think I might have touched it is the bane of my wife's existence. She mocks me ceaselessly for running past her to jump in the shower and scrub my entire body with scalding hot water and soap every time I spot a plant with three leaves in our yard. I am sure that Keya and Heather are likewise sick of my harping about just how much poison ivy I was seeing. I am fairly certain I'm going to have nightmares about it for weeks to come. We eventually made it back to the Cornelius Creek

aid station, but I still haven't worked out how we climbed so much and descended so little back into that aid station, it was like an MC Escher painting. At the end of this slick muddy section there was a conveniently placed stream that we needed to cross. The water was over my knees where I crossed so most of the mud from the previous few miles was washed away.

Near this aid station is also the point where you have run over the marathon distance and where I personally had done more climbing than I had ever done in a single day. There is an out and back to the aid station and you pass lots of other runners that are ahead of you, all of whom encourage you and who you encourage. This is not the prettiest part of the course but definitely one of my favorites because I needed all the encouragement I could get (especially after all that poison ivy). This aid station was also the point where my question from the night before was answered, regarding whether my deer carcass camp site was lucky or unlucky. When Keya pointed out that there was part of a deer spine hanging from the tent, I knew that the deer carcass at my campsite was definitely lucky and I have legs that are currently unblistered by poison ivy to prove it (not to mention that I finished my longest run ever on extremely slick and difficult terrain without falling even once and I fall all the time normally).

After this aid station is when what I have termed the brutally beautiful part of the race begins. As we are about to climb over 2000 feet in about 3 miles, after having already climbed 5000 feet. This climb follows along North Creek which is another beautiful mountain stream and the climb begins pretty gradually. After a half mile or so it gets steeper and steeper and the terrain gets rockier and trickier, and did I mention that it had rained before, so it was also slick. Soon after leaving the aid station we were passed by two people but I am proud to say that I think these were the last two people who passed me for the rest of the race. Heather, Keya and I steadily marched up this climb, we weren't flying but we never stopped save for a brief photo session at the falls (way briefer than I would have liked, those girls meant business). In addition to climbing over lots of rocks in this section, there are also several wooden bridges and walkways that were a bit slick due to the rain and mud. There are also lots of wooden steps that begin right after the falls, each section of steps eliciting a groin when they come into view. We finally made it back to a section of trail that we had run down previously causing me to think the climb was almost over. This was incorrect as there was still over a half mile up the mountain to the last aid station.

Eventually we made our way out of the woods to the last aid station, we were done with the dark side. I ate a few chips and refilled my water bottle one last time. My goal was to finish in less than 8 hours and there were about 45 minutes left to meet that goal. Keya and Heather said for me to go for it so I dashed off once we crossed the Parkway and hit the single track trail. Almost immediately I felt bad because running with them was probably the only thing that put me in position to meet my goal in the first place, plus in retrospect they both crossed the finish line in under 8 hours too.

This trail involved the last couple of hundred feet of climbing and then four miles of downhill. I had been looking forward to this part of the race for weeks. I am pretty good at running downhill particularly on trails and these trails were very runnable. This is followed by 3 miles on what I was thinking were smooth gravel roads. The trail part went really smoothly, but then I made it back to the gravel. I was running as hard as I possibly could at this point, my watch was telling me that I was running around 7 minute miles which is very fast for me. Going up this road with hundreds of people around you, you sort of lose track of how steep this section of road is. It is really steep and it is far from being as smooth as I remembered. Still I was flying, passing people left and right. I felt better than I had all day and I had felt pretty good most of the day.

After about a mile and a half at this pace I began to tire and within a few hundred yards I began to feel downright awful. I hadn't felt nauseous all day but I felt I might need to stop and perhaps vomit at any second. I slowed down considerably and pleaded with myself to just stop running but somehow I kept trudging along. The mantra I repeated over and over was "you're almost done; it will be over soon." On the way up in the morning, I remembered passing a painted spot on the road marking where the one-mile point of the race was. At this point I convinced myself that I had already passed it without noticing. When I finally came to it several minutes later I was extremely deflated, but I continued to slog along. Finally, I spotted the sign to the camp and heard people cheering. I am sure I looked like death warmed over but I continued to struggle forward. I took the right into camp, slowly ran across the grass field and crossed the finish line. There were lots of people cheering for me, most of them had already finished their race and were hanging around to soak up the atmosphere. Dr. Horton shook my hand and said "that was hard wasn't it?" He couldn't have been more right. My face must have said it all, or perhaps the fact that I was moving so slowly when I should have been sprinting over the finish line like so many before and after me would.

Still I had finished my first official ultramarathon, in 7 hours 50 minutes and some change, almost 10 minutes faster than my goal. It was a great day even though I felt like absolute garbage at the end. I quickly got out of the way (okay it probably wasn't too quick), got my shorts (this is what they give finishers instead of medals), and waddled around to wait and cheer for Keya and Heather as they crossed the finish line. They both finished in the next few minutes and I then slowly made my way to the car to get my shoes and wet clothes off, and drink some cold water.

Upon reflection this was an amazing day of running, and it went so much better than I could have imagined. Still I felt worse in the last mile or two than I have ever felt running, but you are going to suffer in a race like this. As a matter of fact, I read the race report of the winner of the race and it sounds like he suffered a lot too so I guess I'm in good company. This race was far from the most important thing in my life, but it was a challenge that I had taken on and I was proud of myself for finishing. I probably had no business reaching my goal of finishing in less than 8 hours, but deer me I got lucky and parked in the right spot, not to mention parking myself behind Heather and Keya for the entire day.

After getting myself together I made my way back to the finish line to cheer for the other finishers. Within the next few minutes more of the Roanoke Valley Trail Runners who had run began to gather; Jack Bugo, Jennifer DeForest, Ercilia Pereira, Matt Warner, and others. We all erupted in cheers when Dru Sexton came into view and crossed the finish line. We were so excited for her and so was Dr. Horton. We might have cheered even louder when Marty Winn crossed the finish line after falling short the year before, he was determined to conquer this course and he had done it, the smile on his face in the moments afterwards said it all. So often I feel like running is a very singular, almost selfish, pursuit and it usually is for me as I am too busy to run with others very often. I believe to lead a joyful life you have to do it in community. On this day, like never before, it felt like running was most definitely a community event. I could see so much joy on people's faces, and it was typically in response to someone else's accomplishment rather than their own.

I hung around until the 3:30 PM cutoff and cheered all the runners who crossed the finish line. The energy and the atmosphere were amazing. Upon reflection this is the best thing about this race, watching all these people who had worked so hard just to get to this point have their moment in the sun and cross that finish line. What I found absolutely amazing was watching

how excited Dr. Horton gets for these finishers. This guy is an absolute legend in this sport, he has accomplished more in really long distance running than all but a few of the greatest athletes in any sport and he was waiting at the finish line to hug and congratulate so many, including me. If I made a free throw I can't imagine any great basketball player would congratulate me, yet here was Dr. Horton at the finish line, as excited as any of the runners when they crossed that line. Is it authentic? For sure, no one is that good of an actor (plus they made a movie about his life and if he was this good they would have hired him to play himself). This is the same man who had promised earlier that he would be sitting in his chair the whole day because of debilitating back pain, yet he was jumping and clapping and cheering like his own child had won an Olympic gold medal. His excitement is contagious and we all caught it. It was honestly one of the most beautiful, authentic things I have ever witnessed at an athletic event.

This is a great race; it has everything you could possibly want; a fantastic, challenging, and especially beautiful course. It also has a legendary and legendarily hilarious and enthusiastic race director. With several young children I don't have a lot of time for racing and most importantly to be able to train to prepare myself for these brutal races. Still I hope I can do this one again someday. As I try to remind myself on a daily basis, being able to run is a blessing, we are never promised tomorrow, and every day is a gift of God. On Saturday, April 22, 2023 I was given one of the biggest gifts ever because not only was I able to run, I was able to run 34 miles in a land flowing with milk and honey (and moss), in the Promise Land.