

The Last Lone Runner

On Sunday afternoon, as the van inches down the steep winding Echo Summit Pass that empties into the Lake Tahoe basin, it is pounded for fifteen minutes by a powerful thunderstorm filled with wind, rain and marble-sized hail. There is some fear that the vicious pelting will implode the front windshield and the treacherous winds will sweep us off the hillside and down the steep ravines. Wow, scary!

Fortunately we eventually reach our destination in the Mojave Desert. We see the destruction that was caused by another storm that had also thrashed parts of Death Valley. Large boulders and rocks are strewn everywhere. Flashfloods have sent rivers of muddy sand down the canyons and across the roadbed.

Might this weather related furry be an ominous indicator of harsh problems to be dealt with during the next few days? Gads, I hope not, because tomorrow I will be competing in the Badwater Ultramarathon. This 135-mile race starts in the middle of Death Valley, at Badwater, and crosses two mountain ranges before finishing at the Portals, halfway up MT Whitney. It is considered the toughest single stage competitive running event in the world.

At the pre-race meeting in the Furnace Creek Auditorium, as race director Chris Kostman covers the ground rules, the large room begins to get overly warm and stuffy. While the ninety runners congregate for group pictures on the overheated stage, I begin to have trouble breathing. It feels like the inside of the sauna where I had spent many hours heat training. I have to go outside, where it is 120-degrees, in order to cool off. Whew!

Stepping outside the room at the Stovepipe Wells Hotel, after a restless and almost sleepless night, it is apparent that this is going to be a very special and daunting day. At five o'clock in the morning it is already 100-degrees. The inspirational messages and colorful drawings (made by the kids at the Valley of the Moon Children's Home, a crisis center in Santa Rosa, CA) that I adhered to the side of our van last night are falling off. The extreme heat and humidity are melting the tape. Oops!

The black ravens that mysteriously survive in this harsh environment are panting and listing on the ground in a sliver of shade from a few salt cedar trees. They have no energy to fly to their normal resting and baking spots on the telephone lines. This is probably not a very good sign.

Even the six and eight o'clock starters will have no early morning relief. For safety concerns, there are three staggered starting times to help prevent the seventy-six runners from bunching up along busy Highways 178 and 190.

As the runners and their crews mingle at the Badwater Basin sign, just minutes before our ten o'clock start, it is sweltering. Although it feels hotter and muggier than usual, my main concern is the missing sea level sign that had been attached to the side of the Black Mountains, 280 feet above our heads. It is gone. I think someone has stolen the landmark.

I will have a word with the "Mayor of Badwater", Ben Jones, and "First Lady", Denise. Maybe they are slipping and taking it too easy. Another California recall may be in order. Maybe I will challenge them with the campaign slogan, "No more crime at Badwater." All I need is two or three votes. Since the total population of Badwater is zero, the ballot box will need to be stuffed in order to pull this thing off.

As the National Anthem plays, just seconds before the starting countdown, I get thirsty and feel parched. What! How can this be? I have been drinking gallons of fluids over the last two days and have to be waterlogged. Maybe it's the humidity or nervous energy. Just in case, I guzzle two more bottles of water. Slosh, slosh, slosh.

The seventeen miles to the Furnace Creek Resort are euphoric, as endorphins flow and I run and chat with lots of different people. Want to have some fun? Run with the zealous and energetic Chris Frost. We stay loose by kidding, joking and taking in the incredible beauty of the desert basin and multi-colored surrounding hillsides.

The next twenty-five miles of rolling hills, along the edge of the sprawling Death Valley salt basin, are extremely difficult. Although I am wearing a light weight sun protective running suit and a safari hat, the intense 125-degree heat is assaulting every pore in my body.

It becomes tough to move forward, but my crew, Roman, Jason and my beautiful wife, Christine, are alongside in the van attempting to keep me cool by spraying cold water from super-soakers and draping my shoulders with wet iced-down towels.

I arrive at Stovepipe Wells check-in station (42-miles) in nine hours by gorging on plenty of water, electrolytes and eating a variety of high calorie foods. To freshen up and cool off, I attempt to rinse myself in the shower by the pool. Gads! I almost get scalded from all the hot water flowing out of the cold tap. The searing heat of the day has made the pool, the deck and even the groundwater too hot. There is no relief here.

After a brief respite, I start the gargantuan task of ascending the seventeen mile grade to Townes Pass (59-miles). This area has always been the most difficult and hottest part of the race. As I

trudge ahead, I am whipped by winds that are howling through the canyons and swirling across the desert floor. Its 130-degrees and it feels like running in the middle of a firestorm.

Yet, at the beginning of the climb, I still feel strong and confident. But as darkness settles in, I am really looking forward to running in the cool of the evening. Unfortunately that is never going to happen.

Halfway up the pass, at the Emigrant Station turnout (mile-50), I decide to take a short break on the stoop of the van. Just as I sit down, I pass out. While sprawled on the desert floor, the Grim Reaper pays me a visit. There is neither a scythe nor a shrouded figure. But, in a dimly lit fog, a huge pressing presence is sensed. Since I am already in hell, unless we are heaven-bound, forget it; there is still this race to finish. I “wake up” screaming, yelling and clawing at my crew who had thought for a few seconds that I was not coming back.

Doctor Lisa Bliss, part of the race medical team patrolling the area, stops to revive me. Once my pulse is found, she administers a mix of ice, cold drinks, wet towels, food and encouragement. Initially, I feel relatively okay. But, it lasts for only a few moments, because soon everything begins to spiral downhill. During the next few hours there is some throwing up and several bouts of diarrhea. I have had similar problems in the past and was able to recover quickly. But, not this time.

A power walking Lisa Smith yells as she goes by, “Arthur get off your butt and get going.”

Although I do not want to waste precious time, I remain stretched out in the van feeling terrible. Then Marshall Ulrich stops by showing some concern. Maybe I can tag along with him and somehow muddle through. I manage to crawl out of the van and

start the desperate struggle up the hill. After an hour trying to maintain his pace, I am sick again and can go no further.

My red ribbon and race numbered wooden stake is stuck in the ground on the side of the road and we drive back to the Stovepipe Wells Hotel. It looks like a triage center. Although an IV is in order, it is refused.

A medic says, “Art are you sure you want one. There are only a few bottles left and other runners are in worse shape.”

That’s okay, because replacing fluids with a needle in your arm disqualifies you, and I still had every intention of finishing this race. A bed was available in one of the rooms that are filled with dehydrated runners. But it is hotter in the room than outside. At four in the morning it is still 114-degrees. It is time to get out of here. It is too depressing.

So we drive into Lone Pine (mile-122). Although I am able to cool off at the Dow Villa Hotel, my body is never ready to extend itself. Several times during the day we either start or drive back the sixty-seven miles to my marker in order to continue the race, but with little success. The searing heat is punishing me and I get weak and nauseous whenever I start to run or walk. It is not looking very promising.

Although sleep deprived and completely washed out, I toss and slash about in bed. All attempts at recovering are futile. It is becoming evident that I am not going to finish this Badwater Race.

After many months of intensive training, I thought I could handle anything. Nope. What happened? Maybe it’s severe dehydration, maybe it’s the intense heat, maybe it’s a flu like bug, or maybe the law of averages has finally snagged me.

Did Not Finish. Three demoralizing words that are a piercing, devastating and crushing blow. After twenty-five years of running hundreds of races, I am about to earn my own personal albatross, a DNF. Maybe I could emblazon red flashing neon "Scarlet Letters" on my chest. Humbling. This has become a depressing nightmare.

I need to make something positive happen, and soon. So, early Thursday morning, still fatigued and mentally depressed, I begin to trudge up Mt Whitney. After faltering the first four or five miles, I begin to feel a little better as it gets cooler in the "Hundred switchbacks."

I am in awe and mesmerized by the stark beauty on this climb; especially along the trail in the Pinnacles on the West Side of the mountain. The enormous walls of chiseled granite and aqua tinted ponds of snow melt below are spectacular. If you are looking for inspiration it can be found here.

On the 14,447 foot peak, as I sit on a rock beside the summit plaque, inclement weather moves across the area. Cold wind, rain and lightning lash the mountainside. I begin to freeze and turn purple and really don't care if a bolt or two strikes me. Now that my core body temperature has lowered a few degrees, I almost feel "normal."

The fear of going back into the heat is gone. Did not finish is becoming tolerable but quitting is never, ever going to be acceptable. I walk over to the logbook, stored in the metal protective container attached to the side of the small (weather protecting) cabin, and write, "It is time to go back and complete this Badwater Race for the kids."

The trail is wet, and there is some fear of getting hurt as I slip, slid and fall numerous times on the way down, but it really doesn't matter. I will hobble across the course on crutches. I couldn't wait

to get back to the hotel to tell my wife that we are going to finish this race. Not a word is said. She knew by the look in my eyes.

After icing-down a few coolers, we head for Townes Pass. The marker is picked up at ten o'clock. Still frazzled from the first day blitz and the Whitney scramble, I start gingerly walking up the hill. Then its jogging little baby steps until my body is fluid and relaxed. Once the pass is crested I run eight-miles down the backside of the mountain to the Panamint Salt Flats (mile-68) where a short break is taken.

To keep from overheating and drying out from the hot winds that are swirling in the area, we start draping my shoulders with cold wet towels. My condition is still in question, but once this valley is trekked and I begin to edge up the eight-mile steep winding and cooler mountain pass, I should feel better.

As I struggle across the salt flats a car stops and out pops Monica Scholz (First women and third place overall). She is ecstatic about my being back on the course and gives me enough Ensure and Red Bull to fill my depleted supplies. Before leaving, she gives me a big hug and tells me to, "Charge the hills." Okay, Monica, that's what I will do.

Reinvigorated, inspired and heeding her advice, I run to Panamint Springs (72-miles) then all the way to the top at Father Crowley's (80-miles). During my other five Badwater races, I had never done that before. The stage is now set. I will run about five-miles then take a few minutes to rest on the stoop of the van. We want to make sure my vital signs stay stable. The last thing I want is to crash again.

I do this all day and night. I run every step of the way including the first five miles up the Whitney Portals Road where I finally run out of gas. I strap on my CD player at the Death Valley Park

Boundary Sign (85-miles) and begin to listen to music. I am communicating with my crew via walkie-talkie.

The forty-miles during the night are complete bliss. It is soothing to have my wife and John Rodgers leap frogging me in the van. I watch hundreds of comets streak across the sky filled with millions of brilliant stars. The lights from the van guide my way. Only a few cars pass during the night. I am the last runner on the road. And, it doesn't matter. Here all alone on Friday night, I am running with an adrenaline buzz and never want it to end.

We park on a side street in Keeler (mile-108) for a midnight snack and a bit of reminiscing. My first year I crashed only a hundred yards from here in sweltering 125-degree heat, but was able to continue after being iced-down. During my third year we were skewered with fresh 200-degree asphalt that was recently laid on the highway, just in front of this small burg. The wafting heat melted the glue in my shoes and the soles started falling off.

Ironically, in two other years, hot ash and dust filled winds, created from huge fires high up in the Sierras, blew across the dried out Owens Lake and obliterated Keeler. I remember having trouble seeing and breathing. I have seen huge prehistoric creatures crawling and soaring across this mars-like desert landscape and then disappear into the dark of the night.

After running into Lone Pine (mile-122) and five miles up Mt Whitney, I finally have to walk. Actually I was attempting to run the last 13-mile difficult uphill grade to the Portal finish line. But my calves start to cramp and two screaming Achilles Tendons are hammering me, so I will limp the last eight-miles.

As fatigue settles in and my weary mind conjures in a dark compartment, I become transfixed on the Alabama Hills that surround the area. Millions of huge boulders are stacked

haphazardly on top of each other like a fragile house of cards. I have visions of pulling one of the smaller rocks out of the pile and watching them all fall apart, crash to the ground and then tumble, rumble and roar down the mountainside into the valley below. As the ground begins to shake, I drink several frappuccinos. It is time to wake up and move ahead before I am swept away. Whoa! There is only one thing better than a Badwater hallucination and I am way too tired for that.

My wife and John join me for the last mile. We cross the imaginary finish line at nine o'clock on Saturday morning. Alas, the deed is finally done. There is not as much exuberance as years past. Except for a few high fives and some pictures, there is little fanfare. It is more reserved, solemn and somewhat anticlimactic.

Although I am flushed with a sense of pride, I make a conscious effort at keeping the "celebration" low keyed and tempered. I did not want to overplay what I had accomplished. The original goal was to buckle by finishing this race in less than 48-hours. That didn't happen.

I have been home for a few weeks and I am still in the healing and recovering phase. Although the swelling and pain in my feet are almost gone, the pain to the ego will probably last much longer. Although there is some lingering emptiness and disappointment, everything turned out okay.

A few days ago I received an e-mail from race director, Chris Kostman. He congratulated me on what I had done. And, in the spirit of Erika Gerhardt (who fought off an emotional breakdown and then climbed to the Whitney Portals for an unofficial finish during the 2000 Badwater Race), he was sending me an honorary finishers medal and T-shirt.

I received them in the mail yesterday. I honestly don't know if I deserve this prestigious award, but I won't be sending it back. It is now displayed on a wall surrounded by my five other Badwater medals. It is one of my most prized possessions. It has made me feel good about what I did.

Today, I saw the kids that I ran for at the Valley of the Moon Children's Home. I walked into their classroom with my head held high and my heart in my throat. The visit was fulfilling and a little emotional as I gave them heartfelt thanks for all their inspirational drawings.

My gift for these young kids who have had the most difficult of times, is not so much about winning, or medals, or ribbons, or did not finish. It was more about did not quit. It was about honor and standing tall. It was about character building. It was about setting an example with moral decisions based on dignity and respect for the human spirit by doing the right thing and always finishing whatever one starts.

It was a privilege to be part of the **2003 Badwater Ultramarathon**.

I can't wait until next year.

I will be back.

Arthur Webb
Badwater
98, 99, 00, 01, 02, 03*

* Honorable mention