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Heat 'just insane' in race in Death Valley

BRUCE BROTHERS

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For everyone who believes it was just too hot to run or hike or in-line skate last week, allow me to introduce Pierre Ostor.

Ostor knows no limitations.

In his most recent endurance event less than two weeks ago, Ostor hadn't even warmed up before the temperature inched into the low 90s early in the morning at the starting line.

Then it got hot.

Ostor, a bicycle mechanic from White Bear Lake, was one of fewer than 100 entrants in the annual Badwater Ultramarathon that started July 12 in Death Valley National Park.

Among sporting endeavors, Badwater ranks in a class of its own. The footrace starts at 282 feet below sea level near Badwater, Calif., the lowest spot in the Western Hemisphere, snakes through Death Valley and then 13 miles up Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the continental United States.

Its distance is 135 miles.

"For a world-class distance runner or adventure racer, it represents the ultimate challenge," wrote Kirk Johnson, a novice marathon runner who took it on and produced a book entitled, "To the Edge — A Man, Death Valley, and the Mystery of Endurance."

Challenges are nothing new to Ostor, a native of France who had completed a dozen 100-mile trail races including one across the snow-covered terrain of Alaska in February, an event where he had to haul 35 pounds of equipment on a sled, plus a 350-mile bike race over some of the same Alaskan snow trails a few winters ago.

Nothing, however, prepared him for Badwater.

When his crew of Don Schoff of Stillwater and Donald Clark of St. Paul scouted the course the day before the race, Ostor stayed at the motel.

"I said, 'No, I'd rather not see it.' "

His first real glimpse of the Death Valley course came as the sun rose shortly before the start, while he walked 200 yards to a prerace meeting. Welcoming, it wasn't.

"It's a pretty amazing place," he said. "You look like you're on a different planet."

Did we mention the heat?

"From the get-go it was in the 90s," Ostor said. "I think the high temperature was 126. Most of the time it was around 116 to 120 during the day."

There's no shade, either.

"There are no trees, nothing there," Ostor said. "The heat, it's just insane."

He did nothing special to prepare for this race, he said, "but I should have."

Other entrants reportedly try such zany stunts as pulling an exercise bike into a sauna to work out in high temperatures. Ostor, who completed the grand slam of four 100-mile trail runs within 11 weeks last summer, just kept his running mileage around 50 a week and added his usual 100 miles a week on his bike, including a 50-miler every weekend.

Then, he said, "I just went and winged it."

The stories of runners encountering apparitions, rattlesnakes, wind and fatigue — did we mention the heat? — are the stuff of legend. As well, there's a 20-mile climb over Towne Pass, which reaches 4,960 feet above sea level, about 60 miles into the race, before the course drops again. Another long climb awaits at Darwin Pass, and entrants always have those final 13 miles to look forward to, when the course starts up the 9-percent grade of Mount Whitney and just keeps climbing.

"That's a steep climb," Ostor said, "and it doesn't have a flat spot."

Participants are given 60 hours to travel 135 miles, but they must finish within 48 hours to get one of racing's most prized possessions, the finisher's belt buckle. After Pam Reed of Tucson, Ariz., won Badwater for the second consecutive year in 2003, she detailed her experience on David Letterman's show.

Letterman shook his head and asked what prize she won.

"Well," she responded with a smile, "I got a belt buckle."

Ostor was running after the same prize. He relied on his crew, who went through four big coolers filled with ice, to chase away the snakes and prod him with water, energy bars and exhortations. He crawled into the back of their rented van for brief rests, occasionally grabbing a few minutes of shuteye.

"I'd wake myself up. I'm programmed to go five to 10 minutes and get back on the road," he said.

The van provided his only respite from the sun and the wind, which reached 25 mph and drove sand into the faces of the entrants.

At times, he recalled, "my eyeballs felt like they were burning."

During the first day, with more than 100 miles still to travel, things got ugly. Clark told Ostor he was looking pale.

"The first day I suffered," Ostor said.

He took his longest break of the race, nearly 20 minutes in the van, before wrapping ice inside a handkerchief and tying it around his neck and stepping back on the steamy pavement.

The 48-hour cutoff was no certainty.

"I had some doubts there for awhile," Ostor said.

At about 1 a.m., however, he reached the downhill stretch after Towne Pass, "and I could run again."

He kept chugging, running and walking and taking long drinks of as much ice water as he could consume. He finally scrambled to the finish line at about 3:30 a.m. Wednesday.

His time: 45 hours, 29 minutes, 30 seconds.

"I don't think I'll ever forget this one," he said of his experience. "It was awesome."

One problem remained: At the Mount Whitney Portal, elevation 8,360, there was no place to sleep or even celebrate.

After making sure Schoff and Clark, also operating on two days with only brief naps, could navigate back down a dark roadway that still had other runners coming up, Ostor clutched his belt buckle and the three climbed in the van and headed 15 miles back to Lone Pine for quick showers. After toweling off, they took off for Furnace Creek near the race start to pick up their other vehicle.

Then they drove directly to Las Vegas.

"I didn't take a nap until we got to the airport; I snoozed there for about 15 minutes," Ostor said.

About 2½ hours after reaching the air-conditioned airport, they were in the air, headed back to the Twin Cities. Ostor finally slept in his own bed Wednesday night. Then, believe it or not, he got up Thursday and reported to work at 5:30 a.m.

"I was a little tired," he reported, "and I limped a bit because I had some blisters. But it wasn't too bad."

Bruce Brothers' recreation notebook appears Sundays. He can be reached at bbrothers@pioneerpress.com.