

MARSHALL ULRICH'S SOLO BADWATER TO MT. WHITNEY RECORD

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FIRST-PERSON STORIES

My Most Unforgettable Ultramarathon (& What I Learned From It)

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INYO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA, July 1-4, 1999—Thousands and thousands of miles, six continents, 89 ultraruns, and seven adventure races behind me, and I still tend to recall the last event I finished the most poignantly. However, one event in particular does come to mind as exceptional: The Badwater Solo: the first successful unaided, self-contained crossing of Death Valley and the ascension of Mt. Whitney.

It started from Badwater, a sinkhole in Death Valley that at 282 feet below sea level is the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere and climbed to the peak of Mt. Whitney, at 14,500 feet altitude, the highest peak in the contiguous U.S. The course covers a distance of nearly 150 miles.

The solo attempt was the culmination of desert racing experiences over a period of many years: seven Badwater-to-Whitney crossings, as well as the only south-to-north Death Valley crossing of what at that time was a national monument (now a National Park), plus two different races in the Sahara. These desert races helped me learn about my body, and what it requires to continue functioning in the extreme conditions one encounters on the journey.

The adventure racing experiences, i.e. Eco Challenges and Raid Gauloises, helped me learn the organizational skills required to take care of myself during the self-contained aspect of the completely unaided solo.

Two key elements come immediately to mind regarding my running.

The first is that none of my accomplishments would have taken place without the support of my friends, whether it be emotional and logistical support, or running at my side. This includes the product and monetary support of my primary sponsor, Pharmanex.

The second is my strong belief that ultra-distance sports are, to me, a life process condensed into an event or series of events. The growth process they provide is what drives me as it opens the window into my very mind and soul. The events are but a vehicle for this to happen, and hopefully I internalize it all effectively, and that is what allows me to evolve—it is the “process” that is so compelling.

Given these statements, you may well suspect where I am going with this story: a factual account of the “solo” may or may not be interesting, and to me it is anti-climactic, in that the significance lies only within the “process” itself. Some runners get this”, but I suspect that some brows may well rise, since many athletes view records, first-run events, and wins as very significant in the whole scheme of life. What is really important is that we fight the fight, dream the dream, and go out and do!

To this end I will address the event, but the “What I Learned From It” is truly the most important piece of the puzzle.

The Badwater-to-Whitney Rules

Most of the governing rules of what is referred to as “The Death Valley course” have been in place since the early 1970s when the course was first recognized. The rules were further codified by The California Ultrarunners Club in the early 1980s and defined in an appendix of the book (The Death Valley 300) covering the first-ever out-and-back crossing by Tom Crawford and Rich Benyo in 1989. The rules are brief and to the point:

1. The attempts must take place in the July-to-August “window” to officially count.
2. It must be done beginning between 6:00 a.m. and 11:59 a.m. to count as an “a.m. start”. Any other times are considered “p.m. starts”.
3. Crew vehicles are allowed as are IVs (with the exception of what was called the Hi-Tec Badwater race, which banned IVs from 1995 on).
4. Runners are allowed to leave the course as long as they return to that exact spot when they return and continue from there, sacrificing all time spent off the course.

Additional Solo, Unaided, Self-Contained Rules

1. No IVs.
2. No aid of any kind from an outside source and/or person.
3. No using any shelter other than nature's shade (i.e., boulders, creosote bushes, trees, etc.).
4. You must have everything from start to finish: food, clothing, equipment, and all necessary water. If a water source along the course is available, it cannot be used.
5. Trailers or any other apparatus are allowed as long as that apparatus is pushed, pulled, or carried. No motorized trailers. The trailer or apparatus can be disposed of only at the Lone Pine Junction (the intersection of Whitney Portal Road and Hwy. 395) or the Whitney trailhead.
6. With the exception of water, nothing can be disposed of along the way, not even trash.
7. Medical emergencies must be dealt with and/or administered by the individual only. No help or supplies can be used from an outside source.
8. Only a.m. starts are valid.
9. No leaving the course is allowed; you must remain on the course at all times.
10. There must be at least one person monitoring the above compliances at all times.

As you can see, some of the rules have been further restricting. This was done only to make the solo attempt as "clean" as possible. With the rules in place, the definition of "solo attempt" is indisputable.

The Trailer & Equipment

The two-wheeled trailer I created consisted of a modified Baby Jogger donated by Equinox. It was stripped down to the bare frame and reduced in width by four inches so it could accommodate snugly an 80-quart cooler, thereby effectively reducing the center of gravity. This arrangement placed the bottom of the cooler only six inches above the ground.

The original 20-inch tires were replaced by two 26-inch road bicycle tires in order to reduce rolling resistance. The "rickshaw"-like boom handle was equipped with two brake handles, one on each side, which controlled the opposite-side wheels. Thus a braking system was created that also served as a steering device, as more pressure was applied to one side or the other. An adjustable mid-bar was attached to the boom, which could be clipped into place using an aluminum backpack frame. This frame could also be coupled to the tubing of the trailer by long webbing straps, which added another way of pulling the trailer, and it was used on the mountain portions using a clip-on backpack/cargo holder of approximately 1,000 cubic inches capacity. These systems of attachment allowed the cart to be pushed or pulled in at least a half-dozen different ways. Flashing red lights were fitted on the front and rear for night safety and reflective tape applied liberally.

The cooler was fitted with baffles spaced four inches apart in order to minimize the sloshing of water and therefore the shifting of weight. A 50-gallon-per-minute submersible pump was dropped inside and hooked to insulated tubing that ran up the boom handle to the front center for easy drinking. This pump was run by a lawnmower battery, which was continuously charged during daylight hours by a 6"X20" solar panel that was mounted on the side of the cooler. Electrical wiring was then run from the collector, battery, and pump, and was controlled by a switch located near the hand brakes. Detachable cargo webbing was added to the top of the cooler for storage of food, emergency equipment, first aid materials, and extra clothing. The trailer had to be balanced while in motion and the contents within the webbing served as ballast.



The Solo

On Wednesday, June 30, I left Fort Morgan, Colorado, flying to Las Vegas. My two-wheeled cart was disassembled to fit into a bicycle box and the cooler was used for equipment and checked through as common luggage.

I rented a van and drove to Furnace Creek Ranch, approximately 17 miles north of the Badwater starting line. As I arrived at the Ranch, Ben and Denise Jones (the honorary mayor and first lady of Badwater) greeted me. Phil and Kari Marchant were on hand to contribute their Badwater-to-Mt. Whitney crew experience. Phil aided me in putting together the trailer, since he is very familiar with the mechanics of bicycles. Gary Hoover from Florida was also in the area to lend a hand as needed.

Scott Weber, an eight-time veteran of the Badwater-to-Whitney crossing and the only person to do a triple-crossing, arrived later that evening. Scott brought along his five-gallon capacity Igloo-equipped Baby Jogger so that he could get in some training miles along the course while also monitoring my progress and adherence to the rules. That evening, everyone pitched in and helped me make my final preparations, which included First Lady Denise Jones doing a thorough taping of my feet against the punishment they were about to undergo.

The next morning (July 1) at 5:00 a.m., seven of us in five vehicles headed to the Badwater starting line. When we arrived, everyone pitched in to help me get organized.

We filled the ice-chest with 10 seven-pound bags of ice and the balance of approximately 13 1/2 gallons of water. I had experimented with this ratio of ice-to-water and determined that at approximately 120 degrees air temperature and 180 degrees pavement temperature, the water would remain cold and the ice would melt in approximately 48 hours. That was the time frame that I had hoped to use to reach Lone Pine: 122 miles from the start, and 24 miles from there to the top of Mt. Whitney.

Phil pumped up the tires to about 100 pounds and they were bulging excessively. The estimated weight of the loaded trailer was 225 pounds: 170 pounds of water and ice, 30 pounds of food, medical equipment, sundry equipment, and clothing, and 25 pounds of cart weight.

I harbored two major concerns. One of my fears was multiple flats—or even worse, a blow-out or two. I only had one extra tire and two tubes. The other concern was running out of water.

In either case, the Solo effort would be over. Four years earlier I had tried this Solo event using the same trailer, but without the water pump, but made it only six miles before succumbing to symptoms of severe dehydration: vomiting, drowsiness, and intense headache. The year Ben Jones brought me back from the dead with IVs. So why try the Solo again?

It is amazing how “unfinished business” can motivate a person. It was also intriguing: Can a person really transport enough water to sustain himself for 146 miles with a cumulative incline of 25,000 feet from the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere to the highest point in the contiguous 48 states?

The Official Start

At 6:00 a.m. Ben Jones yelled “Go!” and I was off and running, so to speak. The reality is that it was hard to even pull the cart while walking! Ben had suggested weeks before that I fly out to Death Valley and do a “test pull” up Townes Pass. My reply was, “I tested it pulling it one mile in Fort Morgan. If I came out for a trial run, there is no way in hell I’d go back out there for more!” At any rate, a few miles north of Badwater I began to question whether or not the Solo could really be done.

I had hoped to average approximately 20-minute miles through the entire portion up to Lone Pine. As I passed Furnace Creek at 17 miles, with temperatures already at 110 degrees, I had averaged 16-minute miles. Between Furnace Creek and Stovepipe Wells, at 41 miles, the temperature had risen to 128 degrees (in the shade, not that there’s much shade in Death Valley) and winds had added dehydration effects. By then it was 8:00 p.m. and my average was just over 20-minute miles.

Through this first portion of the Solo, I had decided to drink all that I wanted and to never look inside the cooler, as I didn’t want that to deter me from staying ahead of dehydration. I took a first look into the cooler and to my surprise, I had consumed less than four gallons of water! That was the good news. The bad news: all the ice had melted.

The effects of the heat became somewhat intolerable as I looked forward to climbing Townes Pass: 5,000 feet of climb in 17 miles.

The Longest Hill

What transpired was a 15-hour, through-the-night “grunt” pulling of the by-now 200-pound trailer. I was reduced to a seemingly endless repetition of pulling that cart up the steep grade for three-quarters of a

mile, dropping to the ground on my back to rest, recovering for five minutes, continuing forward, only to stop and do it over again and again, all the way to the top. By the time I reached the pass, morning had arrived and temperatures had already started to climb.

Downhill 3,400 feet in just over 10 miles and across Panamint Valley proved to be an exercise in controlling the cart. I discovered that turning it around and letting it pull me downhill worked the best. My thoughts turned to: "What if this thing gets away from me?" The graphic depiction of my end generated by a worried mind made me conscious of my mortality.

Fortunately, it did not pull me to my death, but my quads took a fair beating from the marked descent. As I approached the Panamint Springs resort at 72 miles (38 hours from the start) I knew that I would be spending one additional unintended day in the desert. The temperatures had reached over 115 degrees. My tolerance for heat was further reduced and I perceived it as being hotter than the day before.



There is a tree oasis at Panamint Springs and I rested for two hours as I had done at Stovepipe Wells the day before, once again waiting for the sun to go down.

Dusk was at hand and another ascent awaited me. This time it was a 15-mile, 3,000-foot climb to the Padre Crowley Overlook. This ascent was more bearable than the one to Townes Pass, due no doubt to the decreasing weight of the cart as I drank the water inside.

Dawn caught me on the Argus Range (just above 5,000 feet altitude) gazing at the long shadows pointing to the Owens Valley. I was impressed by the images cast by the Joshua trees upon the sand. I was finally beginning to feel human again.

My water level was down to about seven gallons and the trailer was much easier to pull. I was able to actually run with the cart across several of the remaining miles into Lone Pine.

During that period I was visited by Bjarte Furnes from Norway (who would later accompany me up Mt. Whitney), Jeff Tropple from Lone Pine, and Jurgen Ankenbrand from Germany. Along with Ben Jones, these people served as additional documentators and photographers.

The time spent traveling from the Darwin turnoff in the Argus Range into Lone Pine was somewhat unremarkable (especially placed against the events of the previous day) with the exception of a nagging bloody nose that would plague me throughout the solo attempt.

A Nose For Trouble

As I approached the intersection of highways 136 and 395, four miles south of Lone Pine, both nostrils were bleeding profusely. The Vaseline which I normally use to coat the lining of my nose was completely liquified by the heat, and was of no use whatsoever. I tried to pack my nostrils with tissue, but that only complicated the situation, because then I couldn't swallow any fluids.

Finally, I thought of my lip balm. It was thick enough to stay on my finger and, stuffed in my nose, it temporarily stopped the bleeding.

My growing intolerance of the heat had by now become a major "mind funk". All I wanted to do was find shade, which I finally did as I turned onto Whitney Portal Road, which heads west from Lone Pine into the mountains.

Sixty hours from the start, I took another two-hour nap. I waited for the sun to drop behind the towering Sierra Nevada. I had nearly four gallons of water left and a 13-mile pull up to 8,000 feet to Whitney Portal.

John Rosmus and Trina Tropple arrived to help monitor my progress during the night. They brought the total number of monitors/witnesses to 11.

As the cart grew lighter as I consumed the water inside it, the prospects of being successful in my quest to the top grew. Nine miles outside Lone Pine, I reached the significantly steeper switchbacks (Known as the "Z".) leading to the Portal and the Mt. Whitney Trailhead. Although the trailer now weighed in at just more than 100 pounds, I found myself unable to pull it any farther. I checked the water level and estimated I had 3 1/2 gallons of water left. I determined that I could afford to dump two gallons without fear of not having enough to make it to the top of the mountain. The loss of approximately 16 pounds of water was just enough to allow me to drag the trailer to the trailhead. What I had estimated as a 48-hour trek from Badwater to the trailhead had turned into a nearly 68-hour slugfest (67 hours, 38 minutes, to be exact).

After discarding the cart, Bjarte and I started up the Whitney Trail in the dark. By now, being relieved of my burden, I was happy to have only one gallon of water inside my pack. The pack was attached to the same frame I had used to pull the cart; it was also the same frame I'd used to lay on the desert sands to insulate myself against the baking surface.

The nose bleeds persisted all the way and they caused me to harbor the occasional doubt that I'd be able to make it to the top. These doubts came on in waves until we crested the east face of Mt. Whitney. What is traditionally a difficult climb at the end of the annual Hi-Tec Badwater race became a driven, self-consuming opportunity to "rise to the occasion." I became preoccupied with survival.

The infernal heat had given way to the cold and I was now thankful for having the extra clothing I'd transported all the way from Badwater. My energy level was pitiful at best, and the additional calories it

required to keep warm were just not there. Temperatures at this altitude in the middle of the night drop to near freezing.

Passing along behind the pinnacles on the opposite side of the mountain and knowing that I had just over one mile (and a 500-foot rise) to go gave me renewed faith in myself. Life became good again. I knew the first-ever solo was within my grasp.

After 77 hours and 46 minutes, I reached the top. I'd conquered the course. Or had I? I breathed a sigh of relief as I gazed down wearily back toward Death Valley. Had I conquered the course? Can such a course ever be conquered? I realized how insignificant all events of this nature are when placed against the majestic and frightening landscape. I had accomplished something that had never been done before, but had that in any way really affected the course itself? Now really. The course would remain long after I was returned to dust. I felt humbled, felt that I had not so much conquered the course as redeemed myself when I placed this accomplishment against past failures.

Frozen during the night, Bjarte and I took a few moments to allow the sun to warm us before we started down.

And What I Learned From It

Our Greatest Accomplishments Humble Us Most

The solo attempt served to bring into focus by its very arduous nature the past experiences I'd had both on this unique course and during other races in which I'd participated. This was the most difficult "race" of my life and in the process of doing it, it stripped away one layer after the other until I was totally exposed to myself. It stripped away all notions of ego-based superiority and taught me a more profound sense of humility than I'd ever before experienced.

Self-Imposed Endurance Provides Empathy

For the first time in my life, harnessed to a cart weighing more than 200 pounds, I felt the bondage of the servant animals and the important role they have played in increasing the quality of human lives. The bondage to that cart taught me how we are all united in the universe in spirit, none better than the other, none worse. It also brought home to me how presumptuous I have been in the past by boastfully thinking thoughts toward reaching an idealist's perfection. Once again I was reminded what a short distance I have covered, and what a marvelously long way I have yet to go. If only I can scratch the surface in my lifetime, I will be content.

Accomplishments Are Merely Extensions Of Ourselves

I realized that many accomplishments that have been of such great importance to me are merely extensions of my personality. They are acted out, at times coming from the purely physical side of me (including my ego), as opposed to my seeking their spiritual essence. Thus, the Solo becomes a vehicle for exposure of the inner self and psyche—nothing more or less. When someone takes notice of an accomplishment, such as the Solo, the two of us become, for that brief instant, connected. This awareness may or may not have any direct impact on our lives, but if it does affect that person positively (i.e., as inspiration), it then becomes validating. We are suddenly participating in life and in humanity as a joint effort.

We Must Take Responsibility For Ourselves

The Solo effort taught me how we can take responsibility for our lives and thereby guide our own destinies instead of blaming and being victimized by our own imperfections. It confirmed that the anger and rage that exists in most of us is based in our inability to accept our own inadequacies. The Solo taught me that we all have the strength and conviction to deal with adversity—if we will just tap into it. But more than anything, the Solo has given me profound gratitude for my family and friends, appreciation of what I have, who I am, and where I am going in my life.