

2023 Promise Land 50k++ Race Report

Backstory: I'm in my early(ish) thirties and I've never been a runner until my thirties, and never been a trailrunner until about a year or two ago when I joined the CATs (Charlottesville Area Trail-runners). I've also come into the sport of (trail)running from backpacking having started solo-sectioning the Appalachian Trail in 2017 as a way to push myself and see what I was made of. I learned a lot and found out I was capable of enduring a lot of pain and suffering when I was out backpacking on my own. So naturally once I found out backpacking had a lot in common with trail running, I was hooked. Also, me and my fiancée decided to run the Richmond marathon last year and I loved the training and long distances, so naturally once some friends started to ask me if I was going to do an ultra my fate was sealed. I decided on Promise Land kind of on a whim because, well... why the hell not? I was going to push myself and I knew myself well enough that I was going to finish this thing come hell or high water (spoiler alert: lots of water, plus some hell).

-Also of note, I have a terrible reaction to poison ivy, and I passionately and vehemently hate poison ivy, like a LOT. Stupid plant and its STUPID oil.

-Also, also of note, I have this thing where my body will suddenly decide it needs to poop and usually I have about 10 minutes to lift off, yea...it's a thing I guess?

-Also, Also, also of note, I had to get BOTH of my big toenails removed (by a professional, don't worry) near the start of my training because I went too far in new shoes. This has given me a mild aversion to getting my feet wet since, my toes are still a bit...sensitive lets say.

The Start: I arrived on Friday afternoon to the beautiful campsite area and was actually greeted by Race Director and running legend Dr. Horton almost immediately after setting up my tent. I was expecting my former colleague to arrive soon, he decided to join me on my first ultra, and we wanted to meet up that evening. Once we found each other we settled into the pre-race briefing, I was stoked, everyone seemed so welcoming and friendly. I met a few new folks and a few CATs members and asked all of them their plans for the race and the weather, since there was predicted to be some rain. No one seemed daunted by the prospect of rain but I was a little worried it might get cold with all the rain so I decided to pack my outer shell, which turned out to be a solid decision.

On race day I was up early, I packed up my tent, got my bowel movement out, ate some food, got my gear on and was checked in, all went well! The race started even though I couldn't hear the announcement that Aid Station 2 was moved a few miles back nor could I hear the actual start of the race, but on we went!

The Race: Now this was my first ultramarathon, and my goal was finishing. I was most definitely NOT going to be setting any speed records, I wanted to go out conservative and really make sure I nurtured my stomach and legs, I was in this for the long haul. I did start out right at the very back of the pack with my former colleague, and since this wasn't his first ultra and I wasn't

comfortable being at the back, I pushed a little and power hiked my way into a pack, totally expecting to see him later in the race, but unfortunately I never did (sorry dude, next time i'll try to hang with you for more than a few seconds!). But this was also about the time when I got to hang out with Marlin. I had met him the night before while camping, but got to know him a little more during our first climb and found out not only was this his 6th Promise Land, but he was 70 years young! The man is pure, unfiltered inspiration. We hiked the hill a little, but we were both on different paces and split up after a while.

My stomach was a little unhappy with all the fluids, gels, and snacks I was pounding, but I still needed to fuel fast and often, so I kept at it. I finally got finished with the first big ascent and started going downhill, and was keeping up with a small pack of other runners, so I was in good spirits. I was starting to get a little worried about all the poison ivy all over the sides of the trail, but I just kept on trail and avoided anything hanging over the trail. Once we passed the out and back where aid station 2 was, we started going uphill again and I joked we had to be nearing the highest point of the course soon right?! This was met with wild sarcasm. We did eventually reach the top though, and then got some snacks at aid station 2, followed by a quick descent down a gravel forest service road to aid station 3 for some more snacks. There was quite the spread at these stations: pretzels, pickles, potatoes, sodas, plus a lot more. I grabbed as much as I needed and hit the big descent down Apple Orchard Falls. I started to catch a few more people and was moving pretty well but was still trying to keep it in low gear and protect my legs. As I kept descending and descending things started to change, it was like "the dark side" of the course knew its own reputation. It was already quite foggy and cloudy but this is when the thunderstorm rolled in. First it was quiet but then changed quickly into a full on downpour. Finally I heard the thunder, and I actually let out a cheer since I figured a thunderstorm meant it wouldn't last all day, and it was certainly better than constant rain. This is also when I simultaneously ran out of water and developed a burning cough in my throat that caused me to nearly lose my lunch.. So naturally I started sucking rain water out of my sleeves to be able to get some water, why the hell not? This was an ultra, anything goes.

Finally, I reached aid station 4 in the middle of the thunderstorm and the volunteers were genuinely concerned for my wellbeing which was nice, but after a few hot pierogies and a refill on water I was back on course! Except this is when I felt that feeling, and I knew I had about 10 minutes to find a place to go off trail to release some "downstairs demons". Luckily (sarcasm), it was still absolutely pouring down rain so that really made it easy to do the deed. Let me tell you, there is nothing like digging a cathole and pooping in the woods while buckets of rain fall on you, it's almost like I got one of those fancy bidet things for free! 10 out of 10 for the most epic dump of my life. I felt a lot lighter when I was done and the course actually turned into a nice road 5k. At Aid Station 5 I got a quick ice cream sandwich and some more pierogies and was back out on course. The rain slowly stopped, and things seemed to be turning around for the better, maybe? Not at all. The conditions were actually turning into something far more sinister. All the rain had turned the course into a thick muddy slop fest. Since I was near the back of the race, lots of folks had churned up the mud so the footing was almost non-existent, every step turning into more of a slide. Almost 4 full miles of slick footing, I liked to call this part of the race as more of a mud skiing session. I felt like a newborn fawn, barely able to keep myself upright.

To put the cherry on top, this section featured BUSHES of encroaching poison ivy reaching out over the trail, trying to curse me with weeks of painful rashes. At this point, I was going through some deep internal struggles, but I was determined and so so angry at all that poison ivy. After realizing I still probably had about 2-3 miles to go of nothing but dodging poison ivy over slick footing (with another possible poop coming), I went somewhere else. I was just picturing Dr. Horton laughing, knowing the devious challenge he was giving me when he cut this course right through this poison ivy patch. I had to go somewhere else, I had to distract myself from this. So of course, I randomly decided to write a haiku that goes like this:

ultra trifecta.
poison ivy, mud, and s**t.
PL has it all!

I don't know why I did this, I'm not sure I've even written a haiku before. I'm not even a big fan of poems, but it was helping me cope, so I ran with it. Literally. This was also when I started to feel myself falling on my backpacking suffering skills, I had to break into a smile at the sheer fact that this couldn't have been designed to be more treacherous for me. And after turning a corner, taking glorious piss, and descending into some stream beds, I realized I had escaped that section with my dignity, and a funny new haiku. I was also starting to pass some other runners again. And at the second to last aid station I ran into a familiar face, Marlin! Inspiration for the last climb! I stuck with Marlin and up we went, over Apple Orchard Falls. I was just so happy and energized to be with such a person especially after making it through the muck from the last section that it carried me right up that last climb. I was going to finish, and have fun doing it. Me and Marlin powered through the last 8 miles together, the pain in our legs didn't matter. As we cascaded down the last couple miles I was putting in my fastest miles, by a lot. I was passing plenty of runners too, I even got to reconnect with a friend right before she finished her 10th Promise Land! I saw I was finally approaching camp and got to embrace my fiancée just before the finish, her support made this happen, she earned this as much as I did. Then I hopped across the finish, literally springing myself at Dr. Horton. I collected my glorious short shorts, and they were all mine! I don't think I will ever take them off.