

Molokai Ultrarunning Adventure

18-21 August, 2011

Julie T, Jan M, and Mikey set out on yet another Ultra Adventure: to cross the island of Molokai - End 2 End, East to West, in a two day staged run, supported by the fearless crew chief and resident nature photographer extraordinaire, 'French Fry' aka Stephane L.

The 25 min plane ride over on a twin engine turbo prop Island Air plane was more like a short bus ride. Once we arrived, we picked up our rental car for the adventure: a Dodge Caravan minivan. When they say 'mini', they mean 'something like an overgrown Volkswagen Beetle with a bunch of bench seats shoved in the back so you can fit less gear and luggage.' I guess they didn't have ultra running adventures in mind when they designed these matchbox vans. We packed it to the roof, headed out and picked up our camping gear from a very generous friend on Molokai - oh yes, this was going to be a Camping slash Ultra Running Adventure. We headed to the first campground near Kaunakakai, where we shared the space with about 450 members of a Molokai family Reunion, which meant an all night serenade, and kind of rough start for the first day of running the next morning. I'll give'em credit though. These people know how to throw a party.

Friday morning. We geared up and the topic for discussion of the day and then throughout the entire adventure was: Water. Yes. Molokai in itself has some pretty difficult water supply challenges, let alone a crew of ultrarunners trying to figure out how to sustain running, camping, and carrying water for nearly 4 days --- where water was \$4.99 a gallon. As many of us in the ultra community know, you dig deep, and figure out a creative way to solve a problem. Or work around it. Luckily, we got the tip of the weekend: reverse osmosis machines were available at 2 spots in town. Water. Fifty cents a gallon. Drinkable. We are in the game now.

At mile marker zero, highway 450 East, the crew of three ultra runners, and mobile aid station headed out. Going the wrong way. It would appear that the very first thing we did was make a wrong turn. This was going to be some adventure. Okay, so we'd have hit the end of the road @ Kaunakakai Harbor in about 1.5 miles, gotten on the ferry and headed over to Maui to run that island again. Not. So after correcting our sense of direction, we got going on the road, East bound, headed for Halawa Valley, 28 miles away. Our stops were planned about every 10 miles but typically, depending on conditions, mobile aid station stops are always flexible. The weather was good, some rain showers but mostly mild heat, humid, and cloudy conditions. We stopped at mile 10, adjusted gear and just worked out the kinks... settling into the run. The road was easy - smooth, fairly flat, and long stretches. Not the most exciting but what we did notice was the number of fishponds we passed on our way out, and how rural this section of the island is. And very little traffic, which is a factor that can make or break an island perimeter run. Julie and I cruised along at an easy pace and enjoyed the scenery. Found a nice little mom & pop store, "Manae's" with lots of local goodies at mile 16. Took off again and after a few more miles it turned into single lane paved, oceanside road. Nice. Too nice in fact. I was waiting for it... if an ultra run seems to be going too easy, then you know. It's coming. There's got to be something coming that's going to hand your backside to you at some point. And it was.



From mile 22, this is where it started.... nice, steep little climbs, on a very windy road. The reason this starts to suck is because, around every bend, you can't see what's coming. And it's usually more hill. Aha. New trick. Look at the power lines... they still going up on the other side of this hill? Yep. Then, you know.... not to get your hopes up. No downhill in sight. It was an enjoyable climb because of the views, spectacular. Looking out across the sea from the east end of Molokai, trying to take your mind off the ups. Between mile 23 and 24, something very unusual happened. It seemed like the longest mile of the day to me so far, and it certainly was. For some strange reason, I noticed that

French Fry and the mobile aid station hadn't gone very far at all since the last time I saw him. Okay. I must look pretty bad, like I'm struggling - y'know.... 23 miles, hot, climbing hills, endless curvy roads, power walking, and you know you're only a few miles from some efn downhill section somewhere...ugh! No prob. I'll take the aid any day. I could use a few more of those Chips Ahoy. So, I walk up to the back of the red Dodge Caravan, pop open the door and start whining about the Longest Mile - what?

"Wrong van."

Says the dude sitting in the driver's side. oh holy shiiiiit!!!! crap!!! I realize I'm staring at someone who is NOT French Fry, and has their dirty laundry baskets in the back of his vehicle. NOT our mobile aid station. OOOOOOPS!!! Then I'm fumbling to shut the door and trying to explain what happens when ultrarunners start getting a little okay. He was not entertained. I swallowed my pride, apologized, and as I'm passing the driver's door, I hear:

"It's just up ahead."

okay,.... thanks...um.... dude. As I'm BOOKING up the hill. Dang. Embarrassed and pumped by a fresh supply of adrenaline, I quickly get my backside moving away from the Other Red Dodge Caravan that is Not Our Aid Station and get the hell out of there. Finally, a few miles later, here is French Fry....standing outside of the Right Van, waiting for me...pew. I decided to reserve sharing the details of my story until later that night. Now I was on a mission to finish our leg for the day. I got aid and headed out, and finally,...bliss. Downhill descent into Halawa Valley - absolutely breathtaking. Kind of made up for Wrong Van Dude and everything else of the last miles worth of climbing up that mountain, to get down into this amazing valley. Pristine beaches, and waterfalls at the end of the valley made for quite spectacular scenery on the descent all the way down to the finish @ mile 28. The road was very windy and so there was always a fresh glimpse of the views. From what basic info I knew, Halawa Valley was the site of the first Hawaiian settlement on Molokai. I can see why.



arrived pretty close together, figured out where we'd set our camps for the night. There was, amazingly, a picnic area, toilet and shower to use. We had our beach swims, showers, and cooked out for the night. We were all looking forward to a good night's sleep however, we didn't realize that this valley also has some wild weather. But of course, that would not show itself until after we pitched tents. In addition, there were some other strange visitors in said valley, as we found out that our little local friend, a horse I fondly named "Hershey" at first, could also turn out to be an invasive species. I think we missed the memo on one or both of these items. As we sat to ate, Hershey became quite a nuisance, and after all of us attempted our version of Horse Whisperer - that was not working - to get rid of him, Mikey pulled another trick out of one of his crazy hats. He grabbed his white cotton button down shirt and suddenly became the Matador of Halawa Valley and YAAAAAAAH'd poor Hershey out of the picnic area until he didn't come back. I believe that French Fry recorded this on video and it will be out on YouTube soon, and



Julie T and I were damn glad we were right by a toilet or we'd have been rushing to the nearest palm tree because this act qualified as Pee In Your Shorts funny.

After we all settled down we headed to our tents for the night. For a good night's rest. Right. Wrong. I did not realize we were about the test the limits of REI Tents. Squalls. Gale force winds and violent torrential rain, for periods of about 15 mins, frequency...oh, all through the night. I kept having visions of the flying house from the Wizard of Oz and wondering if it would be a soft landing in the brush and trees a few miles up the valley. French Fry had done a remarkable job of securing the tents, including mine, with the tent stakes and sand pushed up against the tent to secure it. Until five o' nine in the morning.

The tent, with me in it, finally went flying.

I was pushed over by the wind and rain, and ended up lodged against Julie and FF's tent. It was almost laughable but then, having your tent wash away with you in it.. really. Its' not. So, I got up, pulled the tent back into place, secured the stakes and sand again, and turned around to see the most beautiful, glowing sunrise coming at me from the sea. There is something quite remarkable about seeing nothing but water between you and the rising sun. Take a moment and think. It's perfect. Then, get back into your freshly secured tent and try to get another 15 mins of zzz.



Day 2.

Return back to mile marker zero at Kaunakakai, and time to run the West side of the island. 22 Miles to Papohaku Beach.

We broke camp, headed out and drove back into town. Restocked, regeared, refueled, revised, rewatered, re. Okay. Enough Re'ing. It was kind of a slow start and yes, we will pay later. I noticed and made the comment that it seemed noticeably hotter than the previous day. Hm. And yes, the West side of the island, is like, um, well I can relate - the mountain range between Nevada and California in August. Not fun. Highway road, bitumen pavement, searing heat. Yup. Not fun. Although, if you get altitude, that can help make it a little more bearable. Of course, to GET to altitude, what does that mean? Climbs. Oh, yes.

After the end of this day - it's important to note this now - I started referring to the miles between 9 to 16 as "Bastard Hill", or "Bastard Mountain". Don't get me wrong, it was beautiful - the views, the wide open space, just you, the road, and wilderness. But, it means climbing a 7 mile long road, all uphill, 90 degree heat on hot pavement, and no breaks. It was the hill that kept on giving. It. To You. A climb not to forget.

Julie T and I had started out again at zero and busted out the first 8 miles. Tough road, we had a few 'warm up hills' - running in the heat which, we'd not had the day before. Went through water like camels and S-caps like popcorn. No shade either. This was what it was all about... these are the types of moments that can break you in an ultra run. You have to really want to be out there, and to finish, whatever finish means. It was mentally challenging and physically draining, and we both worked extremely hard to try and stay hydrated. The slights of delirium start to set in a bit, your judgement gets messed up, and every little thing that's wrong can seem like it's a Ben Hur problem. We've all been there and we know. You use whatever psychology and tactic that you need to, to just keep it going.

Julie T was incredible on the hill. I think that is partly what kept me going. She had the stamina and perseverance to keep running. I slowed to shifts of slow jogs and power walking to get through this section. But, I knew there was a Top of this Mountain because I could see it...somewhere up there... As we continued to climb, the views were just so

amazing. This is the reward. You start to really think and things can become quite clear in places like the top of a mountain range, when you are by yourself on stretches of open road, and only the occasional car passes you. That's one time cars are a welcome relief.

Mikey was ahead of us and making good time. He'd gotten a head start on us so we never really saw him until closer to the end. French Fry was the bomb as our mobile aid station. This time, it was a White Dodge Grand Caravan that was the welcome relief sight every time he'd be there on the side of the road. We had to switch vans because apparently I was having problems with red ones. (We'd had car trouble, seriously. But, we ended up with a Bigger Van). Not to mention, he was hilarious at times. French Fry would pull over to me and Julie T, give us support, and then say things like "I'm going to Munchie." At times like these, you need some comic relief.

Now. As with any course, any event, any race, any ultra, anything that can go wrong, might. There was only ONE turn we needed to make to get to Papohaku Beach and the end of our west end tour run that day - at approximately mile marker 15, we needed to make a right turn. Of course after that long hill climb in desert like conditions, you don't give a damn. Period. You just simply keep the feet moving and the brain occupied. Shoot. I realized as I got close to mile 16, that I was looking over the valleys to the right, at a nice looking resort and beaches. Shht. That means... that I have overshot the turn!! *&(#W%\$*#)% . ugh. Its hard not to get angry.... Once again... Crew Chief FF, comes along, and saves la diem. He pulls over in the Grand Caravan, I say, hey, we were supposed to turn right back there...? To which he says, "ugh..hm. yes. I sink so." oh carpe! Ohokay, can you take me back and drop me at the turn. We also had to go collect Julie T, who was about a mile ahead of me at that point, and take her back to the turn also.



Nobody looked too happy at this point. This is what you call the 'I just want to be done' point. All runners are hot, dehydrated, and fatigued. Then you miss a turn on top of all that. Yes. Humor - needed at this point. We drove back to the turn, FF dropped us at our respective mileage, and we continued on in the dreaded heat and hot road to get to the finish. Two moments of joy at this point, however: a five minute ride in an air conditioned van, and wait for it.... Down Hill. oh yeah. Finally.

The descent into Papohaku Beach is about 5 miles long. Mostly down, and a few flat sections, but you didn't care by this point.... it was Papohaku or bust. I finally caught up to Mikey and Julie T after enjoying the descent in the heat, again, no shade but hey who was asking , and insisted on running to the campground about a mile further from our last aid stop. Suddenly you find you can pick up the pace... we all made it into the campground, headed for the beach or shower and just drank like camels to start rehydrating. Whew. What a day and what a run. Kaunakakai to West End Papohaku, 22 miles.

We completed the island crossing of Molokai, end to end, East to West. Approx 50 miles, staged over two days worth of running. It was a thoroughly enjoyable adventure and all in all, a great, fun run on a beautiful, unspoiled, undeveloped island. This is the best way to see it and learn about it. The locals want to keep it that way, and I can see why. It's a very special piece of the puzzle of all that which makes up "Hawai'i."

We settled into camp and a cookout for the night. Now, every story has to have a good caveat and I could not have thought this one up if I'd tried. We had come up with a 'soup' to have for dinner that evening, and since you are refueling for the next day's adventure (for us.... time to hit the trails on Sunday), you also need a good carbo refueling. Well, most of us had S.O.S., that is, "Something" on a "Slice of bread". But one of us, just had to stand out, and be 'special'. Chef Mikey made up his own plate of soup and carbs, and I could not resist, busting into gut bursting laughter and grabbing my camera. I just HAD to document this 'daily special' plate of food. So, for all you foodies out

there, never underestimate what you can do with... Pretzels. I present to you, the Chef Mike Special.

Need I say more.

Next up: Day 3. Trail Day...

We broke camp in the morning at Papohaku and headed back to our favorite refueling stop, the Chevron station at Kaunakakai. This was a great ultrarunner stop. They sold all kinds of local homemade goodies, had an order-to-go grill (at a gas station, right) and had ice, clean bathrooms, and ...children's toys. Yes. Unusual sight at first and after a couple of days, this seemed completely normal. After dropping some of our gear we headed up the mountain towards Kalaupapa and the sea cliffs to find some trails to explore.



We were all definitely in a much more relaxed mode after a couple days of baking at 450 degrees on the highway roads. Day 3 was the easy day, the fun, enjoy-the-views and stop-and-smell-the-jasmine kind of a day... we explored a few trails along the cliff lines above Kalaupapa and took lots of photos. Some of the trails are permit only and carry some pretty steep penalties. Luckily we found a wireless connection in the area and were able to get online just in time to get permission to descend down the cliffs to the beaches below. Not really but it makes for a good ending to the story.

The Molokai adventure ended back at Base Camp Kaunakakai, we all packed up after yet another delightful ice cold beach park shower and headed out for the airport. Funny enough, sometimes the adventure just never stops, because our shuttle driver offered to swing by a local hotel on the way to the airport, where a sweet little Sunday afternoon kanikapila jam session just happened to be taking place. We sat outside on the porch, listened to a few tunes and reflected on what a great experience was had by all, reliving a few of the highlights and fresh memories of the Molokai Crossing.

I highly recommend the Molokai ultra running adventure. If you go, bear in mind that Molokai is somewhat of a strange new frontier but it has a lot to offer. Water is a scarce resource so plan accordingly. The campsites and beach parks offer basic amenities in most cases. To use certain trails on the island you need permits, and hunting is very popular (there are deer, even!) It is a beautiful place, unspoiled, peaceful and the pace of life there..... Takin' it eaaaaasy.

Happy trekkin'

Trippy

