

"Most Enjoyable Ultra in the East"

Promise Land 50k

by David Horton

I received a very encouraging email from Scott Mills on Monday, April 26 saying, "The Promise Land 50k is the MOST enjoyable race in the east." I must agree! This was the fourth year of the Promise Land 50K, and in this very short period of time, it has developed a well-deserved reputation according to many runners ... not just my biased self! It has it all!

- 1) A great start/finish location. A big grassy field greets the majority of runners who choose to camp the night before the race ... where we have a pizza blast and bonfire on Friday night prior to the race, and a great cookout for all runners and crews after the race on Saturday.
- 2) A great a course. Over 7,400 feet of gain and an equal amount of loss, some very tough climbs, and great descents, some technical trails, and some nice soft grassy roads.
- 3) Great views! The runners are usually high on the mountain (highest elevation just over 4,000 feet, starting and finishing at 1,200 feet) when the sun comes up due to the early 5:30 a.m. start. Spectacular views of the mountains all around with spring, grass and flowers evident at the lower elevations. 4) Great streams. You run for several miles adjacent to the Cornelius Creek and then later, the famous (infamous) climb along the Apple Orchard Stream passing the signature mark of the race, Apple Orchard Falls, the best waterfall along any ultra that I know of.
- 5) Great awards. The overall male and female winners received Patagonia jackets with other award finishers receiving Patagonia bags. All other finishers received Patagonia Ridge Runner shorts.

Runners were awakened at 4:30 a.m. by the playing of the Star Spangled Banner by Camille Rabon on the French horn. Most runners were pleased that the regular wake-up call, by a noted singer, DID NOT wake them up at this race!

In the women's field, the favorite was Annette Bednosky (Boone, NC). Annette has been running fantastic in the last year, winning several races. No one else appeared to be in her league.

The same was true in the men's field. Eric Grossman (Louisville, KY) had already won 4 ultras in 2004. Matt Kirk (High Point, NC) had just recently won the Umstead 100 Miler in a very fast time. Alex Kahl (Somerset, NJ) had raced very well at the Holiday Lake 50k in February. Scott Eppleman (Coppell, TX) is a noted ultra runner who figured to be in the chase as well. One of my running students at Liberty University, Andrew Ponder, ran his first ultra at Holiday Lake in February and had gone from 27th place at the halfway point to finish in 6th place. I had advised him to go out with the leaders at Promise Land and see what happens.

By the second aid station (Reed Creek - 8.6 miles), Grossman had a 3-minute lead over Ponder and 4 minutes over Eppleman. The rest of the day saw Grossman pull away from everyone. Seeing that he was not going to get the course record, Grossman pushed the pace to break Scott Jurek's record of 41 minutes in 2002 up the Apple Orchard Mountain Trail (advertised distance 2.8 miles - real distance 3.4 miles). Grossman broke the record in 40 minutes.

Grossman's final time of 4:41:09 was 11 minutes off Clark Zealand's course record. Eppleman and Ponder ran together through 19.3 miles at which point Ponder hit the wall. Eppleman continued on and finished second in 5:19 - almost 38 minutes behind Grossman.

David McCombs (Quantico, VA), a previous winner of the Mountain Masochist 50 Miler, was a late entrant. McCombs had only been training for four weeks and had very little mountain training.

McCombs went out easy, but moved through the field throughout the day; finally taking 3rd place in a time of 5:26:15. Scott Brockmeier (Chapel Hill, NC) took the masters title in 5:44.

Scott Mills (Alexandria, VA), age 52 and Bull Run Race Director, finished 9th overall in 5:36:59 to take the grand master's award. Ponder, having been in 2nd place at 19 miles, showed a lot of guts by hanging in there and finishing in 19th place in a time of 6:05:30.

Bednosky had a 7 minute lead (8.6 miles) over first time ultra runner, Emily Potter (Savannah, GA) and Amy Thompson (Boone, NC) with Beth Darnell (Catonsville, MD) another 2 minutes back.

Just like Grossman, Bednosky continued to pull away the rest of the day, finishing in a fine time of 5:34:30, 7th overall! Darnell caught and ran with Potter through 19 miles where Darnell began pulling away. Darnell cruised on in to take 2nd place in 6:07:22.

Sophie Speidel (Charlottesville, VA) ran an even pace race and took over 3rd place on the Apple Orchard Falls climb. Sophie took 3rd place and the master's title finishing in a time of 6:14:01. Thompson took 4th place (her best ultra ever) in 6:21:48. Rachel Toor (Durham, NC) took 5th place in 6:31:34, just edging out Potter by less than a minute. Victoria Kendall (Arlington, VA) took the grand masters title with a time of 8:26:06. Betty Leverton (Navarre, FL) became the oldest female finisher we have ever had at any of the local ultras ... age 63.

Runners have seen bears on this course before during the race, no such luck this year. However, the crew at Sunset Fields saw a bear cross the road less than 50 yards from the aid station as they were arriving to set up.

The "fastest fat boy" went to Kevin Wilson (Marion, VA) and the "best blood" went to Holly Pyle (Alexandria, VA) in her first ultra.

We had some unique combinations at the race this year: father/daughter (the Potters), father/son (the Kirks), brothers (the Garbees), 2 sets of sisters (the Andrews & Pyles), husband/wife (The Townsends, Marshalls and Finkles) and 2 Mike Prices' (unrelated).

The least-trained person was probably Frank Villa, the sponsor of all our ultras. Frank had been training 3 miles per week!!! Yet, he set his PR on the course finishing in 7:43.

I teach a running class at Liberty and of the ___ finishers, 13 are in my present running class or have been in the class previously. Who says ultra running is an old person's sport?

This was the second race in the Lynchburg Ultra Series (LUS). The final race in the LUS is the Mountain Masochist 50 Miler on October 16. The MMTR is also the Montrail Ultra Cup Championship race. This might be the most competitive race in the U.S. in 2004. The field WILL BE LIMITED to 300 runners; no waiting list ... no substitutes.

The Promise Land 50k's motto ... "Not Your Average 50k" is just that ... A very special, unique, pretty, challenging and as Scott Mills said, "The most enjoyable race in the east."

Hope to see you at the MMTR 50 in October. And don't forget the Hellgate 100k in _____. Another Horton adventure!!!!