

Searching for Challenge: A Hero in My Own Mind

by Richard Senelly

The world of ultra trail running now has six 100-mile races in the U.S. In their seasonal order they are: Old Dominion, in Virginia, Western States, in northern California, Vermont (new this year), Leadville, in Colorado, Wasatch, in Utah, and Angeles Crest, in southern California. A total of over 1,000 runners compete in these races; many others are turned away due to race size limits. Runners have to fight to get in. Less than half finish. One of these days someone will try to do all of them in one year.

Folks sure can think up unique things to do in their spare time. I mean, besides humans how many other life forms do you know of that leave their home and sustenance, leave kith and kin, comfort and security to perform such difficult, dangerous, and totally unnecessary feats?

The definition of *human* seems to include this seeking of challenges and adversity. So, apparently, what starts out as an innocent child playing, running across the face of an open field and among the trees of a wood, can turn into an ultra-trail-runner. But

how? Why?

Recently, I was on a trail, running. I was following John Salmonson, a friend, a veteran of several 100-mile trail races, and a driving force in Hawaii's small ultrarunning community. He was ruminating about the nature of what we were doing out there.

We were doing four laps of a ten-mile loop trail on a mountain just outside downtown Honolulu. With around 1,500 of climb on each loop, we were doing 12,000 feet of elevation change in 40 miles. The scenery was gorgeous, but the trail was rocky, rooted, and muddy, with plenty of sheer drops. My attention was, therefore, riveted on the here and now: just where each foot was going, drinking water without slipping, and convincing my quads to keep working.

Conversation was trimmed by the effort and conditions to what seemed naked truth.

I told John that when folks ask me why I run, the kind of folks who don't really want to know, but who think they're supposed to ask, I say, "I really want to be in good shape when I die." Groucho couldn't have answered better. In fact, even if they were sincerely interested I wouldn't have had much of an answer. All I knew was that I just ran. At 45, I was still a kid running in the woods. Truth and being are tricky stuff. "To be or not to be," "Do-be-do-be-do," take your choice.

I told him that I had come to the conclusion long ago (in a late-night fit of alcohol humor) that as we age past our sexual prime we start to lose brain cells. Science tells us that. Alcohol speeds the process. There's no telling in which order they will expire. Some of us are left with a brain that wants to do physics, some want to run. It's all a crapshoot.

Well, I was there to learn from his knowledge and experience of ultra trail running in general and Western States in particular. He was an important part of my frantic attempt to prepare for that race. I am a novice. He is an expert. He is also running with a stress fracture somewhere in his right lower leg as he talks about the drama of one Western States competitor's incredible, gritty finish.

The finish of Ed Fishman in 1986 is legendary (Ed and his five finishes at Western States are legendary!). It seems that somewhere in the night, miles from the finish, Ed, who was 64 at the time, fell off the trail and down a cliff. He broke his nose, broke two fingers, and sprained one ankle. He climbed back up and hobbled his way to the track where the race finishes.

Western States has a 30-hour time limit. Ed entered the track as the clock was ticking out the last couple of minutes. He was bloodied and dirty. His nose was pushed

to one side of his face. His fingers and ankle were taped. But, he made it. Ed is a hero.

And then, John blurted it out. He told me why he ran those mega-mothers. He said, "I'm a hero in my own mind!"

Let us theorize. These days it's hard to be a hero. Long gone are the days when folks could hunt mammoth or stop a sabretoothed tiger. Our lives, particularly in this "first world" country, are tame and sedate compared with those of our progenitors. Most folks now experience adventure from their armchairs.

As children we learn about lots of heroes and their deeds. We dream of adventure. By the time we grow up, lots of us have jobs, families, and other responsibilities, and we've learned to sublimate any genetic memories of the hunt. We've put heroes and adventure aside.

For some of us there comes a reawakening. The spirit of adventure re-emerges. Perhaps it starts with realizing our physical mortality and becoming fitness conscious. A walk in the park leads to jogging. We run a little in the predawn. We tackle a 10-km race. We finish a marathon. We do an ultra, maybe a 50-km or 50-miler. We hit the trail. And so it goes.

We want to be heroes in our own minds.

Then again, what's heroic about self-annihilation? Typically, in one of these 100-milers a runner will incur tissue necrosis. That's necrosis as in death. Out of ready-to-use fuel such as digested carbohydrates, the body's engine starts eating fatty tissue, then muscles. This is like finding yourself without firewood in the middle of the Yukon winter in a log cabin. You start with chopping up the furniture and then the cabin itself to keep warm. It can't go on forever. Of course this is no cabin in the Yukon, this is your body. This is self-cannibalization.

Perhaps more analogous, certainly more grisly, are those hideous campfire stories of starving folks hacking off parts of their bodies for food. This is shocking, but is it heroic?

Worse yet, in a 100-miler, it's all voluntary and the choice of stopping is always available. Where's the heroism?

Today's 100-mile races all have plenty of aid stations with the latest in nutrition and fluids, medical help, sometimes even gear replacement. What's the big deal?

Well, I'm beginning to find out. Just finishing our little 40-miler taxed my mind and body. The exhausting hours spent training week after week never seem to be enough. My mental metronome has stretched out from a day-to-day only measure, with hour-to-hour markings in my business calendar, to include seasonal and year-long cycles. The rhythm of my life has gotten much more complex. I am on a multi-year approach to Western States.

I'm no hero yet. But, maybe, John is right. The effort required to prepare for and finish 100 miles running on a rough trail can make us heroes. At least in our own minds.