

Seven Years at the Promise Land 50K

By David Horton

I don't know of any race setting that is better than PL. We have a big pavilion and a very large field for camping. The vast majority of the runners camped out in this area. Runners hung out and shared war stories and many set by the roaring camp fire and got to know each other better.

A wake-up call went out to the runners at 4:30 a.m. After a light breakfast that was provided to the runners, everyone was called to the starting line. Runner Jeannie Craig (Bedford, VA) sang the national anthem beautifully. At precisely 5:30 a.m. the race began. I am a stickler for starting events on time...so I make sure all my races start on time...as should all races.

There were four runners who had a very good chance of winning the men's race. Eric Grossman (Emory, VA) won the race in 2006, but was just recovering from an injury. Local runner Jonathan Basham was second in 2006. Basham won the Black Mountain Marathon in February and was second to Sean Andrish at Bel Monte in March. In 2006, Basham set the record on the 479 mile Colorado Trail. He is on the verge of becoming an elite ultrarunner. Pete Breckinridge (Norfolk, VA) has run two ultras, the JFK 50 in November of 2006 and Holiday Lake 50K in February...winning both. Aaron Schwartzbard (Reston, VA) also has many high finishes in ultras over the last few years.

In the women's field, Sarah (Space Cadet) Johnston (Danville, VA) has become an excellent runner, winning the Bel Monte 50K in March. However, she had been bothered lately by an Achilles tendon problem. Previous winner Annette Bednosky (Jefferson, NC) had won ultras in each of the last two weekends and is regaining the form that enabled her to win the Western States two years ago. Tracey Schrage (Richmond, VA) was running her first ultra but had shown that she had lots of speed and an ability to run up steep hills.

As expected, Breckinridge took the lead and looked to make it three ultras, three wins. I saw Breckinridge near the Colon Hollow aid station (19.3 miles). I asked him how he liked the course and he said that it was brutally tough. He lives and trains on the mountain and trails around Norfolk, VA!!!!

By the time Breckinridge got to the next aid station, Cornelius Creek, he was light headed and staggering slightly. (The next 3 miles are the toughest in the course as it climbs up 2,000 feet up by Apple Orchard Falls all the way back up to Sunset Fields.) Breckinridge arrived at Sunset Fields about one minute before Basham. Both looked very tired. Basham checked into the last aid station (2.6 miles from the finish) just a few seconds after Breckinridge but left just a few seconds before Breckinridge. From there to the finish, it is all downhill on a gravel road. Basham crossed the finish line 31 seconds before Breckinridge for his first ultra win and becoming one of the best ultra runners in the nation. Basham's time of 4:41:25 is the fourth fastest time ever at PL. Grossman paced himself very well and took third place in 4:53:59. Schwartzbard took fourth place in 4:57:14.

For the women, Bednosky took an early lead but was followed closely by Johnston and Jennifer Belt (Blacksburg, VA). Schrage was also very close. Bednosky checked into Cornelius Creek first with Johnston and Belt only a minute behind and Schrage another minute back. From there on in, Bednosky pulled away to take the win in 5:36:16. Johnston had significant problems with her Achilles tendon and faded but still managed to finish. Schrage ran strong in her first ultra to take second place in a time of 5:49:49. Belt finished third in 5:54:41.

The Master's winners were Derrick Carr (Fredericksburg, VA) and Annette Bednosky. The Grand

Master's winners were Herman Richards (Stockton, NJ) and Nancy Ferris (Goode, VA) in the times of 6:12:28 and 7:15:48 respectively. The men's Super Masters winner was Bob Anderson (Woodbridge, VA) in 7:16:50.

The Best Blood award went to Byron Backer (Greenville SC). Backer was wearing a white Patagonia shirt. He had two huge round red spots of blood and streaks running down from these spots. You can guess where these spots were. The Fastest Fat Boy award went to Scot Hayward (Hudson NC).

The overall winners received a Watershed suitcase from Patagonia. Second through 10th place males and 2nd through 5th place females and age group winners also received Patagonia Half-Mass bags. All sub-10-hour finishers received a pair of Patagonia Ultra shorts.

A special award of a monogrammed "Lazy Man's Chair" was given to the top Liberty University and Virginia Tech students. The VT award went to Steven Baker (5:08:08). The LU award went to Krista Meisch (6:30:04).

We had 56 area runners, many of them who are college students, complete the PL 50K. I am very proud of this fact. It wasn't until the third year of the MMTR 50 Miler that we had more than this number for the entire field. Ultrarunning has become an accepted and popular sport in southern Virginia.

We had some very good sponsors: Montrail provided some shoes; Nathan provided some hand-held bottles and packs; Frank Villa provided some financial support; Black Diamond supplied some head lamps; and Conquest provided a replacement drink. We should never take for granted our sponsors as we could not have quality events without them. Next year's event will be on April 26 and will be limited to 300 runners.

I am ready for a break as this is the 4th ultra that I have directed in the last 6 months. Thank you to all the workers and crews that made this a great 2007 Promise Land for everyone!