

LA LUZ TRAIL RUN HISTORY

The La Luz trail race has a long history with its legendary runners and stories of their struggles and glory! The first race 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 just under 9% 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 7.7 miles long with an added 300 yard road section, climbing 3660 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 17 year old Tony Sandoval broke Steve's record by a whole minute with an amazing 65:23. He later became the 1980 Olympic Trial marathon winner. Tony was so talented he ran a P.R. 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. The two of them had really scorched the last several steep miles, both shattering the record. Rick was already becoming a national class runner who held the N.M. high school mile record. Incidentally, his record from back in 1970 of 4:12.6, has never been broken! Even today's N.M. 1600 record of 4:11.5 by Luis Martinez is slightly worse since this is 10 yards shorter than the mile distance. Rick 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 summer Faustino and Lionel trained hard for the race and went for a fabulous new record with Faustino setting a great pace, finally breaking away at the steep concrete stairs with some 600 yards to go. He ran a 60:51! 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 easily break 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 followed him and then taken the lead even after he had gone out really hard. 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 Dave's pace to be 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.

The race was so competitive that there were 17 runners at an hour 10 or better! My own time was a 66:22 for eighth 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!

This race was so fast that Al's average pace for the approximate 7.9 mile distance was 7:18 per mile. I figured he probably hit the 4.9 mile overlook in about 33:20 which is an incredible 6:48 per mile when you add the trail's 4.73 miles and .17 on the road. Then Al ran the last 3 steeper miles in somewhere around 24:20! This breaks down to around 2:40 for the .4 miles between the overlook and the rockslide, then a blistering 15:40 on the nearly 2 mile section up to the Y turnoff to the crest, and maybe 6 minutes on the steepest final .6 mile! With Al being so good on the steepest terrain these final split times are beyond belief. I am sure no one has ever run the last three miles in anywhere close to Al's speed! Just looking at a 6 minute final kilometer is hard to imagine if you have ever run this brutal section. In my own training from years past when I was "young" and in good shape, I remember running 3 two minute intervals with several minutes rest between each, over this last section of the trail. I could still not quite break 6 minutes! I also remember my race pace over this section when I did my 66:22 PR was 7:07, which is around a minute slower than Al's pace!

The following years were won by Al with new records for the longer 9.9 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 Nike OTC marathon and next years Olympics). I felt Tony was the best marathon runner in the U.S. at the time as well as awesome uphill. Unfortunately he had not made the start. My younger brother Dave Kirchgessner also set a Junior record with a 1:33:16 that has never been broken.

In 1980 Al blazed a 1:12:40 which was probably 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 59:00 on the old course with the extra two steeply paved miles in 13:40 minutes! I figured this race was slightly 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 about 7-8 seconds a

mile (adding the extra two miles on the road). The second mile of this pavement section climbs 550 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 an 8:51 indoors for 2 miles and even specifically trained for La Luz that summer, 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 en-route of 2:05, beating Rick Trujillo's long standing record by 8 minutes! The following year the race distance was shortened to 9.5 miles or 9.0 miles (GPS measured length) which began some 650 yards above the previous start. Al won with a 1:13:26 beating Ron McCurley's 1:14:29! Ron had run a time which he had never imagined himself capable! Ron 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 Waquie caught him right before the trail! As it turned out, Al had lost 30 or more seconds at the start as he had been making his way up the road when the gun went off. I still remember asking the starter to wait for Al but he didn't. Al then had to weave through all the runners to catch the leaders. I can 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 10 minutes behind my friend Al Waquie!

Al won again with the current course record of 1:12:14 in 1983. Wesley Smith, who was another talented Native American and Pikes Peak champion had stayed close to Al for as long as he could and ended up with a non Waquie record of 1:14:03! But Al's best race of 1980 would have beaten Wesley by almost 4 minutes! Al seemed unbeatable and also won on Pikes Peak several more times. I feel Al was the best in the world at high altitude up-hill mountain running at the time. In my opinion only a couple of runners have done equivalent races even in the many years that have followed Al's physical peak!

Runners like Pikes Peak legend Matt Carpenter from Colorado and 7 time world champion Johnathon Wyatt of New Zealand have more recently done many other amazing efforts but Al's La Luz races will remain as some of the best of all time! In my opinion, these runner's best races were Matt's 3:16:39 Pikes Peak record with a 2:01:06 record ascent and Johnathon's Mount Washington record of 56:41. Matt's record race equates to about 25 miles in 2:01 with an hour 15 record descent over the downhill 13 miles. Then Johnathon's record at Mount Washington equates to around 12.4 miles in 56:41 or an equivalent 4:34 per mile which is about the same as Al's record La Luz race.

So how do I compare mountain running with flat races? After looking at many races and comparing them to flat runs I found that most average runners can climb around 1100 feet in the time it takes them to run a mile. For world class runners this would be closer to 1200 feet depending on how good they are uphill. Then, elite mountain runners can climb even better compared to their speed on a flat road or track. Looking at all these runners, at running research articles, and world championship mountain races, it seems using a scientific formula called the Oxygen Uptake theory is

extremely accurate. In this equation, 1172 feet is used for comparing world records in these two kinds of running. This comparison is about like a slowdown of 13 seconds per every one percent increase in grade at a 5 minute mile pace. Using this calculation, the earlier shorter course La Luz would be equal to running 12.6 miles and the present course like about 15. I calculated these by adding the distance with the gain in altitude/1172 feet, then adding in trail slowdown and altitude effects. For example, the original La Luz race was 7.9 miles including the trail and the 300 yards on the road. Then if you take the total gain of 3660 feet divided by 1172, you get 3.12 miles which would add up to total about 11.02 miles.

Now you add the trail slowdown from the undulating and sandy rocky surface. This would make about 25-30 seconds a mile or almost 4 minutes over the length of trail. Now we are at 11.77 miles. Finally you must add in the altitude effects of about 8800 average feet which I calculate to be 22-23 seconds a mile (at 5 minute pace) times the mile equivalent of 11.77 miles and you would get 4:15 more minutes or like another .85 mile. Adding the distance, climbing, trail and altitude factors combine to make 12.62 miles!

So Waquie's record race would be like about 57:40 for 12.6 miles, or 4:34.6 pace! If you then add on the extra time it would take him to run an extra .5 tenths of a mile at say 4:40 pace, you would get up to the half marathon in a time of about 60:00 This kind of time is much better than the half marathon record at the time. In fact, it is not far off the present American record by Ryan Hall of 59:43! According to this formula, Waquie's best races were even slightly better aerobically than the world records back in that same era by Henry Rono. Rono averaged 4:14 for his 13:08 5K record and 4:25 per mile for his 27:22 10 K. This would be equivalent to 4:37 pace for 20K according to present world record slowdowns. This means Waquie's best races would be several second per mile better than Rono's, at least comparing uphill to flat running. Then Waquie's other record run in 1980 of 1:12:40 on the 2 mile longer course equates to 15.5 miles at 4:41 pace. I calculated the 2 extra miles on the road to equal 2.9 sea level miles since the original 2 mile added section gains almost 900 feet and the average altitude there slows an elite runner some 35 more seconds. This race also equates to a low 1:10 on the present course! Basically Waquie would beat top runners by around 30 seconds per mile on his best races!

I realize my 1172 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 the best elite uphill runners or somewhere around 1400 feet in the time he would run each mile. This unique ability would make the La Luz like less than 12 miles for Al. Then if you compare the normal speed up from a 20K which he could do in about 61 minutes down to a 10K, you would get a low 29 minute time! Sure enough, since Al had run a mid 30 minute time in Albuquerque this would be about a minute faster at sea level on a fast track.

Anyway the next year in 1986 was won by Colorado's 34 year old Pablo Vigil in a great time of 1:14:20! Chester Carl and Chuck Smead rounded out the top three with fast times of 1:15:48 & 1:16:42! Both Chester and Chuck had won Pikes Peak several times and were extremely talented uphill. In fact Chuck had run a record 2:05:22 time on the Pikes ascent some 10 years earlier which has only been broken once to this day,

by Matt Carpenter in 1993!

This was Pablo's first and only La Luz and his first time on the trail! Pablo had been considered the best mountain runner in Europe and possibly the world in the late 70's to early 80's, winning most of his races there! If Pablo had raced Waquie while both men were at their peak, (before Pablo began raising his family maybe 5 years earlier) he might have given the champ the race of his life. Pablo had been a consistent 28 minute 10K runner and was very strong up steep hills!

The next year saw 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 British and then UTEP 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 Waquie's 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 has won 11 times with a best of 1:15:09 in 1999. This kind of time was very fast considering the worsening erosion on the rock slide and other parts of the trail. Today the course is undoubtedly much worse and could be 4 or more minutes slower than the early days. Winning times are now only around 1:20 at best. In 2009 Paul Howarth won in a 1:28:32 followed by Kris Houghton in 2010 and 2011 with 1:24:22 and 1:25:16. Kris had actually won the 2009 race as well, running unofficially with a fast 1:21! And last year Simon was back blazing another record in the 45-49 division and first overall! He beat the young guys pretty easily with his 1:21:48! In 2013 Simon had a great race against Kris as both were in good form with Kris pushing the pace and eventually just winning by less than a minute with 1:22:15! 2014 was another thriller with National team member Ricky Gates taking it with another fast 1:21:32. See the results pages!

It is unlikely anyone will ever break the legendary Waquie's records. At least not until they rebuild the trail. 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. Then in 1975 Lynn won 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 was also the fastest ever run till 2012 when Kim Dobson destroyed all the women and almost every man as well, with a 2:24:58!

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 begun 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 1:31:10 the next year.

The next winners were Lynn Brown, from Durango, Colorado in 88@ 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 times of 1:33:49, 1:33:41, and then a 1:34:41. Marie was a national class marathoner. Next year's winner was Cathy Pierce from Socorro who ran a 1:36:31.

The next year saw a new record by an Olympic class marathon 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! She placed third overall! This kind of time is even better than Lynn Bjorklunds 69:15 on the old course. She basically ran Lynn's 69:15 minute short course time and added on the extra 1.6 mile road section at a slightly faster pace of 13:23! Magdalena also won the Mount Washington road race in 1998 with a 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 in 2011 with a 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! Rachel won again in 2011 with a new 1:34:31 P.R. and Erica again in 2012 with a sizzling 1:34:59! 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. In 2014 Rachel took another victory with a new PR of 1:34:24! She beat Brandy Erholtz by just 50 seconds! You can also go to the Pikes Peak website (pikespeakmarathon.org) to see all those 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! Tom