

## La Luz Trail Run History

The La Luz trail run began in 1965 when nine runners lined up to climb the six mile ascent up the old trail to the Sandia Crest. Raymon Leyba won that day in an hour and 20:44. The trail had been built to lead to a mine near the top of the rock slide. The next year the trail was recut on the other side of the canyon to be less steep with about a 9% average grade. The first five miles have about an 8% average grade and the last section closer to an 11% grade. The final .6 mile is the steepest part of all with about a 13% grade! The new trail would total around 7.7 miles to reach the summit with a climb of 3600 feet. The trail was easily traveled and had the rock slide filled in with gravel over the roughest sections. The times run on the course quickly improved with both a smooth trail and talented runners. The first great runner was Steve Gatchupin who won in the years 1966, 67, 68, 69 and 71. He was from the Jemez Pueblo like Al Waquie who most mountain runners know was the King of the La Luz. Steve was also famous for winning the Pikes Peak marathon six times in the late 60's and early 70's. Steve ran his best La Luz time in 1968 for a 66:23. He also won Pikes Peak and ran in the Olympic trials marathon all in three weeks that year. Most people do not know that Steve was a top marathoner and had almost made the 1968 Olympic Team, running in Alamosa in preparation for the Mexico City Olympics. I bet he might have made the U.S. team if he had not run Pikes Peak and La Luz so close before! Steve was also inducted into the Native American Hall of fame along with such runners as Billy Mills and Al Waquie.

In 1970 Steve's friend and former state high school champ Harold Sando from Jemez beat him to break up his winning streak. Then in the following years other famous runners came to test themselves on the mountain. The most famous of which was probably Tony Sandoval who later became the 1980 Olympic Trials marathon winner. Tony was probably our nation's best marathoner in the early 80's. His Olympic Trials record of 2:10:19 stood till this Olympic year when Ryan Hall broke it.

In 1972 as a young 18 year old Tony ran a 65:23 to break Steve Gatchupin's record by a full minute. The second placer that day was Rick Rojas who had pushed Tony to a fast time. Rick was also a State Champion from Los Alamos like Tony who holds the N.M. high school mile record of 4:12.6 from back in 1970. This record still stands! Rick's talent allowed him to become a world class runner like Tony. Rick represented the U.S. in the Pan Am games as well as winning the national cross country championships in 1976. He also set a new 15k world record of 43:12 in 1981.

Then in 1973 U.N.M's Faustino Salazar won La Luz with a 65:55. In 74 Lionel Ortega won with a new record of 63:24. Lionel was an all American as well as an earlier high school state champion in cross country. He was later ranked 8th in the U.S. in the marathon and was even better in the half marathon.

The next year saw a new record by Faustino as he destroyed the old time with a 60:51. He had left his U.N.M. teammate Lionel in the dust over the last steep 600 yards with a strong surge at the stairs. Lionel finished in second, but 36 seconds behind. It seemed as if Faustino might be capable of running the course in an hour if he only held a slightly faster pace!

In 1976 another famous runner (Rick Trujillo) came to try the mountain. Rick had won Pikes Peak many times and was a legend. No one could beat him. There was a chance Faustino could but he was not entered this year. There did happen to be a small wiry runner signed up by the name of Alloysious Waquie. He had become an All American in cross country at Haskel Indian College in Kansas. Waquie was also a N.M. state high school champion in 1968. The race began with Rick taking the lead and Al following. No one could stay with the pair as they forged ahead. As the race came to the final steep two miles Al refused to pass Rick, respecting him. The pace was fast but not unbearable for Al as he later said he could have gone faster. Rick won that day with a 62:13 with Al right behind.

The next year Al became the first to run the course in an hour flat! His pace was 7:30 per mile over the nearly 8 mile distance which started 320 yards below the trail on the road. He was unchallenged and seemed to be unbeatable. In fact, Al would never be beaten again in his career, on "his mountain".

The next year Al did even better and ran an incredible time of 57:40 which left his competitors in shock and over 30 seconds a mile back! This time is 7:12 per mile (counting the race as 8 miles) and would

make unbelievable splits if you saw his times. I figured he hit the overlook (4.7 plus nearly two tenths on the road making 4.9 miles) in around 33 minutes, then the next .4 to the rockslide in around 2:40 with the last 2.6 steep miles in around 22 minutes! Rick Rojas said the closest he got was at the start and Dave Segura said he could only hold off Al for a mile or so when Al politely just took over and took off! Dave was another amazingly talented runner as he did a 2:13:59 marathon that year as a 20 year old! This was an American age group record!

Anyway, Rojas had a personal record of 61:39, Dave a P.R. of 62:04 and Lionel a good 63:20, but all far from Al's time. My own time was a 66:22 for 8th place. There were 17 runners under one hour and 11 minutes that day making a very competitive race.

In the year 1979, the race was lengthened two miles to begin right beyond the second cattle guard on the road. Now the course would climb 4,600 feet. Al won again with a 1:14:18. He again beat the best runners badly, with Lionel second at 1:18:30. One of Lionel's Athletics West Olympic hopeful teammates (John Lodwick) finished in third (1:20:12) with Benito Arellano fourth. Tony Sandoval was expected to compete along with the other Athletics West Marathoners and give Al Waquie a race, as he was in top condition, but he did not start the race. My brother Dave also set a 15 year old junior record of 1:33:16 that day, which has not been broken yet.

The following year in 1980 Al ran his dream race as he scorched to a new record of 1:12:40. No one could stay close to Al as he had achieved his goal of running an hour and twelve minutes. Al told me personally that he had actually dreamed twice of running the race in an hour and twelve minutes and sure enough his dreams became reality. This was probably the best race ever run on the trail and it is doubtful many world class hill runners could have beaten Al on this day. Al's time was equivalent to running a 58:40 on the old course with the extra two steep miles in around 14 minutes. I figured that the effort would equate to maybe a few seconds better than his earlier 57:40 by adding a slow down of 7.5 seconds per mile (or about 60 seconds on the old course) because of the draining, extra section on the road. Al's time might have been even faster if the weather had been as cool as the day of 1978. The time also equates to around a 1:10:20 on the present course which is 660 yards farther up the road. Al would have covered this section in around two minutes and twenty seconds at a 6:15 pace, since the lower part of road is a little less steep.

Second placer Tim Tays, told reporters they should name the La Luz after Al after finishing almost 8 minutes behind at 1:20:16. Tim was a college runner at Kansas University who held school records and had run as fast as an 8:51 indoor two mile and 13:36 three mile. Third place went to Ron McCurley with a good 1:22:46.

The next year in 81 the race was cancelled because of road construction, so Al had to be satisfied with winning the Pikes Peak marathon instead of La Luz. He set a new course record of 3:26:17 beating Rick Trujillo's record by 8 minutes!

The next year in 1982, Al won La Luz again after losing 30 or 40 seconds when he was left behind walking up to the starting line. Al had to weave through all the runners and catch up! I still remember him passing me after about 3/4 mile going very fast. Al caught up to the leader Ron McCurley right before the trail. Al must have run a record time to the trail because he later said he had used up a lot of energy to gain the lead. I'll bet he did under 12:30 for this section because Ron probably ran around 13 minutes in order to run such a fast time of 1:14:29. Al then ran with Ron to "recover" till the last four or so miles when he began pulling away. This was my friend Ron's best race ever and he told me that he had felt so good that he had dropped the second place local star Matt Segura at the mile mark. Ron had run other great races such as his Pikes Peak 35-40 record time of 2:15 but never as well as he did this day. Ron's time of 1:14:29 beat everyone badly, except for the little Jemez runner who spoiled it.

The next years were again won by Al all in the 1:12 to 1:15 range. He was unbeatable and had also won Pikes Peak twice on the round trip and once on the ascent, and set records there too, with his best of 3:26 for the marathon. Unfortunately Al began having knee problems because of the pounding of the downhills at Pikes Peak. He did not compete again at La Luz after 1985.

I personally feel Al was the best uphill runner in the country, except possibly Matt Carpenter, who has run slightly faster up the Pikes Peak course. Matt never competed at La Luz. The only other runner who I

consider probably better than Al uphill is the World Champion Jonathon Wyatt from New Zealand, who has won that event many times and also has an incredible record of 56:41 on the Mt Washington run! This time is off the charts and I believe equivalent to running 12.5 miles in 56:41 or a half marathon in the 59:30 something minute range. (better than the American Record and pretty close to the present world record) The shorter La Luz course in it's past good condition would equal maybe 12.6 miles adding in the high altitude, sandy gravel and rocks on the trail. So Waquie's 57:40 could be almost the same as Jonathon Wyatt's record. My calculation is based on adding a mile for every 1000 feet of climbing and also adding in the altitude and trail condition factors.

While talented hill runners might not be able to run a world record on the flat it is also obvious that most world class track runners can not run like a Wyatt, Waquie or Carpenter either. Each kind of running is very different. Using this calculation, the present eroded La Luz course would take almost as long as running 16 miles. So a 1:20 would be like a five minute pace for 16 miles. With the present erosion, especially on the rockslide, it is doubtful if anyone could do much better than about a 1:15 since this would be about equal to running 16 miles at a 4:41 pace. It is therefore probably impossible to break Waquie's record unless the trail is first rebuilt in many sections. (especially in the rockslide area.)

On Pikes Peak, my calculation would make the ascent equal to about 24.5 miles. But a runner must be acclimated to the altitude as well as have good altitude genetics in order to run this well. Otherwise, the times might be closer to running a marathon. People born at sea level would probably not have the lung volume to run at this comparative level as it has been shown that people born and growing up at extremely high altitudes actually have greater lung capacity. They also have more capillaries in their muscles. This does not help them at low altitudes but does allow them to be more efficient extracting the oxygen out of thin air. It is also important to have a high max VO2 which becomes even more important at high altitudes. It has been proven that most average marathoners only do about the same on the Pikes Peak ascent as on a sea level marathon. They usually do even worse if they are not used to the altitude and hills. People like Matt Carpenter do better, and set the standard. This is because he is acclimated to the altitude as well as has a tremendous oxygen uptake of record proportions, and trains specifically on steep inclines with intervals and speed work as well! Matt also told me he would train at high altitude on the weekends but not stay there for long periods of time as he said that this would effect his speed. His 2:01:06 ascent record in 1993 could be equal to about a 2:09 marathon. Since Matt also sprinted a record descent downhill for another hour and 15 minutes that day for a 3:16:39 round trip, it is quite certain he could have gone several minutes faster uphill. This 1993 race might therefore be considered even better than a 2:09 marathon. Unfortunately, people can only speculate about comparing the two types of running and no one will ever know for sure.

Matt has also done many other incredible races, including winning the Leadville 100 mile race in a new record (beating the old one by over 90 minutes). He has won Imogene Pass many times as well as the Vail Hillclimb and Mount Washington. Matt even set a new Mt Evans record in 2008! Matt presently holds the world record for a marathon over 14,000 feet with a 2:52:57. Matt is definitely the best high altitude long distance mountain runner of all time, in my book!

The following year's 1986 La Luz was won by Colorado's Pablo Vigil in a great non Waquie record of 1:14:20 to break Ron McCurley's previous time. Then Charles England won the 87 and 88 races with good times of 1:18:40 and 1:16:54. Then in 89 Bill Reifsnider won with a fast 1:16:30. Bill was so good he could run a half marathon in 61 minutes but he could not beat Waquie's times.

The next year saw a young Olympic 1500 meter hopeful by the name of Dan Maas win the race in a quick 1:14:49! Dan was obviously really tough in hill races too! Dan also won the years in 91, 92, and 95.

In 1993 John Bednarski won with a 1:21:01 and then Eddy Hellebuck won with a super fast 1:15:35. Eddy was a world class 2:11 marathoner and also held several word records for 40 year old runners. He was small and light, like Waquie, well suited to uphill running.

The next years were dominated by another native New Mexican who had been a state cross country champion for Del Norte and college runner at Arizona. His name? Simon Guterrez! Simon was a very fast and gifted uphill runner who had represented the U.S. internationally in cross country. He has also won many mountain races notably the Mount Washington hill climb where he has placed first in the years 2002, 2003, and 2005. In 2008 he got first in the masters division of this hill climb with a time of 61:34

and finished only a mere 55 seconds from first place overall, breaking Matt Carpenters 40 year old age record! Simon might not be able to beat Matt at Pikes Peak at super high altitudes but he is probably equally good at lower elevation and in a shorter distance race! The Mt. Washington course is 7.6 miles and very steep with a 11.5% grade. It is steeper than La Luz's 9% and about as long. The higher altitude and worse footing at La Luz however, probably makes up for it's less steep grade making the two races nearly equivalent in time.

Simon also has the Pikes Peak 35-40 and second best over 40 ascent records (after the immortal Matt Carpenter) as well, with 2:13:29 and 2:18:06. He also won the overall ascent race this year in cold, snowy conditions in 2:18:09!

Simon has placed very high in the new World Mountain Running championships. He was 10th in both 2005 and 2006! In the master's world championships in 2006 and 2007 Simon won first place both years, which makes him the best in the world for an over 40 hill runner! In the 2008 world championship master's race held in the Czech Republic Simon again got 1st place in the 40-45 division! He also ran to a 25th place in the open championships held in Switzerland the following week, helping the U.S. team place third for a bronze medal!

In the La Luz, Simon has won more titles than even Waquie, with ten. He won most years from 1997 to 2008 except when he was in Switzerland studying physical therapy. In these years of 2000 and 2001 Jeremy Wright and Richard Shelly won with respective times of 1:20:08 and 1:18:49. Both Jeremy and Richard were competitive members of the U.S. mountain running team.

Simon's best race was in 1999 when he ran a 1:15:09. Some people think this kind of time was getting close to the Waquie class of runner since the trail was several minutes slower with the unmaintained erosion on the rock slide. Where once runners could run this entire section, now they must jog and jump over the loose rocks. The course is undoubtedly even worse now and could be at least 5 minutes slower than in the early days. Simon is not seeming to slow down much at all as he is now over 40, and he recently told me he is racing and training as fast as ever! His Mount Washington, Pikes Peak and World Championship races are proof of this! Although his recent times on the La Luz are slower than his best in 99 he still competes against world class hill runners and beats them in other races. Simon is definitely becoming a legend in his own right.

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## 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. She 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 this year 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 68 minute old course and kept it up on the extra section on the road. Magdalena also won the Mount Washington road race in 1988 with a course record of 1:10:08 never beaten to this day, 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. Her best time was a great 1:34:42 in 2008! Rachel is a member of the U.S. women's mountain running team that won gold in the 2006 event. She even placed a great 38th this year (2008) in the world championships in Switzerland. The 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 longer 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.

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