

Promise Land 2018 had previously been my best race. My only goal had been to have enough left in me to bomb down the last 5k. The climb up Apple Orchard Falls was fun as I passed a number of young guys looking quite sad as they took breaks. I met my goal, passing a guy at a sub-6-minute mile, but then letting him go by me a mile from the finish, not realizing we were #10 and 11. Still, finished at 5:38 and 1st Masters feeling great.

In 2019 I figured I could do it faster, and although starting with a hurt foot from running barefoot on the roads a couple weeks before (stupid), I proceeded to fly down the grassy road early in the race chasing Brenton Swyers. I knew I was in trouble when the gravel road beyond Cornelius Creek was much more effort at the same pace I had done the previous year. I was quite sad climbing up Apple Orchard Falls and quads were completely shot coming down to the finish. I limped in at 6:20 something.

In 2020 I was waiting to sign up to see how my training was going and thinking that this Corona virus that had been dominating the news would blow over and we would return to normal. Of course, that never happened and there was no Promise Land that year. I didn't do any big spring races in 2021 or 2022 (really just doing JIM and Hellgate both years) and training for MMT100 dominated 2023. However, after a pretty good run at the Holliday Lake 25K (except for adding an extra half mile by missing a turn), I was ready to return to Promise Land in 2024.

Coming into 2024, I didn't have any real goals except to be under 6:00 hours and not have a repeat of my sad 2019 performance. I knew Shannon Howell was hoping to break 6 hours and since we had spent many hours at Hellgate (and she has beaten me every time), I figured I would run with her to help her meet that goal. Having spent the day before the race with my daughter, Abby, at Lawn Days for admitted students to UVA, I got a hotel room in Bedford as a compromise to get Abby to come to the race. Shannon was staying at the same hotel and was going to give me a drive to the start.

We got to start around 5 and after checking in, hung out in the car for a while longer at the start. One of my favorite things about Horton races is the pre-race prayer and then singing the national anthem before the start. So, after the pre-race traditions and lining up somewhere in the back of the front, we were off at 5:30. Shannon had been off to the side of the start and taking it easy on that first mile of road running, I quickly lost sight of her. As the climb got steeper, I slowed a bit but the 6,000 foot climbing treadmill sessions I had been doing a couple times a week seemed to be paying off. I finally caught up with Shannon around a mile and a half in, chatted for a few minutes but decided to push on. I did some power hiking on the steepest parts of the road but continued to move pretty well. Abby and I had driven up to Overstreet Falls before the pre-race dinner so once I noticed the fallen tree above the road, I knew the Glenwood Horse Trail and the turn up the singletrack would soon be there.



1 Hanging with protesters after getting gels at the Corner



2 Abby at Overstreet Falls evening before the race

The last four times I had been on this section of trail had been coming from the other direction at about 4:00 in the morning. Quite different experience running uphill when dawn is getting ready to break. I was able to run much of the singletrack with some quick hiking breaks and soon I was to the short descent to the grassy road. Once hitting the grassy road. I did push a little at the beginning of this section and within a few miles came upon a pack of about eight runners. I noticed one of them was John Andersen and when he called out “who is back there?” my response was “Someone who is probably making a poor race decision.” I slowed down a little to run with this group and we saw the most brilliant sunrise over towards Lynchburg with the rays of the sun framed by clouds and fog in the valley. It would have been nice to grab a photo of the sunrise, but I was racing and feeling pretty good about it. I ran with this group until Aid Station 2. I got out before most of them, seeing Brenton Swyers coming up to the aid station before I started the climb to the highest point of the race. This year I had run the grassy

road section the slowest of all three of my Promise Lands.

It had started to get a bit chilly and quite foggy, which was okay since I was still working the climbs. I ran the little climbs pretty well and this section seemed quite short this year. Hitting the highest point of the race, I then started the relatively short gravel road descent to Sunset Fields on the Parkway. I stopped to take a leak and John then caught back up with me. I was complaining a bit that my digestive system didn't feel quite 100%, probably due to the half a pizza I had eaten the night before. I wasn't sure if I might need to duck into the woods to do some paperwork. That feeling passed and after filling my handheld with Tailwind at the Sunset Fields aid station, I started on the descent down the mountain.

I left the aid station just before John and started to think that I might have a chance at beating him, so I needed to put some space between us since he can definitely outclimb me. Technical downhill is my specialty, so I pushed the descent down to Cornelius Creek, passing a few runners, including Rachel Corrigan, who was second lady. Coming into the aid station, Horton called out that I was first lady, since my hair is starting to get a bit long. Laughing about that, I grabbed some water and then started down the slightly downhill gravel road section. For years I had never been interested in running with music, but after finding it can really help with motivation, I started doing it more recently. I had put together a playlist specifically thought out for Promise Land with the intention of starting my music at Cornelius Creek. I generally planned the songs around the speed and effort I was thinking I would be running so the first song up was *Scratch Gravel Road*, a bluegrass song from The Special Consensus. I continue to push the section a little but the effort wasn't too hard and one of those miles was even at sub-7 pace.

I reached the turn to the single track up to Colon Hollow in no time and soon hit some pretty muddy sections. It is weird how emotional you can become during longer runs and when a German remake (in English) of John Denver's *Country Roads* came on, I actually started to tear up a little. The climb up to Colon Hollow seemed much easier than the last two times I raced and before I knew it, I was up at Colon

Hollow. Here I took the only food from aid stations I ate all day, an orange slice. I had been fueling exclusively on Huma Gels that I had picked up at Ragged Mountain Running Shop the day before during the UVA visit. The rolling roads after Colon Hollow went pretty well and I ran basically all of it. When I reached the gravel road, I noticed that I had cell service and decided to give a quick text to Abby to tell her to show up at the race earlier than she planned. I had texted her "Running fast" and then I got a call from Abby. In my only partially functioning brain, I thought it was just a coincidence that she was calling me at the same time I was texting her. A quick conversation with her and I hung up and started running again. Good thing because Horton came driving up the road in a jeep shortly thereafter.

Soon it was the short downhill back into Cornelius Creek. My GPS had gone bonkers and was telling me I was only running a 19:00 min mile pace downhill. Guess I just had to run by feel. My playlist had switched over to songs about mountains (*How Mountain Girls Can Love*), songs about Virginia (*Back to Virginia*), and some German music. Maybe it was that the race seemed to occur earlier this year, but the poison ivy didn't seem as bad or high as it had been in the past down to Cornelius Creek. The water in the creek also didn't seem too high as I think it came only up to my knees at the crossing. As I headed down the short out and back to the aid station, I caught a glimpse of the actual first lady, Sawyer, running strong up to the last climb. When I hit the aid station, I knew I needed some electrolytes, so struggled to open my LMNT Habanero Lemon packet and dump in my water. I also took another gel, this one the first with caffeine.

The climb up Apple Orchard Falls was the weakest section of my race and I did not run as many sections as I probably could have. My music included songs about suffering (*Children of the Mountains*) and praises through that suffering (*Praise You In This Storm*). The stairs were especially hard and I don't think I was hiking as quickly as a could have. I got passed by a guy I had passed on the way down to Cornelius Creek. My stomach was feeling quite sour and I just didn't want to keep drinking that habanero lemon LMNT. I was getting sad. In my head I was planning to run the final downhill to the finish at a nice easy 8 min/mile pace. Then closer to the top Rachel Corrigan, second lady, passed me. I had passed her on the downhill from Sunset fields. My music had changed over to songs like *10,000 Reasons* by Matt Redman and *Even If* by Mercy Me.

Finally, I had reached the top and started jogging again. Dumped the electrolytes so I could refill with water. I looked over and saw Michelle Andersen coming over to me. Why would she be running toward me with some flasks? I went over to the aid station and filled my handheld. I looked over my shoulder and saw John Andersen with Brenton Swyers right behind him. I believe a four letter word came out of my mouth, I pounded two ginger ales to settle my stomach and started off across the Parkway.

Right as I had hit the aid station, Mercy Me's *Almost Home* came through on my playlist. It's a powerful song based on scripture that reminds us to preserve through suffering to "finish the race". While it of course is referring to struggles of our earthly journey, the words of the song and metaphors that Paul uses in the scripture on which the song is based, was absolutely perfect for this point of the race after a brutal climb and less than 5 miles to go. I've included the full lyrics of this song at the end of the report since it is so good. I started to tear up again and pushed hard toward the last slight uphill of the race.

At this point, I had planned that my music would change over to some German party music (Schlagermusik) and *Bring Mich Nach Hause* came on. While the song is about wanting to go back to Mallorca, the tempo and beat were perfect for crushing down a rocky, technical descent with Brenton right on my tail. I tried to put a little space between us but every time I did, he managed to close the gap

again. I was running a little reckless and finally found a rock with my foot. I shouted out pretty loud, took about 8 steps in a very crouched over position, but managed to stay upright. A little before the falls and the gravel road I passed by Rachel.



3 Running it in

Once I hit the gravel road, I started moving pretty quickly. I thought I was outrunning Brenton but then heard footsteps pounding behind me. "You're going to make me run this hard, aren't you?" I shouted to him. "You aren't making it easy" he replied. We ran down hill at slightly faster than 5:30 pace. There was no way I was going to maintain this pace, so I let him go, but still managed to clock a sub-6-minute mile. I kept Brenton in my sights and kept looking behind me to see if there was any sign of John. Still no one. Another mile at just over 6 min and I had passed the mark for 1 mile to finish. Finally, the stop sign was up ahead, signaling less than a quarter mile to go. I kept up the pace for the short distance on the grass with Horton calling out my name and second lady. I looked up and saw Abby sitting there at the finish line and taking my picture. I'm so thankful

she got to be a part of this great race that I had. I bested my PR from 2018 by 8 minutes, finishing just a few seconds over 5:30 and getting first masters.

Taking a moment to catch my breath and recover, I watched as the next couple of runners came in including John and Rachel. After watching several runners finish, I learned that the showers were broken. You should have seen the look on Abby's face as she had been promised that I would have a shower and there would be no smelly runner in "her" car. Well, into the creek I had to go and cleaned up.

So many people I want to thank for making this now my best race. First my wife Jessica for putting up with my training and constant talking about running. Shannon, for driving me to the start. Side note, up until a few days before the race, for some reason Jessica thought Shannon and I were sharing a hotel room. Abby for spending some quality time with me at UVA, being part of a great day, and driving me home. Ironbound gym for letting me put the treadmills through hell. John, for inspiring me to run hard in the mountains and especially David Horton for holding this great race.



4 Finish Line with Horton

Almost Home

By Mercy Me

*Are you disappointed?
Are you desperate for help?
You know what it's like to be tired
And only a shell of yourself.
Well, you start to believe
You don't have what it takes
'Cause it's all you can do
Just to move, much less finish the race.*

But don't forget, what lies ahead

*Almost home
Brother, it won't be long
Soon all your burdens will be gone
With all your strength
Sister, run wild, run free
Hold up your head, keep pressing on
We are almost home*

*Well, this road will be hard
But we win in the end
Simply because of Jesus in us
It's not if, but when
So take joy in the journey
Even when it feels long
Oh, find strength in each step
Knowing Heaven is cheering you on*

*We are almost home
Brother, it won't be long
Soon all your burdens will be gone
With all your strength
Sister, run wild, run free
Hold up your head, keep pressing on
We are almost home*

*Almost home
Almost home*

*I know that the cross has brought Heaven to us
Make no mistake, there's still more to come
When our flesh and our bone are no longer between
Where we are right now and where we're meant to be
When all that's been lost is made whole again
When these tears and this pain no longer exist
No more walking, we're running as fast as we can
Consider this our second wind*

*Almost home
Brother, it won't be long
Soon all your burdens will be gone
With all your strength
Sister, run wild, run free
Hold up your head, keep pressing on
We are almost home*

*Almost home
Almost home*

*We are almost home
Almost home
Almost home
We are almost home*