

Don Halke's Grand Adventure-

The Odyssey begins: Western States Endurance Run

On June 19, 2007, Melanie (my wonderful wife and top notch crew) and I started our summer long journey. This wasn't just a plane trip to Squaw Valley, California, but to the starting point for my Grand Slam hopes and the fund raising campaign I created to honor my father and friend, Glenn Hoffman, who is fighting desperately against colon cancer. (The Grand Slam is comprised of the four oldest 100-mile races, ran in the same running season.)

In Squaw Valley, I would join 391 other ultra runners trying to run the 100 miles from Squaw Valley to Auburn, traveling the historic Western States trail. Many of my friends figured that since I had ran WS in 2005, that this would be just a long training run for me. I knew better than to underestimate the challenges of any 100-mile distance!

To try to explain how difficult it is to run this many ultras in this short of a time frame, consider this. No one from Pennsylvania has been able to complete all four of these 100-mile races in the same running season, in the 20 year history of this event. In 2007, I am the oldest of three people from Pennsylvania attempting to accomplish it this year.

Prior to arriving at Squaw Valley, we did some site seeing, hiking in Muir Woods, and a mandatory stop in Auburn to have diner with my pacer, Paul Fejes. Paul lives about 20 miles from the finish and is very familiar with the trail. He paced me in 2005 and during that race became a close friend. If you are feeling a little nervous and getting pre-race butterflies, there is nothing like a good meal and running conversation with a runner friend to help soothe the nerves, the beer helps, too!

On Thursday morning, Melanie and I arrived at Squaw Valley. The village was already a buzz with runners! The Inn we were staying at was so cute and comfortable we almost felt like we were in Austria, instead of California. In the afternoon, we attended the briefings for the trail conditions and for pacers. The excitement just continued!

On Friday, we attended the mandatory weigh in. Everyone was there! Tim Twietmeyer, the five time champion, Graham Cooper and Nikki Kimball, the 2006 champions, Chrissy Weis, the maker of the Dirty Girl Gaiters and many more. Tim came over and was chatting with me. Chrissy and I posed for a photograph together. I have bought a lot of her gaiters and already am appearing on here website. Chrissy is attempting the "Last Great Race"...which is the four races that make up the Grand Slam, as well as Old Dominion and Saint Angelo's Crest 100 mile races.

Also attending the weigh in was our close friends, Ellen and Ken Crouse. They came from Folsom CA. to watch the weigh in and visit with us. Ken is a two time finisher of WS and a frequent volunteer for WS, where he runs safety patrol. Ken was helping a novice 100-mile runner with advice and after the weigh in we all went for a nice "big" breakfast. I learned

something new at breakfast, my bib number, 187, has a special meaning to California police. It is their code for “body found”. Lets just say, I thought about my bib number a lot the next two days!

After breakfast we dropped off six bags of supplies that the race organizers would deliver to various pre-specified aid stations. The logistics for running a hundred miles is incredible. You must prepare to start the race in the cold and dark, run in the heat of day, run again at night in the dark and possibly cold, and you will need sun block and maybe bug repellent. You will probably want to change your shoes a couple of times, and maybe change your socks more often. And then there is the river crossing. Normally, unless the river is flooding and you are boated across, you wade across holding a cable. It is about waist deep and the water is ice cold from the snowmelt. I knew I would not be crossing Rucky Chucky until well into the night, so I had a complete change of clothing for after that, just in case I started to get cold.

On Friday afternoon, we attended the mandatory runner/crew briefing. It was the who-who of ultra running. And of course, the man that started the WS race was there providing chiropractic care. He is Gordy Ainsleigh and he is amazing. Gordy was to compete in the Tevis Cup, which is the world famous 100 mile horse race that runs on the WS trail. But when his horse became lame, this crazy runner decided to run the race himself. He finished in less than 24 hours, beating some of the horses!

After the briefing, we went for dinner and then an early bed!

The race started a 5:00AM Saturday June 23. The temperatures at the start were expected to be in the 30's but were not that cold. I wore just my short sleeve WS shirt, shorts, cap, gloves and of course my “No Bad Days” Dirty girl Gaiters! And then we started into the dark. I was walking the mountain with none other than Gordy himself. We were talking a little about what it would take to break 24. Gordy joked with me as he passed me on a flat section. I immediately caught him on the up hill. He definitely seemed like he intended to do that.

Chatter was everywhere. I was mostly just listening. I heard a man talking about his Leadville experience last year and joined up with him for a few minutes. He was from N.C., Joey Anderson. Joey knows the man who will be pacing for me at Leadville. (Joey did not have a good day and withdrew from the race at Devil's Thumb.)

I crested the top of Emigrant's Pass with some words from Gillian Robertson and her friend, Don. (Gillian and Don operate Zombie Runner's.) They were snapping photos of runners as we crested the summit. The view from the top of my world that morning was fantastic. Behind me I could see Lake Tahoe and in front of me, the Sierra Nevada Mountains stood calling me, with a downward sloping trail leading me into their waiting arms.

And in a second, I was off running...Two years ago I ran over many feet of snow and through a lot of water. This year there would be no snow but plenty of choking dust. It was everywhere.

Every time a runner passed, a cloud of dust would rise into the air. Some people wore bandanas; some even had wore dust masks to protect their lungs.

I passed Lyon's Ridge Aid Station and Scott Mills was helping and yelled a hello. Scott is an incredible runner, with 10 sub 24 hour finishes at WS. I arrived at Red Star Ridge (mile 16) and the voice of my pacer, Paul, who was also a volunteer at this aid station, barked out instructions to me and filled my Camelback and got me moving again. And I was moving well. Chrissy Weis and I kept passing each other as we approached Duncan Canyon. The canyon was black, with green just beginning to return to forest floor, as a result of a forest fire that devastated it in 2001. On the climb out of the canyon, I left Chrissy for the last time, as we headed towards Robinson Flat (Mile 29.7).

I moved through the next few miles with no real problems. I had noticed that the water quality seemed to be diminishing, with a taste of warm plastic being present with each sip from my hydration pack. As I headed towards Last Chance, I saw Gordy ahead of me. I was surprised to be so close to him this far in to the race. I knew I was slightly behind a 24 hour pace and really expected to slow more, once we hit the next three canyons. When departed Last Chance (mile 43), Gordy was still there. I did not see him again until after I finished.

I made the climb up to Devils Thumb. The race organizers say 36 switch backs. I say 39. They say it looks like a Thumb. I say it looks like another finger my mother would not want me to use! But what I can say for certain...it is one hard climb! When I arrived at the aid station and weighed in, I had gained one half pound since I was weighed in on Friday! I had run 48 miles and I had not lost a pound!!! I grabbed a few things to eat and was off...after just checking out of the station, I began the first of about 15 hurl sessions. I think it was the water, but anyway, I lost only a few seconds and continued down the path...unfortunately it was the wrong path! I caught up to a woman who was on trail and we talked a few minutes. And then I started to get nervous about not seeing any yellow ribbons. Yes, we had missed our turn. Well, after about a half mile back tracking we were back on course, headed into El Dorado Canyon. Now this is a drop of about 2500 feet over 4 miles. But what goes down, in this race anyway, must go up. From the bottom of the canyon, we must climb over 1800 feet in three miles! And that is when my calf started to beat like a heart! Oh yes, it was very rhythmic indeed...with a contraction coinciding with my blood curling screams...fortunately, no one was around to hear me, and if they had been, there really wasn't anything they could do about them any way. I sat down for a few seconds, trying to pull my toes forward and work the cramp out. (Do you remember the movie, "The Wizard of OZ"? If so, imagine the witch crushed by the house and her toes curled when the ruby slippers were taken off her feet... Yes, that is how my toes looked!) Then the safety patrol came and asked if I was ok...I guess the screaming had been heard after all...Well, I tried to stand up, to start moving up hill and get away from them..and then, because I stood up too fast, I became dizzy. And I thought.."Oh God, please don't let my race end this way..." Some how I started marching up the mountain. I started slowly but could feel my calf stretching and my pace quickening. I knew Melanie would be at the top of the mountain with a McDonald's cheeseburger for me.

When I arrived at Michigan bluff, mile 55.7, I was almost an hour behind where I was in 2005. I yelled for a message therapist and Melanie immediately went to work changing my clothing and

packs for the night. I wanted to wear a special shirt that was designed for my pacers and crews for this year's race. It is bright green and has a life like picture of me on the front and a nice logo



on the back.

For me, this simple shirt represents the races I will run and was a small gift for my support crews. But when I gave Glenn a shirt, he said the mountains represent his fight against the cancer and every time he sees a green shirt it will remind him of all the people who are supporting him in his race against the cancer. What an inspiration!

With everyone helping me, we must have looked like a NASCAR pit crew...me eating, volunteers filling my camelback, Debbie working my leg, Mel pulling my shirt off and helping me put on a clean one.... But before she did this, she took pictures of me screaming as the therapist worked out the knots in my leg. She wanted to remind me how much fun I was having!!! (Oh, and Melanie forgot to get the cheese burger I had requested...but since she is such a great crew chief, we will remain married!)

I left the aid station headed for Forest Hills...mile 62. I walked about two miles to let my calf loosen up before starting to run. It was a warm evening and the walk break felt great. Then I was able to get running again and made up lost time. I arrived at Forest Hills almost the same time as I had two years ago. Paul met me at Bath Road and we walked into the aid station. My weight was one pound heavier, which was very good! Paul's wife, Christina, and children all had their Don's crew shirts on for me! Christina started to laugh as my calf cramped when Paul helped me change shoes. She is so sweet I couldn't be upset at her, but after the race, I did tease her about laughing at my pain. And then Paul and I departed into the dark!

The run to Rucky Chuck (mile 78) was pretty much uneventful. It was difficult seeing rocks and roots since the trail was covered with dust. Everything looked the same and depth perception became difficult. I was having difficulty seeing objects but still it was Paul that tripped and wrapped his arm around my legs...to save himself from a face plant.

I noticed that the back of my right leg, behind my kneecap, seemed tight and then seemed a little swollen. It didn't hurt, but became more swollen and tighter through the night. (I did not know then how the leg would worsen and swell. I was at the doctor by midweek, for antibiotics. It appears to have been some sort of insect bite.)

I was tired and as we neared the river crossing, we came upon two guys sleeping on the trail! I would have loved to join them. It was 2:00AM!

The river crossing was cool, but it was such a warm evening it did not make us cold. The water was deeper than we expected and we had to hang our packs around our necks to keep them dry. On the far side of the river, I had new shoes and socks to change into.

Paul and I had a great night visiting. When the sun came up, we ran four miles really well and made up a lot of time lost in the dark. We became more certain that we were in good shape to make the 30 hour cut off and our pace slowed, knowing another race was only four weeks away. As we approached No Hands Bridge, a familiar face came up the trail towards me. It was Tim Twietmeyer. "He yelled, hey Don, you can break 29!!!" Then he stopped to shake hands and told me he would see me at the awards ceremony. That was one of those WOW moments for me.

A few minutes latter I arrived at mile 96.8, No Hands Bridge...My friend Ellen and her husband Ken had hiked down to cheer me on and escort me to the finish. Ellen wore her Don's Grand Slam crew shirt. She asked if I was ready to run and I told her "No". We are walking the race in.

We walked the huge hill, and the streets through Auburn all the way to the high school track. I asked Paul and Ellen to join me for our victory lap...all wearing our green shirts. I crossed the finish line, but we (all my friends) finished the first race in 29 hours 7 minutes 22 seconds. I placed 222 out of 270 finishers.

Thanks to everyone who held me in their thoughts that day and a big Thank You to everyone who has pledged or contributed to this fund raising campaign for the American Cancer Society.

Congratulations to Gordy and Chrissy, who did finish.

And Don Halke's Grand Adventure will continue on July 21, 2007 when we will start Vermont 100 Endurance Race