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Western States 100: That Was Something

There are moments in life when confidence swells in your chest like a noble eagle catching a thermal and rising majestically above the fray.

This was not one of those moments.

I entered the 2026 Western States 100 not so much confident as relatively lacking in full-blown anxiety, which, at my age and level of emotional maturity, is basically the same thing. This was not my first rodeo. I knew the course. I knew the climbs. I knew the heat. I knew the long, runnable descents that are only “runnable” if your quadriceps have not already filed for divorce. And I knew that, barring something going completely sideways, it was possible.

The danger, of course, was that many things enjoy going sideways. Ankles. Weather forecasts. Stomachs. Toenails. Race plans. Advanced-aged men who think signing up for 100-mile mountain races is a reasonable hobby.

Still, there is something deeply comforting about starting Western States from Olympic Valley. The start was less than a five-minute walk from the condo, which is about as close to race-morning luxury as ultrarunning allows. No shuttle bus. No logistical Rubik's Cube. No wandering around at 3:45 a.m. trying to remember if the headlamp is in the drop bag, backpack, rental car, or a parallel universe. Just shoes, bib, nerves, and a short walk into the gathering storm of bad decisions.

And what a beautiful place to make bad decisions.

Olympic Valley in the days before Western States has the feel of a family reunion where everyone is fit, young, beautiful, and capable of running effortlessly up a ski mountain while eating hummus from a reusable bamboo spoon. Chris Russell, my friend and eventual pacer, noted the strange village energy: beauty everywhere, a “family celebration” feel, people we’d only ever seen on social media suddenly walking around in actual human form, and the faint sense that some of us were relic imposters muttering, “I’ve done hard things! I swear I have!”

Chris also did yoga next to the mini pool and reported that he really did not care if all those fit young people were watching. This is why Chris is spiritually evolved. Or possibly broken. Both are useful qualities in a pacer.

The days before the race were mostly spent doing the traditional Western States taper rituals: checking weather apps with the emotional stability of a raccoon in a dumpster fire, wondering if I had brought enough clothes, realizing I probably had not, and taking in the sheer absurd blessing of being able to do these things with my body and brain.

I have written before that running was never just about personal challenge. The results of these electrolyte-drenched efforts may be gratifying in the moment, but they are only truly satisfying when shared. That was true in 2017 when I wrote about injury and gratitude. It was even more true standing in Olympic Valley surrounded by my crew, my family, my friends, and a mountain that seemed to be saying, "Come on, old man. Let's see what you've got."

Climbing to the Moon

The race starts with the climb to Emigrant Pass, because apparently Western States wanted to get right to the part where dignity leaves the body.

The climb was deliberate and comfortably within range from a pace standpoint. The wind, however, had different ideas. Forecasts had suggested 65 mph winds at the top, and the flag near the summit was snapped straight to the northeast so hard it looked like the one the Apollo astronauts had propped up on the moon.

The final push up to Emigrant Pass was one of those moments you hope memory does not sand down over time. People lined the trail, cheering like it was a Tour de France climb. One guy offered donuts. Another grabbed my video camera and ran with me for a bit on the climb, because apparently my oxygen-deprived shuffle needed cinematography.

And then came the descent.

The drop from Emigrant is why trail runners lie awake at night staring at the ceiling with a dumb grin on their faces. Alpine flowers everywhere. A riot of color. Gentle downhill. Runnable trail. No snow or mud pits this year, which, after 2017, felt like a formal apology from the ultra gods.

I chatted with runners, including the only other runner from Missouri, Adam Stacy. It turns out he and his wife are good friends with our CFO at Drury. Because of course they are. You travel halfway across the country to run one of the most iconic ultras in the world, and Missouri still taps you on the shoulder and says, “Ope, just gonna sneak right by ya.”

The views were stunning.

Which may explain why I fell four times in the first 30 miles.

The first two falls were benign in the way ultrarunners use the word “benign,” meaning no bones were clearly sticking out and minimal loss of blood. The third fall was more dramatic. I went down hard and heard a pop in my right hip area. The last time I heard that sound, I tore my hip labrum. This is not a sound a runner wants to hear. It is the body’s way of playing a tiny horror-movie violin.

I gathered my body and my thoughts and noticed a brown, viscous material dripping out of my shorts.

There are several possibilities in a 100-mile race when brown viscous material appears on your body, and most of them are not suitable for polite society.

Fortunately, it was Chocolate Mocha Gu with caffeine. A packet had popped. At the next aid station the normally helpful volunteers looked down, assessed the situation, and quickly decided eye contact was not covered in their training manual.

The fourth fall was the one that mattered. I caught a toe and began what should have been a well-practiced drop-and-roll, the kind of elegant trail ballet I have perfected through years of not picking up my feet. But I did not get my arm tucked in fast enough. My forearm hit the ground. My ribs drove into my forearm with the full weight of my body behind it.

I knew immediately I had cracked a rib.

Thirty seconds to inspect for collateral damage.

Then back at it.

This is not courage. This is experience. I have cracked ribs before. I know the real discomfort does not set in immediately. It waits. It lets you get emotionally invested. Then it shows up later with a folding chair and an agenda.

Nothing to do but keep moving.

Devil's Thumb and Other Inspirational Concepts

The climb to Devil's Thumb went better than it had during training camp. That is a low bar, since during training camp I believe I aged several years and briefly considered taking up pickleball. This time the climb took 33 minutes for the mile, compared with over an hour during camp. Progress! Or perhaps the brain simply learns to dissociate more efficiently.

The descent into Eldorado Canyon was harrowing, with what I described in my notes as 87-degree drop-offs that went on for over a mile. Were they actually 87 degrees? I don't know. I was busy trying not to die. This is not a surveying blog.

At the bottom I ran into Scott Warr from Trail Runner Nation, which was a treat. Very nice guy. I would not leave the aid station until forcing Scott to say "Welcome to another edition of Trail Runner Nation" in those golden mellifluous tones.

At Michigan Bluff I picked up Zach for the first pacing section. We were on schedule, and I felt fairly confident we had a real shot at finishing. That confidence faded a bit between Michigan Bluff and Foresthill, which was much tougher than I remembered. Brutal technical descents. Tough climbs. Night beginning to settle in. Ribs beginning to announce they were not in favor of the current management plan.

Foresthill: Where Time Goes to Use the Porta-Potty

Foresthill is one of those legendary Western States places where crowds, lights, crew, aid, and adrenaline all collide in a beautiful and chaotic mess. We lost a couple of minutes because no one had grabbed my running vest, so Zach got in some bonus speedwork retrieving it.

According to Chris Russell, I also wasted eight minutes in a porta-potty at Foresthill. I cannot independently verify that number, but I will say this: time moves differently inside an ultramarathon porta-potty. Einstein touched on this in his lesser-known paper, Special Relativity and the GI Distress of Aging Midpackers.

Dan Turpin (aka Pacer Dan) picked up pacing duties at Foresthill, and my hopes began to fade. The trail that had seemed relatively navigable in daylight during training camp was a very different beast at night. Aid station signs showing where you needed to be for a 30-hour finish started burrowing into my head. It looked like the race was slipping away.

I even suggested to Dan that maybe Chris Russell wouldn't want to cross the river at Rucky Chucky if it looked like we were just going to miss a cutoff.

Dan assured me that Chris Russell was all in.

Quitting at Rucky Chucky, mile 78, was no longer an option.

This is one of the underappreciated dangers of having good friends. They remember who you wanted to be before you started negotiating with who you currently are.

Rucky Chucky: Baptism by River Crossing

Rucky Chucky at 3 or 4 in the morning is not a place so much as a minor hallucination with volunteers.

From my side, the aid station and river crossing were incredibly professional. Volunteers pointed out every step to take in the water. It was cold, but not as bad as expected. From Chris Russell's side, he had spent the hours before overthinking the fact that his first act of running was going to be swimming a river at 4:00 a.m. and then running up a mountain with a 78-mile version of me. Reasonable concern.

I was getting sleepy and not terribly confident in my chances when Chris Russell showed up like a human defibrillator. Amped to 11. Ready to go. Fully committed to the idea that we had a shot. From his perspective, he was standing there in the dark hoping he would not let me down.

That is friendship.

Also neurosis.

But mostly friendship.

The river itself felt warmer than expected in the chill morning air. Chris noticed the big round greasy rocks and was grateful he did not have 78 miles on his legs. I had 78 miles on my legs and was grateful mainly that the volunteers seemed to know exactly where my feet should go, because I certainly did not.

Run the Mile We Are In

The climb to Green Gate was not as steep as I expected and was reasonably solid. Chris told me it was time to push the redline. With 22 miles to go, there was no sense leaving anything out on the course. I tried to bring him back to earth by explaining the remaining climbs and why keeping pace would be nearly impossible.

He brought me back with one of the most useful things anyone said all day:

“We’re just running the mile we are in.”

This step. Now. Do the best we can in the moment.

That helped. More than helped. It simplified everything.

I did not need to solve Auburn. I did not need to solve the track. I did not need to solve the buckle, the cutoff, the cracked rib, the climbs, or whatever emotional betrayal my stomach might be planning.

Just this mile.

Just this step.

Chris shifted into full entertainment-distraction mode as the sun came up, singing every song he knew and several he apparently did not. He held a one-way running conversation that likely annoyed every person we passed, though I was in no position to apologize on behalf of the production. At one point I sarcastically commented that I didn’t think he had four hours of material. This was a tactical error. Chris did, in fact, have four hours of material. Possibly more.

Eventually he settled into “Sunshine Daydream” from “Scarlet Begonias” as the sun filled the valley, and he was, by his own account, filled with awe and joy and gratitude. I was filled with a slightly different cocktail—pain, math, caffeine, and vague concern about my rib cage—but I appreciated the effort.

One of the other pacers told me, “You’ve got a spicy one.”

Yes. Yes I did.

Chris moved between bad singing and race management with alarming ease.

“That’s it...stay left...stretch it out here...let’s go...a little downhill here...ride it...use the gravity...keep that momentum up the other side...”

Then a word would remind him of a song, and he would peel off into a few minutes of “Loose Lucy” or some other chemically liberated jukebox memory before snapping back into instruction mode.

“Loose rock here...”

“Give me six strides...”

“This is runnable trail...”

There are coaches. There are pacers. There are motivational speakers. And then there is whatever Chris was doing, which felt like being paced by a hopped up camp counselor with a minor in psychological warfare.

The Masterpiece

Auburn Lakes came and went fast, with Chris screaming and being so happy he totally embarrassed me. I apparently smiled. I do not deny it.

There was a moment when the pacer right in front of us caught a toe and hit the ground hard. She was just lying there, not moving, curled in a fetal position. Eighty-plus miles into my own race, I stopped to try to help. I don’t say that because it makes me noble. I say it because the trail does this to us. We are competing, yes. We are racing cutoffs, clocks, age, gravity, ribs, and whatever pride remains. But we are also in this together. Sometimes the person in front of you is the race. Sometimes they are a person on the ground who needs help.

Then came the Quarry aid station, where Scott Jurek looked genuinely concerned and made it clear we needed to move if I had any chance of finishing. There are many ways

to receive bad news. One of the more memorable is having one of the greatest ultrarunners of all time silently communicate, “Buddy, this is going to be tight.”

The Pointed Rocks climb became the make-or-break moment. Chris used every trick in the book: encouragement, cajoling, challenging, shaming, singing. He sang “When I Paint My Masterpiece” and then declared the climb my masterpiece when we crested.

I don’t think I have ever given so much on a climb.

And it felt good.

Not good like “this is pleasant.” Good like touching the raw edge of what is possible and realizing there is still a little more there. Good like a place you do not want to live but are grateful to have visited. Good like pain with meaning.

At the aid station we spent less than a minute before my son Zach took over. Chris handed me off with a warning: “You guys gotta move!”

Zach, No Hands, and the Final Furnace

Zach was incredible.

He pulled me along. He kept me motivated. He was kind. He was mean. He did not sugarcoat anything. This is exactly what I needed and also exactly what I had spent many years earning as a father. Parenting is a long game. Eventually your son gets to tell you the next climb is going to hurt more than you have ever hurt before, and you have to admit he is probably right.

At No Hands Bridge there was no time to enjoy anything. That is a shame because No Hands Bridge is iconic, beautiful, historic, and, at that particular moment, mostly a place we could not afford to admire. Zach kept telling me I was doing great and that he was proud of me.

Then he told me the next climb was going to hurt.

He undersold it.

The climb out was slower than Pointed Rocks, but the effort was higher. I was redlining heart rate and breathing, panning for any oxygen I could get into my muscles. Robie Point aid station came with two or three hundred more feet of climb still to go, because

Western States likes to add footnotes to suffering. Volunteers filled my arm sleeves with ice on the run. The temperature was starting to get uncomfortable, and sweat poured off my face.

Reaching Robie Point was magic.

So many people were there wanting to help push Golden Hour runners to the finish. I had been reduced to the simplest possible math: keep moving, crest the hill, run if you can, do not cramp, do not fall, do not waste this.

When I finally crested, I could run. Not fast. Let's not get carried away. But solid enough that I believed I could beat the cutoff.

The penultimate moment—the run toward the entrance to the track before meeting the crew and entering the final cacophony—may have been the most self-satisfying few seconds of the race. I have always been drawn to the penultimate, that charged moment just before the final thing. The ski tips over the edge. The breath before the plunge. The quiet click before the door opens.

This was that.

Only with a cracked rib and Chocolate Moch Gu residue on my running shorts.

The Track

Running onto the track was surreal.

The crowd was loud, but I think my crew was louder. Tami, Zach, Dan, and Chris Russell were all there, basking in the moment but serious in their invocations to keep me moving while I tried very hard not to cramp, collapse, or take one final tumble in front of several hundred witnesses and possibly a livestream.

Chris was on the track at 29:45 looking at Tami's phone, trying to figure out how far away we were and alternating between "he's not going to make it" and "he might make it." Then he saw us come onto the track with about four minutes to get around roughly 300 meters.

Four minutes.

Three hundred meters.

After 99-point-something miles, 18,000 feet of climb, 24,000 feet of descent, four falls, one cracked rib, a river crossing, a porta-potty time warp, and enough bad singing to trigger ASCAP licensing concerns.

Nothing to it.

I ran the track.

Not gracefully. Not quickly. Not like the fit, young, beautiful ultrarunners from Olympic Valley. More like a Viking ancestor who had been tossed over the gunnel by the fierce and coldly dispassionate North Sea and was dogpaddling toward Auburn in trail shoes.

I crossed before 30 hours. 2 hours, 56 minutes and 53 seconds, to be exact.

Western States 2017 had been a DNF. Western States 2026 gave me the buckle.

And then, because the universe has a sense of humor, Zach Miller, who finished fifth, handed me a \$400 Suunto watch at the finish. I think they thought I was the last runner to cross before the 30-hour mark. I will not be returning the watch unless legally compelled.

I also spent a few minutes with Ian Sharman at the finish. I think he was proud of himself for being able to push this old decrepit runner to a finishers buckle. Fair. Coaching me may qualify as an endurance event of its own.

Then I lay down on the grass in the sun, and it was one of the sweetest moments of the entire experience. I did not ever want to get up. I remember looking over at Chris and saying, again and again:

“That was something.”

Because that was all I had.

And because it was true.

That Was Something

I am still processing. Maybe I will be for a long time.

Western States is not just a race. It is a story you enter, already crowded with ghosts and legends and old dreams. Gordy. Ann. Scott. Tim. Gunhild. Dean. Ian. The climb out of Olympic Valley. The canyons. The river. No Hands. Robie. The track. All of it sitting there year after year, waiting for the next group of hopefuls, fools, and true believers.

In 2017, I wanted that story and got the lesson instead. Injury. Heat. Snow. Mud. DNF. Gratitude, eventually, but not right away.

In 2026, I got to come back.

Not younger.

Not faster.

Not magically transformed into one of those smooth, floating, low-body-fat mountain creatures who look like they were born in a hydration vest.

Just older. With a few more scars. Maybe a little wiser.

But I got to run the mile I was in. I got to be pulled forward by people who believed when I was negotiating with doubt. I got to watch my son become exactly the kind of pacer I needed. I got to see my wife and crew carry the day in ways I will never fully know. I got to have Chris Russell sing me into the sunrise and bully me into a masterpiece. I got to be reminded that the selfish act of putting on a bib is not selfish at all when the effort becomes shared.

That is the thing I keep coming back to.

The buckle is mine, technically.

But the finish was ours.

Tami. Zach. Dan. Chris. Volunteers. Aid station workers. River-crossing saints. Friends tracking dots in the night. Strangers yelling at Golden Hour runners like our little old lives depended on it.

I am a lucky man.

And for one long, ridiculous, beautiful, painful, flower-lined, wind-blasted, rib-cracking, river-crossing, song-filled weekend from Olympic Valley to Auburn, I got to be part of something I will never, never forget.

That was something.

Eric