

This race was just a dream. Exceeded my best hopes of how well it could go. I DNF'ed last year and have lived the last year seeking redemption.

HISTORY

Quick history lesson. 7 years ago I weighed 305. I lost a bunch of weight then and have stayed between 200-230 since then. I did that through diet primarily but also took up hiking seriously and trail running over the last 4 years.

Last year I entered Promise Land 2022 Ultra-Marathon. My first official race. RD David Horton is a legend and sort of a personal hero. I got to meet him but failed in my effort to complete the 35-mile, 7400' race. I can't come up with just one reason I failed - there were many. It was unseasonably warm and humid (85 in nearby Roanoke), I was stupid (carried too much stuff with me, started too hard/didn't pace myself well/ran at the wrong times, didn't trust aid stations to have food/liquid, didn't just climb in the creek when I overheated), I was injured (plantar fasciitis).

You can read last year's race report (<https://extremeultrarunning.com/wp-content/uploads/PL/race-reports/2022/winn.pdf>) if you want details. I gave out trying to go up the final 2000+ foot climb after running a trail marathon, overheated and with severe cramps. I limped to my stopping spot after 30.75 miles but left 5 miles remaining. This is going to be long so look at the headers for the parts that will interest you.

FORECAST

I've been eagerly watching and waiting for Saturday 4/22 to show up in the forecast and for the weather prediction to firm up. I could see it was going to be warmer than I wanted, but not as warm as last year. I could see there was a good chance of rain, but at least that would hold down the temperatures and keep me from overheating so bad. The last forecast was 60-65F with a bunch of rain (possible thunderstorms) starting at maybe 9 AM and lasting for the rest of the race. Windy in the 10-20 mph range.

PREPARATION-THE DAY BEFORE

Let's jump back to Friday. I got 8+ hours of sleep on Thursday night knowing I would not get a full night's sleep before the race. I worked a full day Friday then did some grocery shopping. Chatted with my family a bit. Then started preparations. I cooked 6 fried eggs, gave Ty the whites, and saved the yolks in a plastic bag with some bacon. I really enjoyed this at TWOT a couple months ago. Turns out I did not touch it this time. I also put about 8 ounces of strawberry preserves in another baggie, and finally about 3 ounces of cheddar in a 3rd bag. I also would grab 3 navel oranges in the morning (1 would go in my pocket and 2 in the outer webbing of the backpack). This would be all the food I brought from home. Except for the oranges, I ate none of it. But it was a whole lot less than what I brought last year. My goal was to fit everything into the sleek camelback backpack Ed McKeown had given me instead of the bulky high school backpack I had last year (complete with three 2-liter bottles half full of solid ice. This year I would have a 2-liter bladder of ice, lemonade, and salt. But I prepared that in the morning. I ended up only drinking about half of that. I got my liquid from the aid stations, fruit (oranges and grapes), and from the air. I chose Mountain Dew when it was available, I drank a pickle juice shot, got a bunch of wonderful green grapes at BRP mile 12 aid station, and some purple grapes sometime after mile 20 that weren't as good.

CLOTHES PREP

I laid out my clothes. I've got running shorts with a liner in them, so I used these as underwear. I wore another pair of gray shorts with good pockets over them. No drawstring (which in the past has cut into my waist pretty bad). The pants are pretty tight so they would stay up (mostly). They started to droop about halfway through the race when I tried having an orange and phone with a charger in my pocket. I ended up having to stop and redo my backpack a bit below where you cross the AT heading towards Connector Trail so I wouldn't have so much in my pockets.

So I also grabbed my tallest Swiftwick socks (with polar bears), and my newish black and orange New Balance 410 Trail Runner shoes. I also have what I call toe condoms, rubber things to go over my big toes but I added a third for my right pinky toe which had been barking lately from getting rubbed. I went with my short sleeve multi-blue lycra shirt that I almost always wear. Don't wear no-sleeves or the pack rubs me raw. I also brought my rain jacket. That was a dilemma that I will explain later.

I also packed a bunch of alternate clothes. Things to change into after the race, and things that I could swap into if it was colder, or something didn't feel right to me. A heavier rain jacket, more socks, tights, long sleeve lycra top, etc. I didn't end up using any of this. I went down to the garage to test out nipple tape. Tried out 3 different rolls before finding the stickiest duct tape to wear to not rub myself raw. I grabbed 2 headlamps also.

PACKING RUNNING BACKPACK

I went through all of my miscellaneous stuff that floats in my backpacks to make them as light as possible. I scrapped the batteries, the solar blanket, the dog leash, band-aids, tape, and some medicine. What I kept was a new bag with ibuprofen, salt tablets (as recommended by Greg James but I was scared to take for fear of doing something new on race day, I did end up taking 4, maybe 6 eventually), salt, Vaseline, a battery charger and cable for my phone, earbuds, toilet paper, Ziplock bag for used TP, and I think that may have been it. I also put a hat in my pack for the rain but did not use it. My takeaway is that I don't want clothes for rain, I'll just get wet. Now, cold is different, I want a jacket for cold/wind.

SLEEP

I laid down at 9:30. I took 2 allergy pills which make me drowsy. I was asleep by 9:45. Unheard of. The risk is that I miss my 2:35 AM alarm or wake up drowsy. But no, I woke up raring to go. 4:50 of sleep is better than anyone could have predicted.

MORNING PREP

I dressed, put in contacts, kissed Ruth goodbye, and got a good luck. Went downstairs cooked myself 3 fried eggs and warmed up some bacon. Packed a cooler with oranges, frozen pineapple cans, and cheese. Filled up the run bladder with ice and lemonade. Packed the food from last night in the backpack. Made a big cup of ice water. Took everything to Ruth's Tahoe which she let me borrow for the day. It is no good to have a standard transmission truck to have to change gears with crampy legs post-race. It was a 70-minute drive to Bedford/Promise Land Youth Camp

ARRIVAL

I had no problems on the drive, GPS did fine, went through Bedford rather than BRP through

the Peaks of Otter area. Took 70 minutes. Arrived at exactly 4:30, an hour before the race start. Was directed where to park, almost the first one in the row. The campsite was beginning to stir with people waking and getting ready. I could see lines of tents with lights inside and cars beside the tents. I took a moment and gathered my stuff. I put on my jacket which was a question. Carry it at all, pack it (which would be a struggle to fit it in my pack). I decided on 3 oranges to take with me. I wish I could have had at least 12 for the race. I went by the camp bathroom where there was a very short line.

Then to the pavilion to register. David Horton was taking numbers. He had emailed and told people to know their seeding/bib number. I was 284 and knew it. Ercila Ward was there with me and did not know her number. She and Horton almost fought (not really) he assigned her a new number and then there was confusion later when her actual number did not get checked off. I got my bib. Horton was busy, not chatty, did not show any recognition of me and I did not bother him/try to talk. A line was forming and getting longer. He had just been on the bullhorn to wake up campers and tell them they had to register in the morning, even if they had done that last night.

I had the option of camping there and being part of the fun of chatting and pizza party the night before and I hate that I miss that but there is no way I would sleep nor would I be able to pack like I want to (ice, food, lotions, etc.). I then picked out a race shirt. I like this one much better than last year. Gray, not UNC blue, plus the design I prefer. I chose an XL instead of a Large. This is a sad thing that I am thinking I want to be able to wear this shirt even if I get fat. Plus, shirts seem to run small in places like this. I also grabbed a couple of bumper stickers and safety pins to put my bib on. This is the first year that I learned the lesson to fold that sucker down to just the size of the numbers and put it on my left pants thigh, so it is not in my way. In the past, it has been the full-sized flag on my belly, which if I am wearing a jacket you can't see, and messes up my ability to change clothes. Watching Ed McKeown taught me this. Bibs are made from super paper that as far as I can tell basically doesn't rip or get wet, so I can pin through it in a place other than the provided holes. I then went back to the car to drop off the shirt and bumper stickers. Got a last drink of water.

WAITING FOR THE START

Last year I stayed in the car awhile trying to get some more sleep because I was super early and because my phone did not get properly charged on the drive. This year I headed straight back to the pavilion to wait and socialize. There was a lot of food available, soft drinks (I had some Sprite and ginger ale), deserts (I had a piece of cheesecake, the most decadent thing I have eaten in about 4 months). I talked to Jennifer DeForest a bit about her adventures with her car battery on the way there. I went over and talked to the Coccia twins Jared and Jacob who are crazy fast. They finished 8th and 13th. They are so encouraging. Oh, you'll definitely finish this year.

I think Joey Klein was there too. Joey and Ed and I have a FB Messenger chat that is constantly ongoing about everything especially running. It's a weird thing in that I haven't spent that much time in his actual presence (ran the first couple hours of Miserous with him and a group run near Hay Rock on AT) but know him super well. Ed wasn't running but had promised to be there later to cheer us on (his wife ended up having car trouble and he didn't make it but felt super bad about it). I'm very thankful to have him to bounce things off and get advice from a super-experienced trail runner. Joey is newer to races but is much faster than me. His goals were not

merely finishing but finishing well. We had an RVTR (Roanoke Valley Trail Runners) 5:15 meeting to get a picture behind our flag scheduled. Jack Bugo was leading this up. In the meantime, almost everyone else showed up and chatted. I met Beth Johnson and Ace Holst for I think the first time. Also chatted with Dru Sexton who was trying to become the first woman over 70 to complete Promise Land (spoiler alert - she kicked my butt). She's incredible, an inspiration. She let me (and a half dozen others) stay at her rented house in Damascus the night before Iron Mountain race in November.

I didn't spot celebrity runners Rachel Lemcke or Michael Owen before the race, but Joey had told me he got to hang out with them the night before and heard Horton teasing them about Sarah Biehl's unbreakable course record. I also got to see Matt Pisenti (who ran Barkley FC in 2019 but I did not get to talk to him about that), Heather Stokes (her first Ultra, I think, but is very accomplished at 15-mile type runs), Keya Price, and Will Paxton (who trained and ran a 100-mile race together not long ago). I didn't spot Christiann Rogers all day (Ruth and I had run into her on an AOF hike just a week ago, turns out she finished just behind me but I didn't see her). Sunshine Richards was registered but her knees kept her from running. As I understand it usually the Blue Ridge Marathon is a week before Promise Land but this year they were on the same day. This kept several people away from Promise Land including Greg James. It turned out that they had to stop BRM partway because of severe weather (though many stayed on the course). We took our photos.

Horton started making announcements (hard to hear/understand). We (some 313 of us) lined up behind the starting line. He prayed. We sang the national anthem. Horton desperately tried to confirm if a handful of people were there. Then we started. I think about 60 seconds late, not at the stroke of 5:30. No lighting of the cigarette, not even sure exactly what got us going but eventually you feel the crowd moving. I started Strava and Gaia GPS recording on my phone. You sort of self-seed yourself so I was near the back and finally, I made it up to the starting line.

STRATEGY

I have been sort of obsessed with this race. The last year has been largely living to undo the failure of the year before. I found that I weighed 230 pounds at the start of the year and worked really hard to lose 25 pounds to get down near 205. Last year I weighed 200 on race day. I've thought and planned how I would do things differently. I already discussed what I carried and how I dressed and my weather hopes. There was training. This was probably not an improvement but my training a year ago was usually two 10Ks (about 1100') during the week on Mill Mountain and a half marathon (about 2000') somewhere like Carvins Cove on Saturday and maybe a couple of relaxing 5K dog hikes up my backyard Fort Lewis Mountain/FLM (about 800' elevation). This year I had less time. Most of my training was to the ridge of FLM (5 miles, 1500'). Steep stuff, power hike up, run down. That and hiking with Ruth usually at about 3 mph walk speed for me. This left me in not as good of running shape, but good hiking shape.

I hadn't actually scientifically compared it, but I decided that I could hike uphill almost as fast as I could run and use a lot less energy. In this 35-mile race, there was no way I was going to be able to run more than 20 miles of it (not even that much really). So I needed to be smart. Where should I run? The places I can do much better running than walking/hiking. That means flats, and gentle downhills, and maybe steep downhills that aren't dangerous (but those aren't great because they really pound your joints and muscles). I recognized this last year but I had 2 things on my mind that messed me up. The first was pride. Everyone starts the race running.

You have to show these people you belong (it's uphill, and steep for the first 4.4 miles). The other issue was that there are 2 race cut-offs. The first is at nominal mile 12 (really mile 14) 3:45 into the race at 9:15 AM. You've got to do 15-minute miles to get there. That's faster than the overall course cut-off of 17-minute miles. So, they force you to run faster at the start than at the end. The reality is that they don't strictly enforce that cut-off. Probably they look for people in trouble that they don't think can make it and pull them with the cut-off as an excuse.

NEW THOUGHTS

Last year I thought of the race as the 9 sections between aid stations. I set goals for how fast I wanted to run each of these. These sections tended to have both up and down in them. This year I looked at the course and said - This is basically 4 uphills and then 4 downhill. I can hike up 2000' mountains easily. I can run downhill for 5 or 6 miles easily. I gave myself permission, direction really to think of this as 4 hikes (that I would only hike) and 4 easy downhill runs. I can do that. I would not watch the clock. Or at least I would not respond to clock pressures. I would finish, no matter how long it took. I have gone 33 miles before. I have done 8000' before. Just not this fast. I would save my energy. I would not consume it too fast. I would finish. I'd hope for a good time, but a finish was the thing. How would I do this? Well it turns out that when I run downhill my heart rate and energy consumed is basically identical to when I hike uphill. I have no particular preference for going uphill or downhill. I would work just as hard either way. If anything, the downhill was worse because my legs got pounded and sore. I would watch my heart rate and basically keep it the same all day. Now, I did not really watch my HR on my Fitbit. I was just very conscience of my breathing, my exertion, I never wanted to be out of breath or pushing too hard. I would slow down to stay in control. None of what happened last year of pushing too hard and getting out of control. I knew this meant that I would go out slower. I was in danger of not making the first cut-off, but that was okay. I strongly suspected it wasn't real.

THE ACTUAL RACE

I wore my headlamp around my neck the entire race. Didn't turn it on. It was dark but there is something calming about running by other people's lights. The race started and I did as I planned. I walked out of the gate. I very intentionally did not run a step at the beginning. It is pretty flat for the first quarter mile as you leave the grassy Promise Land Youth Camp property onto the asphalt road, then finally onto a hard, mostly smooth gravel road. Then the uphill begins. People flew past me. Everyone. Almost everyone. I turned after 0.2 miles and saw 3 lights behind me. I was in 310th place. That's humbling. It was also necessary. This starting section gets steeper and steeper. Nearly everyone else had been running. Most would soon tire themselves out and begin hiking like me. Relatively speaking I am a very good hiker and not much of a runner. Without ever running I started passing people. I was counting as I passed people. During this first portion, Dru Sexton passed by me. I passed Jack Bugo and Matt Pisenti and said hi. Last year Horton drove past in a truck and mocked my backpack. This year no vehicles went by. After a mile or 2, I took off my light rain jacket and stuffed it in my left pants pocket. I took out my orange and ate it along the way.

AID #1/UNNAMED WATERFALLS

At the first aid station (mile 2.7) I had 76 people behind me. I did not stop for aid #1 which was only water (and was non-existent on the return). According to David Horton, 313 people started the race. My counting was difficult at aid stations. Knowing how many were there when you got there and left was at best an estimate.

After the aid station at the unnamed waterfalls, the path narrowed to single track. We still had another 1.7 miles of climbing to do before the first downhill. I continued to slowly pass people getting up to about 100 behind me before we started downhill. There were a couple of short, flat places where I took a couple of run steps in this area. This first 4.4-mile-up segment took me 72 minutes to do, about a 16:22 pace.

Light came at nearly the same time as the descent began. It was cool and beginning to get foggy now, but not raining. It felt good to run. Not hard. I chatted while behind a guy that was having some leg problems, but I was happy to be at his pace. I walked when we had a few uphill parts. It soon opened up onto a wide fire road that circles around the mountain. This road is super overgrown in the summer but was mostly clear now. People were now finding their place in the race. Some faster runners passed by me again and I caught a few others. We would trade positions mostly gaining while hiking uphill and losing ground on the running flat portions. One woman commented on my oranges strapped to my pack. I asked her if she would be so kind as to grab one and hand it to me as she passed by. She did. I made it as high as 107 behind me. From there I would mostly lose ground all day. But that was fine. As long as I knew there was a good number behind me, I felt I need not worry about any time cutoffs. This first downhill segment is about 3.73 miles long and took me 40:08, that's about a 10:46 pace. Pretty good.

At some point, you get to the low point and the fire road begins going back up towards the Blue Ridge Parkway and Aid Station #2. Horton had announced that Aid #2 had been moved from its usual lower location to the BRP. Not sure why. I noticed a fallen tree that maybe blocked the drive to the usual location. But I am far from certain. This segment is 4.3 miles 1337' up and 55' down. In my mind, I was hiking up McAfee Knob on the fire road. I've done this 50+ times. I would do it now. No running. Just hiking. It took me about 66 minutes. Nice 15:21 hiking pace. I went past the gate where the aid station usually is and found a place to pee. During this portion there was some rain, it was really foggy, I got a little chilly and I thought about pulling my jacket out of my pocket but did not.

AID #2/BRP

I crossed the BRP and came to aid station #2. This was something like 1.8 miles from Sunset Fields Aid Station #3 where the 3:45 cutoff meant you had to be there at 9:15 AM. Supposedly. I stopped at this aid station. It was very busy. I got a couple of cups of maybe mountain dew but most importantly I got a whole pickle and a huge branch of green grapes that were delicious. I love to eat my liquid. I ate them most of the way down the road that runs under Apple Orchard Mountain and beside the Blue Ridge Parkway. Last year I remember struggling to run on this almost perfect running surface, fairly gradual downhill, beaten-down gravel. I did better this year, but I still walked a fair amount. I'm not sure what made this section hard, but it just beats on your legs. It does look like I probably ran about 1 minute faster per mile here than last year.

AID #3/SUNSET FIELDS

I had gotten a message from my friend Claire Williams saying that she was planning to come to visit me along the way, so I expected her near the upcoming aid station. When you get near the aid station cars start to line the road. Sure enough, Claire was there to greet me. She ran alongside me, faster than me, more energetic for at least 100 yards to the aid station. We took a selfie and chatted a bit, I asked her what her plans were for the day (hike somewhere), and she asked what she could get me. But there were aid station workers to help out. Helen McDermott was working there and recognized me and said hi. She designed this year's shirt which is very

nice. I had someone pour a bit more water in my bladder, but I did not have much room, or at least it was all squeezed together and not much more could be added. I had planned to get salt pills, ibuprofen, and my battery pack (to charge my phone) out but in the confusion, I did not do that. I grabbed my last orange; I had more Mountain Dew and also grazed filling up a cup with jellybeans and gummy slices and a couple Oreos. I put my pack on but did not snap it in said goodbye to Claire and took off onto the Dark Side (well-deserved name today).

This is the first of the technical running of the day. It was kind of fun to dodge the rocks on the way down. I passed the AT and continued down, but I was having problems with my pants falling down and my pack slipping off, and trying to hold a cup full of candy. So, I stopped for 2 minutes, took off the pack, put up the orange, and stuffed my jacket into the pack. And snapped my backpack on good. This left me with just the cup of candy and the phone to compete for hand and pocket space. Somewhere in here, I twisted my ankle pretty good. I did not fall down but the twist caused my thigh to go into cramp convulsions that lasted for 10-20 seconds. I ran through it, and it calmed down. That was the worst of the cramps but 5 or 6 more times during the day I would suffer minor cramps in either thigh or calf. It was the sort of thing where it felt tight and served as a warning if I went too hard or twisted too much that severe cramps might follow. Last year I had pretty bad cramps and I did not want to go through that again. Being a cooler day than last year, I wondered how much I was sweating and how much I needed to replace my electrolytes. I had purchased some salt pills that I was a bit fearful to take but decided at this point that I definitely was going to take some at the next aid station.

As I was approaching the Connector Trail towards Cornelius Creek a woman recognized me and said hi. She said she will Jill and I correctly guessed Diss. We are Strava buddies. She soon disappeared ahead of me to finish in 8:27. This section was pretty crowded and most everyone kept their place in line. Once we turned onto Connector it got wider and there was more passing. Several ventured into the woods to find private places to pee. My stats tell me that I improved more in this section than any other. This second downhill covered 7.9 miles and I improved my time by 18:41. The last part of Connector and all of Cornelius trail is the worst of the technical section. It is very rocky and obnoxiously steep downhill. I remember the rocks cutting into my feet and having to do a bunch of walking because of the pain. This year I was able to run basically all of it.

This is about when the heavens opened up and it began to pour rain. I didn't notice that it was particularly slippery though. I surprised myself and caught up with Dru Sexton in this area. I asked if she was okay/injured (how else could I have caught her?). She said she was fine; she just didn't want to fall. As a 53-year-old I can understand why a woman almost 71 would not want to fall. Bones and body are much more brittle now. The consequences of a fall are much more dire. I must take a moment to salute Dru who became the first 70+ woman to complete Promise Land (time=8:47). She's an incredible runner and inspiration. She's also kind and generous. I ran with Dru for a while and we chatted. I eventually pulled ahead of her by a bit. There are 2 minor Cornelius Creek crossings. I got my foot a little wet at one of them and I again twisted my ankle near another one.

I came upon a (50-something) woman (with tall colorful socks) who was obviously struggling, and I talked to her. I assured her that we were on the right path/trail. She said she couldn't see. I asked if it was her contacts. She said yeah, the heavy rain was making it impossible to see where she was running. It was raining really hard. She turned on her headlamp. It was weird

how dark it was getting, and this region is really down deep in a valley. It is the dark side of the course.

AID #4/CORNELIUS CREEK

I had vowed to do business at this aid station. I stopped short and knelt in the parking lot. My body quickly responded with minor leg cramps. Don't stop for too long. I got out the pills and took 3 ibuprofen and 2 salt pills. I got out the battery charger and wire and hooked up my phone. If I don't charge it I will run out of batteries while running GPS. I got everything snapped back up. I grazed at the table. Some more Mountain Dew, a couple cookies, what I hoped were jellybeans but were something not quite as good, and some red grapes that again weren't quite as good. I saw Matt Pisenti here who did not pause long at the aid station and was quickly gone in front of me. The next almost 2 miles is a gentle downhill along a smooth gravel road with maybe a half mile of asphalt at the end. For most, this would be prime speed area. This runs along a creek and is very pretty, but I always find this hard to run. Part of it is that we are about 20 miles into the race now. Part of it is this is some of the hardest ground I will run on. I ran some and walked some.

Matt Warner came up behind me here and said hi. I expressed surprise that he had been behind me (he had completed a 100-mile race not many months ago). He claimed to not be in running shape. But he disappeared in front of me to finish in 8:32. This region featured scary lightning and much rain. The Blue Ridge Marathon was stopped due to this storm. But there was no one to tell us to stop. Not that we would have.

THE TURN OFF TO THE SIDE MOUNTAIN/AID #5

The turn off this road is at the low point and completes the 2nd decline section of the course. It had been a good section. I did this 7.9-mile section 18:41 faster than last year and I was now 23:50 ahead of last year's pace. I did not know this at the time, but I knew enough that meeting the 2nd cutoff of 7:15 was not going to be a problem.

There were markings on the road telling runners it was time to head back into the woods and single-track trail. This is where the effects of the rain were felt. It's interesting to ask how rain affects runs. Since it was about 60 degrees it certainly kept me cool and prevented much sweating and much loss of electrolytes. It likely prevented many severe cramps. It probably allowed me to have a lot more energy. But it also affected footing. Things got very sloppy in the next 6.6 miles until we returned to AID #6 and the cut-off. There are roads and trails cut into the sides of the mountain. This is the least famous and least scenic portion of the race and the least elevation change. But it brought a fair amount of challenge where you were on the verge of sliding down a side hill or falling on your face in the slippery mud track that some 500 feet had already passed through by this point. I was often left with the choice of slipping in the mud or running 6 inches off the trail in the poison ivy where there was at least better footing. I usually chose the ivy (not merely coincidentally the week after the race has featured a nice poison ivy rash on my lower legs).

I met a pair of young women who I found out were in David Horton's running class at Liberty University and were running their first Ultras. They thought he was an inspirational and good teacher (and a bit crazy). I spoke to several other of his students and they all seemed to characterize him about the same way. AID station #5 comes quickly and fortunately, I had been warned that they have ice cream. I got a couple of frozen red popsicles plus some other junk. I

did not linger long here. This is about when the rain stopped mostly for good. In this next section, I met a woman probably a bit younger than me doing her 11th Promise Land and Don Baradell, a 64-year-old man who had finished in 10:12 (with injuries) last year so of course Horton had given him a hard time about not finishing in time. There was a fair amount of chatting here. He finished in 9:34.

This section is the 3rd uphill. 4.06 miles with 984' up and 230' down. Mentally I compare it to Mill Mountain. There is a fair amount of flat and down and I ran a fair amount but mostly hiked it. The mud certainly made it hard to run downhill. I was 6:21 faster here this year than last. Then comes the short 3rd downhill. It is 2.27 miles back to the Cornelius Creek Aid Station. 492' down and 44' up. There are some steep sections and some unbelievably muddy parts with no alternative. I was worried that I would lose a shoe under the muck as I tried to pull my feet back up at times. The good news is that this section features crossing the wide, deep creek at the bottom. You really have no choice but to take a dozen steps in knee-deep water here. I made no effort to find a dry crossing. It was good to get a free shoe cleaning and it was refreshing. If it had been a hot day, I was very prepared to lie down in the water. Once across the creek, there is a couple-minute jog downhill to the aid station as you pass runners heading in the other direction. I was actually 1:46 slower in this section this year. I think I was stressing to make the cutoff last year. Not sure. We've now passed the marathon distance and 6:36 have passed. I know I have 9 miles to go. I'm going to finish if something doesn't go horribly wrong. I don't have to run another step. I can just hike it if necessary.

AID STATION #6/CORNELIUS CREEK

Last year at this aid station is where things really fell apart. I got severe cramps and overheated along the trail near Apple Orchard Falls. This year I didn't sit but took a beat and drank a bunch and grabbed a fair amount of food including a couple bananas. I still haven't and never did touch the cheese, preserves, bacon, or fried egg yolks in my bag (just the oranges).

This started the final climb. The 4th ascent. 2082' in 4.13 miles. This is basically Tinker Cliffs in my mind. No big deal. I jogged a bit (the flats and downhills) but almost exclusively hiked. I caught another Horton student who was struggling with nausea. I chatted with him about his health and Horton. I eventually passed him. I tried to find his name on the list of finishers, but I worry that he did not make it.

I noticed the spots where I had laid down in exhaustion last year, but I kept comfortably hiking. I did not stop moving all day except at aid stations, once to re-pack my back sack, and about 3 bathroom breaks. I guess I also paused to take some selfies at the Apple Orchard Falls waterfall. I was glad to be feeling good. My thighs warned of possible cramps as I stepped up some high rocks. After the falls come the staircase. I took it easy and did fine on this. The girls from Horton's class I met earlier showed up in this area and I lead them all the way up to the BRP before they passed me at AID #7. This section was about not doing anything stupid. Don't press too hard. Just hike. The ascent ends about a half mile past the aid station and the BRP. Last year I was escorted by the sweeper and medical personnel up to the BRP where I got a ride. So, I didn't even really finish the section. But I finished the section more than 70 minutes faster this year. I was a little under a 23-minute pace which is not great but was basically twice as fast as last year. Last year was a disaster.

AID STATION #7

It's steep at the top. I passed the upper, smaller Apple Orchard Falls, passed through Connector Trail, passed over the AT, and pulled into Sunset Fields. I grazed at the aid station again. Got a full cup of ice and had many cold cups of water which felt great. Since AOF my phone had refused to take a picture (software failure). I knew this could be fixed by re-powering my phone but that would mess up my GPS recordings so I would have to live without pictures. I was pleased that I had discovered that the new cord powered the phone up quickly and that the front left pocket of my pack was the perfect place to store my phone and charger. It stayed still and didn't weigh down my pants. First thing in the morning I wrapped my earbuds around my neck for when I would want to access them, but I never did. No podcasts, no music the whole time.

Somewhere in here, I received a note from Ed McKeown apologizing that he was not there. They had a flat tire. He wanted to be there to cheer his friends on. I had been able to communicate my progress with my wife Ruth a few times from mile 6 to 14 but went dark until near AOF where I shared the good news that I was pretty sure I would finish this year. Earlier in the day my oldest son Ty shared on a group chat how thankful he was to not be me at this moment. I thought to myself this is a great moment to be me. This will be (hopefully) one of my greatest achievements and happiest moments. But I get it. So, I had a couple miles where I could text her but lost communication again as I headed down into the final 4+ mile descent to the finish line.

It got lonely on the other side of the BRP. There were some mud issues but not bad. I met a couple non-runners coming up toward me. One of them said I was almost to the aid station, but it ended up being much further than it seemed it should have been. Finally, I reached the gravel road where the aid station had ceased to be. About 2.7 more miles of non-technical but steep downhill road. I ran some but it hurt my legs. I walked and ran. Saw nearly no one. I was still counting how many people were behind me. I guessed there were about 70 behind me (but according to the released final stats 307 of 313 finished and I finished #274 so there were actually 39 behind me. My best guess is that I did a bad job estimating what happened at aid stations. Anyway, a couple guys passed me with about 2 miles left I kidded them that they had too much energy for this late in the race. They encouraged me to finish strong. I hurried along looking over my shoulder. I came upon a few people along the road waiting to cheer on family members as they finished. With about a half mile left, I saw a group of maybe 3 appear behind me. I decided I couldn't have them beating me, so I picked it up and ran to the finish. Turns out that these last 3 miles were some of my fastest times all day.

THE FINISH

I took the right turn into the camp and into the grassy field. I heard cheering as I came into sight. I could see and hear several of my RVTR friends cheering me to the finish line. I saw David Horton spring to his feet to meet and greet me at the finish line. I wish I could remember exactly what he said to me, but it was so nice and so encouraging. He remembered me and my story. He got on his bullhorn and told everyone something like. "I love this. Marty didn't finish last year. I love it when people come back after not finishing. He did it, he trained harder, and he did it. He got better/faster and finished this year. Good job." I told him I had gotten smarter, and I pointed out my smaller backpack that I was wearing (he had mocked me for last year's oversized one). I admit I got a little emotional talking to him. A big part of the last year for me had been living to complete this race. It was a big deal that I had been able to accomplish this.

It was a couple minutes before I even thought to stop my GPS timers. Fortunately, Jack Bugo

had taken pictures of me finishing the race and I could see the finish time. I restarted my phone so that I could take pictures again. I got Horton to take a selfie with me. I picked up my running shorts as a reward for completing Promise Land.

Many RVTR friends came over to congratulate me. Joey Klein was there with Caleb Johnson and Caleb's son. Joey and Ed have been my run chat buddies for probably 6 months now. They are great encouragers and friends and I appreciate them greatly. Jack Bugo came over and told me he got some good photos of my finish and he definitely did. Matt Pisenti, Dru Sexton, Jennifer Deforest, Jacob, and Jared Coccia all expressed their congratulations. I got to talk later with Dru and Horton about Dru's amazing achievement. I finally made it back to the pavilion and had 3 pieces of cold pizza. The first pizza of the year for me. There are few feelings better than stopping running. I was soaking up the post-race endorphin high now. But I would soon break away to start the 70-minute drive back home.

Ruth has been very encouraging to me. Confident that I would complete the race. I had no cell coverage and was unable to report my finish. I hung out after the race for 30 or 40 minutes chatting and cheering other people to the finish line. My phone ran out of charge during this time, so I was unable to let Ruth know I was even alive until a good time later on my drive back home. She has been my training buddy out running and hiking with me. It is great to have a partner like her where I don't have to choose between her and training. I can do both at once - spend time with her, training, exercising, in God's beautiful creation.

THE AFTERMATH

I felt amazingly good. Not completely broken, and able to walk when I got home. Ruth said she ought to put me to work. I hung out a bit then headed for the shower to scrub off the mud, sweat, grime, and poison ivy. I spent the rest of the evening sitting around watching Braves baseball, the Liverpool soccer replay, and chatting with family. I slept without cramps waking me up. A couple days later I could walk pretty well but my thighs were still very sore and did not want to do things like step into jeans or go upstairs. On Tuesday I was able to hike McAfee Knob but when I tried to run my legs rebelled and forced me to stay at hiking speed. 5 days later I can imagine running again.

WHAT WAS BETTER THIS YEAR?

Why did I run faster/better? One possibility is the much lighter, securely stowed backpack. I came into this race with a delicate back. I had thrown it out about 3 weeks ago and it had been aggravated for 2 weeks and re-aggravated as I tried to tile my bathroom floor. But the pack didn't bother my back there were no issues.

A second, more likely possibility is the weather. It stayed cool (but not too cool) and I didn't get overheated or sweat that much so cramps were less of an issue.

A third possibility is that even though I didn't go slower I conserved energy early (and throughout) by never running uphill.

A fourth possibility is that I did not have foot problems. I ran down Cornelius Creek much better this year than last. Might have been the feet.

POST-RUN NUMBER CRUNCHING

I love to have data and crunch numbers. That's one of the reasons that it killed me that when I got to Sunset Fields Aid station for the second time, I accidentally pushed pause on my Strava run. I didn't notice for my best guess is 25 minutes/1.3 miles when I turned it back on/resumed. Fortunately, I was also recording on GAI GPS. I like to go by Strava. I've recently gotten into looking at the GPX files/raw data these apps create. Basically, every second or so they record the time, latitude, longitude, and elevation. When paused they don't. The app crunches the numbers, hopefully, smoothes out the data so the error is not as significant, and spits out paces, distances, elevation changes, etc. So, I created a Frankenstein file where I took the data from Gaia that Strava did not have and inserted it into the Strava file, and re-uploaded the new file as a private file for me only. I also had to change the date because it (rightly) thought this was a duplicate run. I kept it private because then it won't add to my year total stats, plus I already had pictures and likes and comments on the original Strava file. Anyway, the upshot is that I was able to get real data and paces for the time I missed. I also trimmed off the end while I had already finished but was talking to Horton but hadn't stopped my Strava run.

So, the new totals showed 36.03 miles total, 9:10:50 (though the finish line shows 9:10:48 as I cross the finish). 7412' elevation, 8125 calories burned, 15:17/mile pace. But I was also interested in the new numbers for miles 30 and 31 that had been messed up (I didn't do a 47-minute mile).

During the run, I noticed after completing the initial 4.4-mile climb that my time was (I thought) exactly the same as last year. And then again after completing the first downhill segment at mile 8.1, my time was the same as the year before. This was utterly baffling to me. Because I had intentionally gone out slow and I had succeeded. I had more energy. I had not run as hard. I was in so much better condition for the rest of the race at this point and yet I hadn't lost time. I had planned to lose time. But I did not. I filed it away that I would compare my segment and mile times after the race. I'll post pictures of the data by segment and mile but here is the easy takeaway. I ran (hiked) the first mile 91 seconds slower this year, mile 2 was 2 seconds slower, mile 3 was 5 seconds slower, mile 4 was even, then after that, every mile was faster (in seconds) 23, 36, 8, 22, 55, 42, 132, 49, 64, 73, 96, 93, 278, 191, 64, 54, 163, 269, 87, 129, 148, 59, 191, 192, 2683, 859, and 1341.

It's easier to visualize (less data) by segments though. The course alternates between uphill and downhill, with 4 segments each. Here is how my time compared this year to last in each of those segments:

Up 1 - 4.28 miles - 2214' - 0:58 slower

Down 1 - 3.73 miles - 837' - 0:03 slower

Up 2 - 4.30 miles - 1337' - 6:10 faster

Down 2 - 7.80 miles - 2835' - 18:41 faster

Up 3 - 4.06 miles - 984' - 6:21 faster

Down 3 - 2.27 miles - 492' - 1:46 slower

Up 4 - 4.13 miles - 2082' - 70:13 faster (more than this because I did not complete the segment in 2022)

Down 4 - 4.38 miles - 2214' - didn't start in 2022.

THANKS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Thanks to everyone who has encouraged me in these types of adventures. This was a great day and I'm thankful that I get to share these experiences with you. I thank God for enabling me

to do this, for keeping me healthy, and for putting me in a position where I am able to train. I love living in the mountains of SW Virginia. I am very blessed.