



City on a Hill Press

Features

The Badwater 135

The most intense sports event you've never heard of

By Lisa Donchak

Just for a moment, imagine how difficult it is to run a mile. Now imagine running a mile in 120 degrees. Now imagine running it uphill. Now imagine doing it 135 times in a row without sleeping.

Each year, about 90 runners line up to see if they have what it takes to cross 135 miles of Death Valley on foot.

“It’s considered the world’s toughest footrace because it’s so far, and so hot and so insane,” said Chris Kostman, the Badwater 135 race director and chief adventure officer.

The race starts in Badwater, the lowest point in the contiguous United States, and ends at Mount Whitney, the highest point, covering a cumulative vertical ascent of 13,000 feet. The race across Death Valley takes place in July, when temperatures can reach up to 130 degrees Fahrenheit.

Scott Jurek, who won the race in 2005 and 2006, summed up what it feels like to race in such heat.

“I sometimes equate it to running in a sauna with a hair dryer blowing at you,” Jurek said.

The only rules are that racers have only 60 hours to finish the course, and can’t use an IV. Usually only about 75 percent of entrants finish under the cutoff time.

The Badwater 135 falls under the category of an “ultramarathon,” races that by definition are longer than the classic marathon length of 26.2 miles.

“It’s beyond a marathon both physically and mentally,” said Dean Karnazes, who won the race in 2004.

Runners have been known to pass out, lose dangerous amounts of weight and hallucinate during the race. Few sleep, and those who do only stop for about 20 minutes at a time.

In 2002, Mel Stuart, who directed the original “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory,” directed a documentary about the Badwater 135 called, “Running on the Sun.”

In Running on the Sun, Stuart followed a number of runners as they trained for and finally competed in the race. One runner tied a car tire around his waist and ran up hills. Another runner stepped into a full-body sweat suit, went down to the basement, got on the treadmill, and aimed the air hose from his clothes dryer at himself while he ran.

The year Stuart documented the event, a man with a prosthetic leg participated in the race. “The one-legged man who finished is one of the most inspiring things I’ve ever seen,” Stuart said.

So what sort of person would compete in such a demanding footrace?

“Most of the people that finished were not the young people,” Stuart said. “People who are older have the sense of where they have to go to, and they don’t run themselves out.”

Marshall Ulrich, four-time Badwater winner (1991, 1992, 1993, 1996) said, “I think, in order to compete in the Badwater 135 . . . you have to be an all-around runner—[the race] has so many elements that the other [ultramarathons] don’t. It just makes it a little bit of a different challenge and raises the bar.”

Ulrich, who is 56 years old, has run a number of ultramarathons, but the Badwater is his favorite. He liked it so much that he once ran back and forth across Death Valley four times in a row, without stopping—a feat that he called the ‘quad-crossing.’ The quad was a 584-mile run, more difficult, Ulrich said, than climbing Mount Everest—which he has done.

This year will mark Ulrich’s 20th trip across the Death Valley.

“It kind of fits in with my challenge of doing something nobody else has done every year,” Ulrich said. “It’s showing people that something like that is achievable. The only limitations are in the mind.”

Like Ulrich, Karnazes is a veteran of the race.

“I’m the only one dumb enough to do it so many times,” Karnazes said. “But every year I do it I say ‘I’m never doing this again.’”

Karnazes continued, “I never say that I won—I say that I survived the fastest. It’s more about survival, in so many ways, than actually running. You’re basically just running on pure adrenaline and emotion. People out there at Badwater are just trying to survive.”

Karnazes has participated in a number of unusual events. At the end of 2006, Karnazes ran 50 marathons in all 50 states in 50 consecutive days.

“I would say that was my favorite [event],” Karnazes said. “I had my family with me and I invited other runners to come out and run with me during the various marathons.”

In all ultrarunning, but especially with Badwater, nutrition is a key aspect of finishing successfully. When Karnazes ran 200 miles from Calistoga to Santa Cruz, he consumed a total of 28,000 calories in 46 hours of running while burning 34,000. During that run, he ate an entire cheesecake and ordered a pizza to meet him at a traffic intersection.

Pam Reed is the only woman to win the race. After she set the women’s course record in 2002, coming in just under 28 hours, some believed that it was an accident that a woman could have won. But Reed came back and won the race in 2003, proving the pundits wrong.

In her book, *The Extra Mile*, Reed talks about her battle with anorexia. According to Reed, people think that she runs so she doesn’t have to directly deal with her anorexia.

“It’s exactly the opposite,” Reed said. “The more I ran, the more I knew I had to eat and be healthy or else I couldn’t run. My running actually saved me.”

During the race, each runner is supported by a crew that helps keep them hydrated and provides encouragement. Many crews drive white minivans to stay cool, and carry stacks of coolers filled with running supplies. Many crewmembers are runners themselves who sometimes run as much as 20 miles of the race with their racer.

Reed's crew paved the way for new Badwater course records. One of her crewmembers pushed a stroller of supplies to keep the runner cool, though the practice has been since outlawed.

A large part of crewing is keeping the runners cool. Many runners keep spray bottles in their crew vehicle, though many employ more eccentric methods. One man brought a body-length box filled with ice, which he called a coffin; he would lay down in it periodically during the race. One runner brought along two button-down shirts, one of which he would wear while the other was soaking in ice water. After two miles, the shirts would rotate; the one he was wearing would have dried completely.

Catra Corbett, who was a crewmember in 2005 and 2006, said her runner expected her to stay awake for the duration of the run, which for Corbett was 42 hours. Corbett has completed over 300 ultramarathons herself and hopes eventually to compete in the Badwater.

Kristin Stewart was a crewmember for Ruben Cantu in 2000, 2003, and 2004. "Your job [as a crew member] is to take care of your runner, but you have to take care of yourself, too," she said.

For Stewart, the experience of crewing can be very spiritual.

"For that time period, like three days, absolutely everything in my life got stripped away," Stewart said. "Nothing really mattered except Ruben and his running. The fact that you were hungry, thirsty and tired didn't matter."

Stewart continued, "I don't know what it's like to run Badwater, but I know that I go through my own journey when I crew, and that's why I go . . . It just renews me and gives me energy. It's what life is all about."

Scott Jurek also said that the scenery of the desert morning sun can be moving.

"There's that magical time between 4 and 5 a.m. where the sun just starts to slowly brighten up the sky. Once the sun gets into the mountains, you've got all these 13,000-foot peaks in the distance," Jurek said.

When most people hear about races like this, the next question is usually "Why do these people run?"

Karnazes has a simple answer.

"I don't have a car," Karnazes said with a laugh. "It broke down recently. Running is a necessity now."

He paused and continued on a more serious note.

"You know, beyond that, for me, running is very liberating," Karnazes said. "The ultimate sense of freedom. You're not encumbered by anything. I normally run in the trails, in the Bay Area, so you're out in nature and it's one of the rare times that you get to think—just not be bombarded with stimulus from everything, from the world."

Ulrich also explained his reasons behind running.

"I could say that it's a fitness level, but it's way beyond that," Ulrich said. "It's almost what I would categorize as addictive-compulsive behavior of sorts, closely akin to the more dysfunctional ones you would think about, such as alcoholism or something like that. I'm sort of a run-a-holic, if you will."

Race director Kostman discussed the sense of friendship he sees runners find during the race.

"The camaraderie is something special. Most people refer to the [group] as the Badwater family," Kostman said. "You just see a lot of triumph of spirit, integrity and sportsmanship out there."

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