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OUTDOORS

After 70 Miles, Racer Just Warming Up



Ted S. Warren/Associated Press

Scott Jurek, an ultramarathoner from Seattle, training near the summit of Mount Si near North Bend, Wash.

By OAKLEY BROOKS
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Scott Jurek's formidable constitution hung by a string. He was at Mile 75 of last summer's Badwater Ultramarathon, a torturous race in California that covers 135 miles over 13,000 vertical feet from Death Valley to the base of Mount Whitney.

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Jurek remembers being a "little dehydrated," which is ultramarathoner code for having the dry heaves and being on the verge of collapse. He had a good excuse: he had run — and won — the Western States 100-miler just two weeks before.

Jurek's wife and support-crew chief, Leah, ordered him to lie down and close his eyes. After some nursing and fluids, Jurek regained his composure and went on to win Badwater in a little more than 24 hours.

A year later, the 32-year-old Jurek does not seem to relish the victory as much as the moment when he almost lost it all.

"There's the competitive element of it and the satisfaction of finishing," Jurek said recently at his physical therapy studio in Seattle. "But the deeper reason for doing it is the self-exploration. That happens when I push myself to that distant edge when you hit 70 or 80 miles. It's a question of finding that edge and hovering there. That's where the

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self-discovery occurs.”

On Monday, Jurek will be back for the Badwater, which starts at the lowest elevation in the Western Hemisphere, 280 feet below sea level, and ends at an elevation of 8,300 feet.

Jurek is the pre-eminent American ultramarathoner. He won the Western States race seven straight times between 1999 and 2005, and the back-to-back victories at the Western States and Badwater last summer were unprecedented.

He skipped the Western States this year, but he said the meditative state on that “distant edge” called him back to Death Valley. Then he will head to Greece to compete in the 152-mile Spartathlon in September.

“When people start getting discouraged, when they’re puking their guts out, Scott just looks past that,” said Dusty Olson, a friend of Jurek’s who paces him at most of his races. “Seeing how far he can take it — that’s how he gets the biggest rush.”

As an eccentric in a sport full of eccentrics, Jurek has raised the bar in ultramarathoning, which was traditionally dominated by middle-aged runners who graduated from shorter speed events. During a race, he mixes intensity with lightheartedness — he has been known to scream “free speed” on a downhill or ask a race director in sweltering heat, “When is it going to get hot?” — and he made a habit of rolling once for each of his Western States victories before crossing the finish line there.

His success has attracted younger runners and attention to ultramarathons, loosely defined as anything longer than the standard 26.2-mile marathon.

“Whenever you have a competitor who is a once-in-a-generation athlete, whether it’s [Lance Armstrong](#) at the Tour de France or Scott Jurek at the Western States, that attracts attention,” said John Medinger, who has run the Western States Endurance Run five times and is a member of the event’s board of directors.

Jurek’s training regimen is decidedly new age. He powers himself with only vegan food, spending several hours a day preparing meals with Leah. He does yoga. He does not own a car; instead he takes the bus to the mountains around Seattle to train on weekends.

At the peak of his training, Jurek will log 70 to 80 miles on a Saturday and then wake up the next morning and go for another long run. “You want to simulate what your body is going to do at Mile 70,” he said. “You’re getting the muscles to the point where you don’t want to run the next day.”

To prepare for the heat he will face at Badwater — 120-degree temperatures are normal — Jurek has spent the past three weeks in the high desert around Death Valley. One of the keys to survival in such heat is training one’s body to process the 60 to 70 ounces of fluids it needs every hour.

During the race, Jurek also consumes potatoes, bananas, energy gels and rice balls, while cooling himself with icy bandanas and a silver thread-lined safari cap designed to draw heat from his body. Some racers climb into an air-conditioned vehicle at pit stops. Last year, Jurek pioneered the use of a body-sized ice chest that he squeezed his 6-foot-2-inch frame into several times.

At last summer’s Badwater, 67 of the 81 runners in the field completed the Badwater race within the 60-hour time limit. It grew from a solo trek in 1977 by Al Arnold, from the town of Badwater in Death Valley to the top of Mount Whitney. The official race does not include summiting Mount Whitney’s 14,505-foot peak, but traditionalists do it within 48 hours of the race, and Jurek plans to climb to the summit on Wednesday.

This spring, Jurek went with a group of American runners to Mexico to run with the

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Tarahumara Indians, an indigenous tribe in the Copper Canyon that has a deep running culture.

Jurek said that the elemental scene that unfolded before him — the local runners in their crude tire-tread sandals, the villagers mimicking ancient festivals with a race celebration, competitors turning to run home after the race — was an affirmation of what he seeks in ultramarathons.

“It’s almost like we have a genetic memory to run long distances,” Jurek said. “I think of the Tarahumara. It’s almost instinctual for them. You know, we tend to lose all our instinctive patterns. Ultramarathoning is really tapping into that.”

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