

# Romancing the Stone

A 2007 Badwater race story

By Arthur Webb

I am at the starting line and in a few minutes will be joining the six and eight o'clock runners who are already well into the march of madness across Death Valley and two mountain ranges and then to the finish line, at the Portals, halfway up MT Whitney. We are at the 135-mile Badwater Ultramarathon. It is the toughest footrace in the world.

Although I am here, it was questionable a week ago. Excruciating back pain from a mean-spirited and jagged-edged kidney stone had me digging in my heels and white knuckling the rails of a gurney in an emergency room. A dose of morphine gave me temporary relief but during the week there was more pain as gravity continued to drag the cruddy little thing through my plumbing system. It is quiet now; knock on wood.

My goal is to be the first runner over sixty (I am 65) to ever-complete Badwater in less than forty-hours. For months, I averaged 120-miles a week and everyday baked in a 170-degree sauna. I am physically ready.

I have run this race nine consecutive times and have created a race plan, which incorporates everything that has worked on this course. I am mentally prepared.

My support crew, Christine Webb, Julie Strong and Alfonso Partida have met a dozen times to cover possible contingencies. They are ready.

Our support van contains a large chest filled with dry ice, cubes and blocks. This is used to top off four smaller chests containing liquids of choice and two five-gallon coolers of water for drinking and spraying. If overheated, I will climb inside the large chest to cool off. Sizzle!

I will down one cold Ensure Plus every hour and an occasional Power Gel or GU. Every few miles I will hydrate with 16-ounces of cold Crystal Geyser water, PowerAde or a Starbucks Frappuccino (my preferred drinks). I will only carry an eight ounce spritzer of ice water. The mist I spray on my face and other hot spots is a refreshing coolant.

Since I only drink a thimble full on my daily runs, I have not over-hydrated. This will help avoid the numerous nasty water polluted health issues, which includes waddling down the road feeling sluggish and bloated. To eliminate any guesswork we use an electronic scale, which allows us to immediately adjust my hydration level and to help prevent cramping and dehydration I will take Endurolytes.

It is 105-degrees, humid and windy. To prevent moisture loss, I wear a long-sleeved Patagonia Capilene white shirt, matching pants and a shrouded hat. When it is really hot my crew, who will leapfrog me in the support van for the entire race, will soak me with cold water from a garden type sprayer.

Race director Chris Kostman gives the countdown and off we go. The last thing I want is to get caught up in a jackrabbit start; egad, after a few minutes, I am dead last.

I have modified Tim Twietmeyer's (five-time Western States 100-mile endurance race winner), "I run the hard parts easy and the easy parts hard," to Arthur Webb's mantra, "I will run the easy parts easy and power walk the hard parts." There will be no exceptions. Well, okay, maybe a few.

The early miles along the edge of this pure white salt basin is a music laden iPod sing-along and endorphin filled run. At the Furnace Creek Hotel (mile-17) I jump into the pool for five minutes to cool down. It's twenty-five miles to the next time station and it would be a mental handicap heading into the next marathon of arid rolling hills and extreme temperatures, overheated. After filling my shoes with Gold Bond blister preventing foot powder, I am quickly back on the course.

We have a second vehicle that my wife uses to help crew for the next two hours and then drive to a hotel to rest. A major objective is to keep the crew fresh, especially during the second day.

The seven race time stations that are about twenty-miles apart are too much to grapple with. To compress the 135-miles into bite size comfortable mental running zones, I concentrate on the landmark and turnoff signage spaced every three to four miles. As weariness creeps in, I will shorten that distance by using the highway marked mile-posts and on the opposite side of the road, the alternating one-half mile-posts.

As I handily run across the barren heat filled and unforgiving landscape, I catch a runner who is sitting on a mound of sand. He says, "I am cramping and my pacer is looking for my crew." He has no water, appears dehydrated and is overheated. His crew is too far ahead, has few supplies and is puzzled. What! How can this happen? I tell them, "He can stay in the hunt if he is cooled down and given lots of water and electrolytes (my wife gave them a full bottle)." It is too early to be suffering so much. I hope he makes it.

Nestled between the sculptured sand dunes and the multicolored segmented chiseled mountains is the Stovepipe Wells Resort (mile-42). The white metallic roof of this next time station shimmers in the distance and looks like a Star Wars movie outpost: desolate and eerie. Maybe aliens in the spacecraft that I have seen hovering in this area during previous Badwater races think so too.

The seven-miles that cross the Death Valley basin are mostly downhill and are usually run in oppressive, suffocating 130-degree furnace-like heat. But as I run past the Devils Corn Field and into Stovepipe Wells it is a comfortable and less punishing 120-degrees. Thumbs up for heat training.

After a splash in the small tepid pool, a Slippery Rock University research vampire team doing a volunteer study on dehydration drains a sample of blood. Since it will be dark soon, I strap red flashers on my arms and legs and begin to charge up the 16-mile mountain pass that has always been a monumental struggle.

Nine miles into this teeth gritting effort, I am concerned about a sharp twinge in my lower back. Terrific! The last thing I need is the kidney stone to rear its ugly head and curl me up on the ground with knife stabbing pain. Maybe it is just teasing me since it settles down after a few miles. Hopefully, the pounding on the pavement has either jolted it free or the liquids have washed it into my disposal system. Splash! Adios.

At his memorial in June, I promised family and friends that I would dedicate this Badwater race in honor of ultra running giant, friend and crewperson, Vincent Pedroia, who had just crossed his last finish line. This is swirling about in my head as I move straight up the pass into the billions of stars. Fortunately, Julie is walking with me because my heart is in my throat and I need her to lean on.

At the top of Townes Pass (58-miles) I am washed with fatigue. As I lay on the ground for a short respite and a leg massage, will be the only time during

Badwater that I momentarily question "what am I doing here?" Yuck, scratch that negative thought. After a failed catnap, I am still fresh enough to run the downhill miles and surprised to pass about a dozen runners who are walking this section.

Near the bottom the winding road straightens and I see about fifteen crew vehicles strung out across the desert floor. The caravan of flashing red taillights energize me enough to handily finish this grade and trek across the salt basin and up the three-mile incline to the Panamint Springs Resort (mile-72).

I chat with volunteers, Mags and Jack Denness (eleven-time Badwater finisher), as the van is filled with gas. I am always toast here and require a long break, but this morning moving forward has a higher priority. Shortly, I start up the eight-mile steep winding hill to Father Crowley's (mile-80). I will not take another break for fifty-miles.

Chris Frost "zips" by me and says, "Arthur you have a very good thirty-seven hour race going for you." I lightly brush it aside. It is too early to be thinking about finishing times. Besides I am still doing my three-mile at a time chunk thing.

Although the stark beauty in this area captivates and inspires, it remains a difficult climb. I have run this section in two hours but was totally drained. Today, I will walk at a two and a half-hour clip and after cresting have enough energy to keep on moving.

It is early morning as my wife returns full of energy and relieves the tired crew. We will do the same things that worked yesterday and hopefully it will be de ja vous all over again.

The next ten-miles of rolling hills are sprinkled with sagebrush, sparse yucca trees, dinosaur flashbacks and 110-degree heat. To feel at ease with the extreme fatigue that is assaulting me, I gear down into a one mile at a time mode.

At the Darwin checkpoint (mile-90) it's a hello, goodbye and keep on trucking. The next ten miles along the Centennial Flats are mostly downhill and before it gets super hot, I want to take full advantage.

I believe the halfway mark in a 100-mile race is about mile eighty. At Badwater it's the large white cross and gravesite at mile ninety-six. It is noon and hot and I am struggling.

At the one hundred-mile marker, we clip a water soaked white towel over my shoulders and I am cooler. I see the weather-beaten trailer park burg of Keeler on the edge of the dried out Owens Lake bed, eight miles in the distance. Burdened by the heavy towel, I am still able to run to its front doorstep, where I run out of gas. Sputter! Sputter!

While my wife power walks with me for the next nine miles, swirling winds filled with sand and extreme heat blow across the road and thrash us. Whoa! Not only is it difficult to breathe clean air, but this battering is taking its toll. As weariness sinks deeper into my body, it is now Badwater one half mile at a time.

Howie Stern, from Mammoth Lakes, CA arrives and relieves my wife. After shuffling into Lone Pine (mile-122) I ease my overheated body into the Dow Villa hotel pool. Minutes later after gorging on turkey slices and Starbucks doubleshots, I grudgingly begin the extremely steep final thirteen mile climb.

The first few miles up the Whitney Portal Road are punishing as strong headwinds make it tough to advance. Howie leads the way and is figuratively dragging me up the mountain. The pace picks-up as we realize that the end is near and there is a sense of urgency to polish this thing off. It's analogous to the cows smelling the barn thing. Moo!

Just below the two long switchbacks we know that if we charge the last five miles a sub thirty-eight hour finish is possible. But, I am struggling with bone marrow penetrating fatigue, strained hamstrings, and a painful sciatica exacerbated by a chronic lumbar disc problem. Great!

I have a few fleeting doubts as Howie says to me, "Art, whether you crawl or surge either way it's going to be painful." He is right. So I tell him, "Okay let's go for it; besides it will be over sooner."

In the past I have been visited by Yetis, Pterodactyls and other strange creatures in this area, but not tonight. Without the distracting "hallucinations" the switchbacks seem brutally longer and it has become extremely difficult to push forward.

With a mile to go and time slipping away at warp speed, it would be easy to ratchet down to a less taxing one step at a time survivor shuffle. Instead, I dial

up the worn but still motivating “Pain is temporary. Pride is forever.” cliché and continue to press on.

At last, with only a few turns to go, this seemingly endless chore is almost over. My crew joins me and we cross the finish line holding hands, screaming and hollering. We have a mini celebration for the 37:48:35 finish. Yes! We did it. And it sure feels good.

I usually get very emotional at the finish. But, I have reserved it for tomorrow's MT Whitney summit, when I will write in the logbook attached to the side of the cabin, a respectful farewell to my fallen friend.

Later after everyone is in bed and I soak in a whirlpool to begin the long recovery process, I realize that I owe this memorable finish to my crew for their relentless, unwavering and successful race management. Yeah team!

Thanks to race director Chris Kostman, his AdventureCorps crew and all the volunteers for staging this spectacular event.

Thanks to Heidi and Cameron Steele, Carmen Kaplan, SCORE International, Barbie and Jim Riley for their support and the smiley face poster I taped to the back of the van, which gave me a buzz for two days.

Thanks for the motivational drawings that I had taped to the side of the van from the youngsters that I ran for at the Valley of the Moon Children's Home in Santa Rosa, CA. Hopefully, the inspiration is mutual.

Thanks to nurse Kelly Ridgway and all my friends for looking over my shoulder and nudging me on the web cast. I knew you were there. Whew! Paybacks are tough.

Thanks that the kidney stone I nursed for a week was never a major factor and hopefully it is now a permanent resident somewhere on the desert floor.

Congratulations to the "Mayor and First Lady of Badwater" Ben and Denise Jones for their induction into the Badwater Hall of Fame. Yeah.

Congratulations to race winners Valmir Nunes and Lisa Bliss. Hurray!

Thanks to protégé's Julie Strong, Alfonso Partida and Howie Stern for their unselfish and stalwart help. It's your turn now.

To Trisha, family, friends, Sassy and all the animals in his charge, it was an honor to "carry the torch," and a montage of memories taped to the van, at Badwater and to the MT Whitney peak, in memoriam, for the beloved Vincent Gerard Pedroia. Amen.

Finally a huge thanks and much more to my beautiful wife, Christine, for everything. Next year during the Badwater race we will take a dip in the pool, but in Hawaii. Oops! Maybe?

That's ten Badwater's down and (?) to go.

It was a privilege to be part of the 2007 Badwater Ultramarathon.

Arthur Webb  
Badwater Finisher  
98, 99, 00, 01, 02, 03\*, 04, 05, 06, 07

\*Honorable mention