

## One Day, One Hundred Miles

by Joan Reinhardt Reiss

“The trees are your friends and you shall run like the wind,” said my dear friend Denis, a Lakota Indian medicine man. Tears welled in my eyes as I sat in a circle surrounded by my close, caring people. The good medicine blanket covered our legs as we huddled together and smoked the ceremonial pipe. Let the great spirits be with me as I follow the ancient Indian trails in the Sierra.

In less than seven hours I was to embark upon the incredible journey from Squaw Valley to Auburn, the Western States 100 Mile Endurance Run. This was my *Everest* to conquer. The meek may inherit the earth but they shall not complete the 100 mile journey which requires 38,510 feet of elevation change.

How did I get into all this? Slowly! In 1978, tired of making phone calls to set up Sacramento tennis matches, I began jogging around my neighborhood. Running shoes replaced my tennis footwear and distances expanded. Fun runs followed and I started winning prizes in the 40+ age group. This age category even had the delightful title of Masters. Being rather Pavlovian, I responded with more races and more prizes. In 1979, I ran a small, local, marathon and became the first female finisher (3:28) in the Suicide Prevention Marathon.

In 1980 I joined the Buffalo Chips Running Club and started training seriously under the guidance of the Chips guru, George Parrott. Over the next years I became a nationally ranked runner at a variety of distances. The marathon was always my best and thanks to George, I notched seven sub-3 hour times.

Around age 48 I began to slow down. However, I have my athletic gift has always been my endurance. After a few 50 mile races, I scored a first female finish. Madness occurred and I decided to run the 100 mile Western States Endurance Run (WS). The California race goes from Squaw Valley to Auburn and is mostly on trails. If a runner completes the event under 24 hours, an engraved silver buckle is presented. All competitors must finish in 30 hours with appropriate time cut-offs at different points.

Applications became available in the preceding summer and I submitted the \$125 entry fee with my application. As a veteran of 35 marathons, 6 ultra marathons and a few hundred races, I completed numerous application blanks. Each one has a no-fault paragraph whereby the entrant agrees that race management and sponsors are not responsible for anything. The WS application had the longest and most dire no-fault paragraph ever,

“This 100 mile race is one of the most physically taxing events in the world and participation in it presents numerous medical risks, many of which can be extremely serious or even fatal.”

The paragraph goes on to explain that there is a possibility that death might result although race management would do everything possible to reach me. How comforting!

In 1987, WS was in its 11<sup>th</sup> year and 865 mountain men and women applied. In December 452 were chosen by lottery or *elite* selection; which placed me in the second category. There's a management assumption of a 15-20% attrition rate and in 1987, there were 360 runners at the starting line.

The race packet arrived, and I was officially welcomed into the “Ultimate Endurance Challenge.” The child in me was incredibly elated and the rest of me worried. The Hawaii Triathlon is said to be the event that tries the body while Western States tries the soul; I was ready to put my soul on the starting line.

In Sacramento a number of my fellow runners had completed the WS run. What’s more they survived and a number wore the prestigious silver buckle. Using their collective wisdom, I cobbled together a training program. With a few other competitors and my training partner Howard Klein, we began a rigorous regime. By June 1<sup>st</sup>, we completed three 50 mile events and two marathons.

The joy of training was apparent when we ran on the WS trails. Each week-end we did a major run of at least 6 hours covering another section of the course. Great attention was paid to nutrition and electrolytes. The solitude and beauty of the mountains and canyons moved me deeply. No other prior running compared with this experience. I felt free, powerful, and so in touch with the natural world.

A critical WS component is the pacer who must befriend, cajole, and urge the weary runner forward. Once Howard even found me in the middle of a 50 mile race and ran 30 miles with me. The ideal pacer is a close friend who can intimidate you at the appropriate time.

The final component of course is your own crew. At key points they appear with your favorite nourishments, many of which you don’t want to eat. The WS super-market aid stations are wonderful but your people provide that extra boost with both mental and physical nourishment.

My organization came together and the night before the race the crew and I slept in a friend’s Squaw Valley home. Beneath the old Indian medicine blanket, the good spirits gave me dreams of success. On race morning, my orthodox Jewish father-in-law prayed in synagogue, while Baptist friends consulted with their higher authority. Surely, I was the most spiritually endowed runner in the event.

At 5 AM, I hugged my crew good-by and joined 359 comrades to start WS. In the gray, pre-dawn light we snaked up a mountain. An hour later, the sun rose over Lake Tahoe and the Sierras had a pink glow. The next 30 miles are so spectacular with continuous mountain vistas and a riot of wild flowers. A cloud cover kept me cool. In spite of silt and dust, I felt free and powerful.

The crew appeared at all the pre-designated areas. Quickly they filled the bottles with icy water, replaced crackers and pretzels while massaging my legs. No stop lasted longer than five minutes. Seeing them always brought energy, encouragement, and a quickened pace.

In the next 25 miles the canyons loomed and the cloud cover dissipated. The sun burned into the stones and temperatures soared beyond 110°. On the Devil’s Thumb climb, I could feel my energy drain away. Ahead of me, an exhausted runner was planning to quit. He wasn’t a positive inspiration since my leg muscles were entering a decay cycle. Atop the canyon, I sipped soda at an aid station and my nausea exploded outwards. Howard and the crew were waiting, less than a mile away. After pretzels and saltines a new person emerged. “Get to Forest Hill,” urged Howard, “I’ll take you from there!”

Onward I slogged, definitely at a slower pace. A mile before Forest Hill Denis and the crew met me with a change of clothes, a quad massage, nutrition, and a large sprig of lupine for my cap. All this occurred in three minutes.

With renewed energy, I quickly ran to Forest Hill. Here at mile 62, all runners are allowed to have a pacer to help through the long night. After the wilderness quiet, “Pacer Central” is a party town. Howard and I flew down Main Street amidst great applause.

Leaving civilization, we begin the 16 mile descent to the American River. With darkness, Howard turns on the fluorescent light that he has rigged on his fanny pack and illuminates the area like a stage. No other light was needed but the darkness slowed me further.

Rucky Chucky was illuminated like a film premiere. As always dedicated volunteers stand in the cold water holding the thick rope cable. Each had a flashlight to show the rocks and guide our steps. Water covered my thighs and the coldness was invigorating but unlike the volunteers, I was only passing through. Once across we had a sip of soup, clean socks, dry shoes before walking uphill. Our crew had waited but all we had time for was new flashlights. Although, I still hoped for a silver buckle, both Howie and I knew that time was a-fleeting and the canyons had taken an irreversible toll on my quads.

Fluorescent green lights marked the route. We marveled at the glow worm effect as we moved ever closer to Auburn. However, a few miles further on and my energy felt non-existent. I was sure that I could walk and sleep simultaneously. Howie knew the bonk had struck and kept urging me forward. He would say, “Alright, you’ve walked enough! Can we run now?”

Ahead we could hear the generator and see the lights at the 85 mile aid station. My husband Mark was there to greet me. “How are you?” he shouted. “Fine,” I lied. “She’s got the bonk,” Howie added. They sat me down and brought chicken soup, coffee, and cookies. The food acted like Clark Kent’s phone booth and immediately transformed me into superwoman. Away we charged! At the Buffalo Chips aid station at 90 miles I learned that I was the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> woman; a new inspiration for moving forward.

Five miles outside Auburn, the sun rose. For the first time in my life I experienced two sunrises with no sleep in between. We paused on the ridge and looked back at the distant mountains. “Howie, we’ve come from there,” I sighed. We held hands for a brief moment and I told him that he had a five o’clock shadow. He laughed.

At the last checkpoint, I received a floral bouquet shortly before the final run to the track. I withstood my quadriceps pain while the whole crew yelled and shouted during my final lap. We all kissed and hugged and I felt elated with my 25:30.

When the final results came, only 183 runners had finished. This represented an attrition rate of almost 50%. I turned out to be the 8<sup>th</sup> woman. Already, it was clear to me that I had to return and beat the clock.

My present success had many components including luck. After all, I had escaped any major injury. I felt myself flow with mountains, forests, and elements. Supported by hard training, my pacer, and the crew I would return again to beat the clock. However, now among my friends, I count the trees.

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P.S. In 1988, I returned and ran 23:44 at age 50+ which made me the oldest woman to complete the WS 100 under 24 hours.