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## Sports

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# Mother of Two Thrives as Ultramarathoner

Running 135 miles through Death Valley is almost a spiritual experience for ultramarathoner Shannon Farar-Griener

By Lauren Peterson, Times Staff Writer  
July 26, 2006

**DEATH VALLEY** — The inevitable question is why. That's what people really want to know.

Why would a 45-year-old mother of two who otherwise lives comfortably in upscale Hidden Hills choose to run 135 miles through one of the hottest places on Earth, without sleep, in July, during a heat wave that has left most Southern Californians uncomfortably sitting on their living room sofas?



**PHOTO GALLERY**  
Ultramarathoner

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They hear the tales of exhaustion, dehydration, fits of vomiting and hallucinations, the unbearable pain of landing heel to toe on a bloated, blistered stump that only partway into a race doesn't look much like a foot anymore, and the curious assume that a pot of cash or some really nice prizes must be at stake.

Which is when Shannon Farar-Griener shows them her trophy — the pewter belt buckle she received for finishing last year's Kiehl's Badwater Ultramarathon in less than 48 hours.

And, of course, they still don't get it.

"They see the buckle and go, 'You do all that ... for *that*?' " she says.

"They don't understand."

They would understand even less had they seen her Tuesday afternoon, more than 80 miles into this year's race, well into her third pair of sneakers — she started in a size 7, expected to finish in a 9 — one of her toes resembling a small, partially inflated balloon, the insides of her groin area raw from chafing.

"I can't wear underwear and you should see my feet," Farar-Griener said as she paused to slow to a walk. "They're all blisters. I'm in so much pain."

But ...

"As much as I want to quit, I won't. As much as I want to say 'I want to go home to Hidden Hills,' I'm not."

Such is the determination of an ultramarathoner, the definition of runners who compete in races longer than the standard marathon distance of 26 miles 385 yards.

On Monday, 85 runners — 68 men, 17 women — left from Badwater, a map dot about 30 miles from the Nevada state line at the eastern edge of Death Valley National Park, the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere, 282 feet below sea level. The finish line, more than five marathons from the start, is at the Mt. Whitney Portals, trailhead to the highest point in the contiguous United States.

Along the way, the course winds through three mountain ranges, salt flats, sand dunes and aptly named places such as Stovepipe Wells and Furnace Creek, where, years ago, the air temperature is said to have hit 134 degrees.

The hottest point of this year's race, according to organizers, was 123 degrees on

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Monday afternoon. A day later, however, it was a relatively comfortable 94 degrees — with 23% humidity — as Farar-Griener reached the checkpoint at the Darwin Road turnoff off Highway 190.

There had even been a couple of rain showers, though not nearly enough to refresh a woman who had vomited several times during the night and whose feet started developing blisters only five miles into the race — remnants, probably, from a 100-mile run she completed only weeks ago.

The temperature of the pavement can be 50 to 60 degrees hotter than the air temperature, and she had already begun to hallucinate, imagining at one point that "I had radar coming off my body.... I was freaking out. I thought it was a UFO...."

Still, she kept going, sometimes jogging, sometimes walking, and stopping only for bathroom breaks and for her six-member support crew to treat her legs or change the dressings on her feet; she had some kind of bandage between every toe.

The crew — friends and other running enthusiasts — took turns pacing her and then resting in one of two trailing support vans. There are no aid stations along the way, so runners rely on their crews for everything, especially encouragement.

"She's had better races here, but you're a lot prouder to finish on a tough day than an easy day," crew member Lisa Henson said. "The heat coming up off this pavement is just cooking the insides of her legs. But I know she's going to be able to finish. I'm going to make sure she does."

Hours earlier, and many miles ahead, Scott Jurek, a 32-year-old from Seattle, had already won the race in a time of 25 hours 41 minutes — 17 minutes ahead of Akos Konya of Oceanside.

But Farar-Griener's team was watching the clock too, figuring that at her current pace, and without any long breaks, that cracking the 48-hour barrier was still attainable.

A fitness instructor and part-time actress, Farar-Griener raced the Badwater for the first time in 2001, finishing in 51:47:47. Then, for good measure, she reversed the course — adding a climb to the summit of Mt. Whitney and back down again — for a total of 292 miles.

She finished in a little less than seven days, sleeping a total of six hours.

"It was epic. I can't even explain it," she said during an interview last week. "It was very empowering, very life altering. If you can't take yourself out of your comfort zone, then this isn't the sport for you."

Last year, Farar-Griener finished in 47:06:27, which was good for 43rd place and, most important, her sub-48-hour buckle, the race's only prize.

John Radich, a 52-year-old Monrovia resident participating in the race for the sixth time, said it's hard for anyone but another ultramarathoner to comprehend why he runs.

"I've questioned my sanity a few times when I do it," he said before the race, "but I've always been an adventurer and it's an incredible event. It's you versus Death Valley."

Farar-Griener lists similar reasons, and has one all her own. She competes in 15 to 20 long-distance races a year hoping to raise \$100,000 for charity.

"We're lucky not that we can run 100 miles but that we can walk one," she said.

Ultra runners consider a good performance at Badwater to be a pinnacle achievement, physically and mentally.

"This race kicks your butt," Farar-Griener said. "It's so painful and it's so mind-boggling that people want to do it just to prove you can. There are times when your body's against you but your mind is going to go, 'So? You knew this going in, right?' It's almost like the challenge of the pain is kind of a turn-on. It's like, 'Bring it on.' I want to overcome it."

Although some competitors break down — as of Tuesday afternoon, five had left this year's race — the rewards, the runners say, far outweigh the risks.

"I think we have a little sense of pride that attaches to our ultra runner title," Farar-Griener said. "You hit bottom and you're like, 'What am I doing here?' and then you get through those times.

"You feel like Superwoman. That, for me, is the best feeling in the world."



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**ULTRAMARATHONER**

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**COOLER HEAD PREVAILS:**  
Shannon Farar-Griener, left, with Tamara Aarin, covers part of the scorching 135-mile Badwater Ultramarathon through Death Valley on Tuesday. "As much as I want to quit, I won't. As much as I want to say, 'I want to go home to Hidden Hills,' I'm not," Farar-Griener says.  
(Stephen Osman / LAT)  
Jul 25, 2006

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Shannon Farar-Griever, left, with pacer Tamara Aarin of Woodland Hills, walks a portion of the course near the Darwin check point about 90 miles into the race. Farar-Griever is a Hidden Hills resident.  
(Stephen Osman / LAT)  
Jul 25, 2006





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John Vonhof of Manteca, Ca., tends to Shannon Farar-Griener's blistered feet.

(Stephen Osman / LAT)  
Jul 25, 2006



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**ROAD TO NOWHERE:** Shannon Farar-Griever, left (with crew member/pacer Lisa Henson), is 80 miles into her 135-mile race across Death Valley. The only reward: A pewter belt buckle if she finishes in less than 48 hours.  
 (Stephen Osman / LAT)  
 Jul 25, 2006



**latimes.com**

**ULTRAMARATHONER**

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'There are times when your body's against you but your mind is going to go, "So? You knew this going in, right?" It's almost like the challenge of the pain is kind of a turn-on.' -

**Shannon Farar-Griener**

(Stephen Osman / LAT)

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**HELPING HANDS:** Farar-Griener, center, is treated by her support crew about 80 miles into the race. There are no aid stations along the way, so runners rely on their crews for everything, especially encouragement. (Stephen Osman / LAT) Jul 25, 2006