

LA LUZ TRAIL RUN HISTORY

The La Luz trail run began in 1965 with nine runners meeting at the trailhead to run the 6 mile ascent up the west face of the Sandia Mountains. This first race was won by Raymon Leyba in an hour and 20:44 minutes. The original 6 mile trail led to a mine near the top of the rockslide. Then in 1966 the trail was rebuilt to a nice average grade of about 8.5% and included a great section across the rock slide with beautifully filled in rock chips to make it easy to run. The new trail was now 7.8 miles long climbing 3600 feet ending near the top just south of the summit. Passing through many different life zones the new course would give hikers and runners awesome views of the Rio Grande valley below.

The next year's race was won by Steve Gatchupin who won again in the next several years with a great best time of 66:23. Steve was famous for also winning the Pikes peak marathon six times in the late 60's and 70's.

In the following years other talented local runners gave themselves a test trying to see how fast they could run. The New Mexico Cross country team also began to use the La Luz as its first race of the season and soon everyone was training for the ultimate challenge of running "The Light" as La Luz means in Spanish.

In 1972 a young 18 year old Tony Sandoval broke Steve's record with an amazing 65:23. He later became the 1980 Olympic Trial marathon winner. Tony was so talented he ran a national class 1:49.5 800 in college at Stanford, a 27:40 10K best and later several (close to world record) 2:10 marathons. The second placer that day was Tony's friend and coach (Rick Rojas) who had helped train Tony while he had run for Los Alamos high school. Rick pushed Tony to a fast time. Rick was a national class runner who had held the N.M. high school mile record in 1970 of 4:12.6, which was never broken! He later went on to represent the U.S. internationally in cross country and track, setting a world record for 15 K of 43:12 in 1981 as well!

Then in 1973 UNM's Faustino Salazar won with a 65:55 followed by his teammate Lionel Ortega in 1974 with a new record of 63:24! Lionel and Faustino were friends but also fierce competitors who really pushed each other.

The next year Faustino and Lionel went for the record and set a great pace with Faustino finally breaking away at the steep concrete stairs with some 600 yards to go. Later Lionel shook his head and said "Faustino hit those stairs like a tiger and was gone. Oh well, second place!"

In 1976 Rick Trujillo who was famous for winning Pikes Peak won with a good 62:13 but could not break the record. He had come to La Luz to try to break the magic hour barrier. He had been pushed by a small Jemez Indian by the name of Al Waquie. Al could have beaten Rick but he was so respectful of the great champion that he stayed back and let Rick lead. Al later said he could have run faster but had let Rick set the pace.

The next year Al confidently won pushing himself with no competition. Unfortunately the timers had not even arrived when Al finished so they gave him a 60.00 flat. Too bad Al did not have his own watch on that day as he told me he was sure he had run several minutes faster.

The next year Al proved he could go under an hour and recorded the fastest time ever run!! He left his competition in the dust after following Dave Segura for a mile or so. Dave said Al had politely taken the lead even after he had set a blistering pace! Dave was near his best at the time and soon after ran a national 20 year old marathon record of 2:13:59! Al had simply thought the pace too slow, and simply took off! His time of 57:40 beat the likes of Rick Rojas by 4 minutes with Dave Segura another 24 seconds back and Lionel Ortega another minute and change behind. This race was so fast that Al's average pace for the approximate 8 mile distance was 7:12 per mile. I figured he probably hit the overlook in about 33:20 with the last 3 miles in somewhere around 24:20! This means he ran the first 5 miles at 6:40 pace with the last ones at nearly 8 minutes a mile! The race was so competitive that there were 17 runners at an hour 10 or better! My own time was a 66:22 for eight place, but this was over a minute per mile slower than Waquie's pace! La Luz was becoming a major local race and Al Waquie had become a hero and had set the standard for mountain runners!

The following years were won by Al with new records for the longer 10 mile course after the officials added 2 miles to spread out the runners. In 1979 Al won with a 1:14:18 with second placer Lionel Ortega at 1:18:30. Lionel had beaten his Athletic West Olympic hopeful marathoners easily and called this his best race ever. Tony Sandoval had been expected to race Al that day and give him a good race (especially since he was in excellent shape training for the Olympics and was probably the best distance runner in the U.S. at the time as well as awesome uphill) but had not made the start. My younger brother Dave Kirchgessner also set a Junior record of 1:33:16 that has never been broken.

In 1980 Al blazed a 1:12:40 which is definitely the best race ever run on the trail. Al told me he had twice dreamed of running the race in an hour 12 minutes as if this was the fastest time he could imagine. Al had trained very hard and had dedicated this race to his grandfather who had recently passed away. His time is equal to running a 58:40 on the old course with the extra two miles in a fast 14 minutes! I figured this race was even better than Al's earlier 57:40 if you consider the warmer weather that day and the fact that he would have to slow down at least 7 or more seconds a mile (adding the brutally steep extra two miles on the road). The second mile of this pavement section climbs over 600 feet and always seems to take a lot out of a runner's legs. Anyway on this day Al beat the next runner (Tim Tays) by nearly eight minutes! Tim told me they should re-name the race after Al and was amazed at how fast Al could run uphill! Tim had run 8:51 indoors for 2 miles, but was far behind Al with a 1:20:16. Third place went to my friend Ron McCurley with a good 1:22:46.

The next year the race was cancelled because of road construction on the crest highway so Al had to be satisfied with winning Pikes Peak. He set a new record of 3:26 with a record ascent of 2:05, beating Rick Trujillo's best by 8 minutes! The following year the race distance was shortened to nine miles (GPS measured length) which began some 650 yards above the previous start. Al won again with a 1:13:26 beating Ron McCurley's 1:14:29! Ron had run a super race which he had never imagined possible! He told me he had felt so good that he dropped the second place runner Matt Segura at the mile mark and

was on his own till Al Waquie caught him right before the trail! As it turned out, Al had lost about 30 seconds at the start and had to weave through all the runners to catch Ron. I still remember him passing me running with a fast and light tempo after about 3/4 mile! This memory of personally experiencing Al's amazing talent made me feel pretty slow. I finished with a personal record of 1:23:23 but almost 10 minutes behind my friend Al Waquie!

Al won again with the current course record of 1:12 :14 in 1983 and again in 84-85. He was unbeatable and also won on Pikes Peak several more times. I feel Al was the best in the world at uphill mountain running at the time. In my opinion only a couple of runners ever did equivalent races even in the many years that have followed Als personal peak!

Runners like Matt Carpenter from Colorado and Johnathon Wyatt of New Zealand have done other amazing efforts but Als La Luz times will remain as some of the best of all time! In my opinion, (according to my uphill calculation in the next paragraph) Matts amazing 2:01 ascent on Pikes peak in 1993 and Johnathon's string of winning the world championships along with his Mount Washington record of 56:41 are also very comparable to Als best races.

So how do you compare Als best races with other mountain races or flat track races? I have come up with a formula to attempt to compare mountain running with track or flat road races. After looking at many races and comparing them to flat runs I figured that most good runners can climb about 1000 feet in the time it takes them to run a mile. For world class runners this would be closer to 1100 to 1200 feet depending on how good they are uphill. If the world record holder at 5 and 10K (Kenenesa Bekele) was as good as Waquie uphill he would run about a 65 minute present course La Luz. This would in all probability be impossible since other near world class runners have only been able to do about an hour 14 minutes. Looking at all these runners, it seems using a 1100 foot calculation is the closest for comparing these two kinds of running. Using this calculation, the earlier shorter course La Luz would be equal to running 12.7 miles and the present course like 15.2. I calculated these by adding the distance with the gain in altitude/1100 feet, then adding in trail slowdown and altitude effects. For example the original La Luz was 8 miles including the trail and the 300 yards on the road. Then if you take the total gain of 3628 feet divided by 1100, you get 3.3 miles which would add up to total 11.3 miles. Now you add the trail slowdown which would be approximately 5-6 seconds per 1/4 mile slower than a good smooth paved surface. With the rocky and gravel surface this seems reasonable. This would make another 3 minutes and 12 seconds over the 8 mile distance, which would add another .7 tenths of a mile equivalent at a world class 4:35 pace! Now add in the altitude effects of about 8800 feet which I calculate to be about 16-18 seconds a mile and you would get at least 3:12 more minutes making another .7 miles adding up to a total of 12.7 miles! So Waquies best race of 57:40 would be equal to a 4:32.5 pace for 12.7 miles. If you then add on the extra time it would take him to run .4 more tenths of a mile you would get up to the half marathon in a time of about 59:36 or about the time of the present American record of Ryan Hall and only a minute 13 seconds slower than the present world record of 58:23 by Zersenay Tadese!

Waquies other record run in 1980 of 1:12:40 on the longer course equates to about 15.7 miles or a 4:37 pace. This race also equates to about a 1:10:25 on the present course! Basically Waquie would beat top runners by some 30 seconds per mile on his best races!

Another interesting equation is comparing The la Luz to a mile run. Since no one ever ran an hour or its equivalent of about 1:13:15 on the present course except Al, I feel the magic hour barrier had to be at least as good as a 4 minute mile. If this is true, then Al's 57:40 would equate to a 3:50.6! As you look at the next best times ever run you will see they all fall short of this 4:00 mile. Even Faustino Salazar's 60:51 and Pablo Vigil's 1:14:20 would only equate to 4:03 miles according to this comparison.

I realize my 1100 foot equation and mile comparisons are only attempts to compare flat and mountain running but they do make Waquie's efforts very intriguing. According to Al's best track and road race times he was able to climb even better than my equation for world class runners (or around 1400 feet) in the time it would take him to run a mile. This unique ability would make the la Luz equal to only 11.9 miles for Al or a 4:51 pace. Then if you compare the normal speed up from a 12 miler down to a 10K you would get about a 4:38 pace or a 28:45 10K. Sure enough, since Al had run a low 30 minute time in Albuquerque this would be around a 29:00 at sea level on a fast track.

Anyway the next year in 1986 was won by Colorado's Pablo Vigil in a new non Waquie record of 1:14:20 breaking Ron McCurley's previous time. The next year saw another new winner Charles England win in a good 1:18:40 then again in 1988 he did a 1:16:54. Next was Bill Reifsnider with a fast 1:16:30. Bill was so good he could run a near national record 61 minute half marathon but he could not approach Al's times. Then came Dan Maas who was a fast Olympic 1500 meter hopeful. Dan won several more years with his best of 1:14:49 in 1990. In 1993 John Bednarski won with a 1:21:01. John had been a top runner in his prime and was still one of the best in Albuquerque even in his 40's. Then Eddy Helebuyck ran a super fast 1:15:35 as he tried his best to break Waquies record. Eddy was a world class marathoner and holder of several world records for 40 year old runners! He was small and light like Waquie, well suited to running the la Luz.

The next years were dominated by Simon Gutierrez who had been a high school state champion and later international runner for the U.S. Simon was very strong uphill and he later began running for the U.S mountain running team specializing in uphill races like La Luz, Pikes Peak and Mount Washington. Simon won 10 times with a best of 1:15:09 in 1999. This kind of time was very fast considering the erosion on the rock slide and other lower parts of the trail. Today the course is undoubtedly even worse and could be around 4-5 minutes slower than the early days. Winning times are now only around 1:20 at best.

It is therefore unlikely anyone will ever break the legendary Waquie's records. Maybe they do need to rename the race after this man who trained and raced with a driving energy, often running twice a day even after working on trails all day long for the forest service! I believe Al deserves to be considered the

best mountain runner of all time! Other champions have come to win La Luz as you can see from the results pages but no one will ever forget Al Waquie.

Women Of The Trail

The La Luz run has seen many outstanding women runners over the years compete for the title of "La Luz Champ." Lilly Rendt won the first womens trophy in 1967. Then came Lynn Bjorklund who was a threat to most men and also recorded times fast enough to be world ranked in the 3000 meters. She also holds a national high school 3000 meter record of 9:08 set in 1975 that has lasted longer than 33 years! Lynn also won the national cross country title in 74 and 75 and the A.A.U. 2 mile those same years. On the La Luz, Lynn competed against top men and beat many of them over the years she raced. Lynn won the 1974 race and finished 12th overall. David Segura told me he had looked down the trail and saw Lynn only one switchback below him and was worried she would catch him. Dave was a high school champion himself at the time. In 75 Lynn won again with a record of 69:15 which was 10th overall! In 76 she won again with a 1:13:51. I still remember trying to catch Lynn and sprinting past her in the last 50 yards as an eighteen year old. I was really proud of myself, but I knew Lynn had not run her best race that year.

Lynn has also won the Pikes Peak marathon and has the present record for women at 4:15! She did the ascent that day in 1981 in 2:33 which is also the fastest ever run. She has even come back at the age of 51 in 2008 to do a new age group ascent record of 3:20:39! Go Lynn! Lynn has to be the most amazing mountain runner from the late 70's to today!

The next year in 1977, Moo Thorpe won with a 1:23:47, followed by Odette Bonnet. Odette won the next years of 79 thru 80 on the longer course and ran a great time of 1:36:55 in 1980. Odette had been severely pushed by Janine Hill that year who finished only a short distance behind. In the following years Janine did even better and recorded a 1:37:26 and then a 1:33:17 in 85 for a then course record. Janine had the experience and talent from running internationally, and was hard to beat. She had began as a 10k and marathon runner in Canada.

The next winner was a new and tough runner named Kate Washburn. Kate ran an outstanding new record of 1:28:29 in 86. She also won again with a 1:31:10 the next year.

The next winners were Lynn Brown, from Durango, Colorado in 88 with a 1:34:03, Judy Amer in 89 with a 1:39:12 and Maggi Ezzard with a 1:38:47 in 90. Elise Rainbowstar won in 91 with a 1:39:46 and Ann Bockman won in 92 with a fast 1:34:31. In 1993 Elise Rainbowstar won for her second time with a 1:41:21.

In the next three years Marie Boyd won consecutively, doing fast times of 1:33:49; 1:33:41; and then a 1:34:41. Marie was a national class marathoner. Next years winner was Cathy Pierce from Socorro who ran a 1:36:31.

The next year saw a new record by a runner who has beaten the best hill runners in the world! Her name was Magdalena Thorsell. The time she

recorded was a completely unbelievable 1 hour twenty two minutes and 38 seconds! I believe she placed second or third overall! This kind of time is even better than Lynn Bjorklunds 69:15 on the old course. She basically ran a sub 69 minute old course and kept this pace for nearly 14 more minutes on the extra road section. Magdalena also won the Mount Washington road race in 1998 with a course record of 1:10:08 never beaten till 2010, beating world class runners from around the world.

The last winners were Janice Posey in 1999 with a 1:38:52 then Cathy Pierce with a 1:34:47. Kathy won again in 2001 with a 1:42:32.

The only woman to have won more years than Lynn Bjorklund was Rachel Cuellar. Rachel did six performances winning the race between 2002 and 2008. She won again this year in 2011 with her new P.R of 1:34:31! Rachel is a member of the U.S. women's mountain running team that won gold in the 2006 event. The only woman to break her string was Erica Larson, who did an awesome 1:30:23 in 2003. Erica's time was the third fastest ever on the present course! Anita Ortiz also beat Rachel that day doing a fast 1:35:27. Anita was a 5 time U.S. women's team member, four time U.S. champion and the world master's champion in 2004.

In 2009 the great Erica Bowen "Larson" defeated a new runner (Magdalena Donahue) by about a minute and a half with a good 1:36:13. Defending champ Rachel Cuellar was third about six more minutes behind at 1:43:47. Then in 2010 Erica won again with 1:39:45 in a close dual with Rachel Early who was just seconds back! Erica also competes at Pikes Peak and her results over the last several years are very impressive. She has won the marathon many times with a personal best and close to Lynn Bjorklunds course record with a time of 4 hours and 22 minutes. You can go to the Pikes Peak website (pikespeakmarathon.org) to see all the results over the years back to the earliest races!

I hope these results inspire runners everywhere to keep up their running dreams and to remember that no matter how fast or how slow that everyone that challenges the mountain is a true champion! Happy Running!

By Tom

Kirchgessner