

## Features

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### Into The Inferno

It's five marathons long, hotter than Hades and arguably the most insane race on the planet. And for one Canadian, the Badwater 135 was a chance to prove that he was the toughest of them all.

By Leslie Anthony

**It was the middle of July in Death Valley**, California, and people were dying. Eighty-one of them to be exact. For Canadian Ferg Hawke, it was just a question of how much longer he could postpone his demise.

By the time he'd reached the 90-mile checkpoint in the 2005 Badwater 135 Ultramarathon, Hawke had been running for 16 hours in preternatural heat that had spiked to 53 degrees Celsius. After being among the top three runners for most of the race, the 47-year-old had just taken over the lead. But his body was in trouble, especially his feet. He knew that if the agonizing blisters blossoming on his toes hadn't started bleeding yet, they soon would. And then the skin would tear off. And then the real pain would begin.

Like every other runner in this test-of-depending on your outlook-fortitude or folly, Hawke would admit that he actually enjoys making his body suffer. But even a self-declared masochist can only take so much.

**Everything you need to know about Death Valley** lies in its name. The rest is just explanation.

There is, for example, the incinerating heat. With a record high of 57 degrees, it is the hottest place in North America. Surface temperatures in the valley frequently exceed 93 degrees and the pavement on the few roads here gets hotter still. In July, it's not unusual to see temperatures bump over 40 degrees by seven in the morning. Think about it.

Then there's the lunar landscape-a semester's worth of geology class, hell without the flames. Bleak arroyos, wasted plains and crumbling hills compete for erosional supremacy and lava flows scab over the oozing, volcanic wounds that formed the place. Shattered peaks-soaring in places to 11,049 feet-hem the valley in on all sides.

It's no wonder that native tribes long ago abandoned Death Valley as a permanent home. The first white people to come here were on their way to California's fabled gold fields. In 1849, the Reverend John Wells Brier decided to attempt an untested shortcut through the area, dragging his family and several wagonloads of young men into what one prescient guide warned could be "the jaws of hell." For months they wandered lost in the merciless heat. They ate their oxen, burned their wagons, suffered dehydration, dysentery and starvation. Some lost over 100 pounds, several died. Their experience gave the valley its name.

Today, other place names serve as testament to Death Valley's inhospitable nature: Deadman Pass, Last Chance Range, Dry Bone Canyon, Devil's Cornfield, Furnace Creek and Badwater. The latter is a nondescript gravel wash, and the water that bubbles to the surface here is indeed bad-a mineralized stew of reeking, undrinkable chemistry. With little imagination, you can taste the demoralization of someone who, having long since run out of water, stumbled across what was sure salvation, convinced they'd taken the lead in the race against death, only to find they'd fallen further behind. Which makes it even more ironic-and all the more insane-that this place is now the starting point of the world's most notorious ultramarathon, the Badwater 135.

**A baggage handler-or, as he prefers, an "aerospace worker"**-at the Vancouver Airport, Ferg Hawke first took up running in 1989 to get in shape for, of all things, beer-league fast-pitch softball. In the early 1990s, the resident of White Rock, B.C., found his

way to ultramarathons, and during the ensuing decade, garnered respectable results in several marquee events, winning Canada's first-ever 100-mile race in 1996 and coming eighth in the 2002 Marathon des Sables, a week-long stage race through the Moroccan Sahara. He'd conquered some heat, logged serious distance and tasted his share of sand, but Badwater's triple-barrelled blast beckoned.

"I have to get [it] scratched off my list of hard, stupid things to do," he once told a *Ontario Roadrunner* magazine. And so, in July 2004, he found himself at the start of the hardest, stupidest race going.

When somebody figured out that the highest point in the Lower 48-14,491-foot Mt. Whitney-lay less than 150 miles by road from the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere-Badwater, at 282 feet below sea level-it seemed only natural to forge some sort of test piece linking the two. And so the Badwater 150 was born. The fact that Death Valley is also the hottest place in North America was only a bonus.

If someone were to write a book on the Badwater race, they might call it *A Brief History of Misery*. It begins in 1973, when Paxton Beale and Ken Crutchlow, a pair of dedicated California runners, complete a 150-mile relay from Badwater to the top of Mt. Whitney; in 1977, another California hardcore, Al Arnold, solos the route in 84 hours; things heat up in 1987, when Crutchlow organizes a head-to-head race between Yanks and Brits; in 1988, running-shoe manufacturer Hi-Tec sponsors what's by now more accurately called the Badwater 146; two years later, the U.S. Forest Service closes the final 11 miles of trail to the summit of Mt. Whitney, shortening the race to its current length of 135 miles; in 2000, Russian Anatoli Kruglikov sets a 135-mile course record of 25:09; and in 2002, Arizona housewife and self-proclaimed pathological runner Pam Reed, posts the first of two consecutive overall race wins, while lowering the women's record to just under 28 hours.

Badwater competitors belong to a special fraternity within the broader cult of ultrarunning; to a person, they believe no ultramarathoner worth their salt stains has truly arrived until they've completed Badwater. The racers comprise an eclectic mix of quasi-qualified amateurs merely hoping to somehow finish and seasoned pros who expect to do it in style.

The race starts in three waves. At 6 a.m., the coolest part of the day, the first group hits the road; these folks simply hope to make it under the 60-hour cut-off. Intermediate runners, chasing the coveted 48-hour belt buckle, leave at 8. And the 10 o'clock wave, with conditions already bordering on unbearable, is reserved for elites who want to make a race of it.

In 2004, when Ferg Hawke made his first trip to Badwater, he was unknown to the organizers, and instead of putting him with the elites, they stuck him in the middle group. From the gun, he led that pack. By the 40-mile mark he had passed the entire 6 a.m. flight, and found himself running unchallenged through the desert. Although difficult to maintain pace in such a vacuum, Hawke continued pushing it, more so when his crew reported split times from the 10 a.m. wave that suggested he was outpacing even the elites. Alone through the night he ran, into the smouldering dawn.

Two hours back of Hawke, but just behind him in time was 42-year-old Dean Karnazes of San Francisco, a five-time entrant who had once run 262 miles non-stop (he has since run 350 in an astounding 80:44). As much as Hawke's stellar debut was self-motivating, it was even more motivating to Karnazes, who realized his chance to finally win it all was about to be usurped by a hoser unknown. With support crews driving back and forth delivering food, water, gossip and encouragement, there wasn't a competitor in the race unaware of the battle being waged by two runners who would never see each other. Picking up the pace in the final stretch-where Hawke had hung on for dear life-Karnazes bested his rival by a scant seven minutes to claim the 2004 Badwater crown in a time of 27:22:48.

The close finish between a veteran and upstart challenger set the stage for a rematch. Except that Hawke swore at the finish he would *never* do it again. Which is what everyone says in the initial flush of survival.

**Even before the start of the 2005 Badwater**, it was obvious that it would be a very different race for Hawke. First, there was no rematch with Karnazes, who was busy promoting his book *Ultramarathon Man*, on *David Letterman* and elsewhere. Second, now running with the elites, Hawke faced head-to-head competition.

Based on his breakout 2004 performance, Hawke had initially been favoured to win the 2005 event, but then organizers parachuted a handful of the world's top ultramarathoners into the race primarily-if you believed behind-the-scenes conspiracy theorists-to ensure the unheralded Canadian *didn't* win. Foremost among these runners was Scott Jurek, a long-legged, 31-year-old thoroughbred from Seattle, Washington, who'd recently posted his seventh consecutive win in the hallowed Western States 100 trail race. Mike Sweeney, a 50-year-old ship pilot and veteran marathoner from San Rafael, California, was another serious contender.

From the 10 a.m. start, it became clear that it was going to be a competitive race. Sweeney passed through the first checkpoint at Furnace Creek (18 miles) in 2:23. Jurek came through two minutes later, and Hawke was three minutes behind him. This trio would end up waging the race's central battle, but there were, of course, other stories

Arizona's Pam Reed was out to regain the women's crown she'd surrendered in 2004 to Monica Scholz, a lawyer from Jerseyville, Ontario, who'd finished third overall three times. In addition to the serious competitors, there was also a smorgasbord of self-achievers: 55-year-old South Dakotan Daniel Jensen, who has worn a prosthetic below his right knee ever since stepping on a land mine in Vietnam, hoped to finish the race after failing in a previous attempt; Geoffrey Hilton-Barber, 58, and brother Miles, 62, of South Africa, were vying to be the first blind athletes to complete the race; perennial British fixture Jack Denness, affectionately known as "Badwater Jack," was looking to bag his twelfth Badwater and become the first 70-year-old finisher; likewise, Sigrid Eichner, 64, of Germany, was aiming to become the oldest woman to make it all the way; and, bringing up the rear at the first checkpoint, was Marine Corps Major Curt Maples, 41, who had engineered and finished his own 135-mile "Baghdad Badwater" while deployed in Iraq. Sadly, he would be the first to DNF in the real thing. By mile 42, the second checkpoint at Stove Pipe Wells, five others would also drop out.

**Stove Pipe Wells-named by miners who shoved** stove pipes in the sand to mark the location of underground springs-is a place of Vesuvian heat where tourists come to fry eggs on the pavement and runners stick to the white lines of the road because the heat of

the tarmac melts the soles of their shoes. It's also the exit from Death Valley proper, where the first of three mountain ranges lifts racers from the skillet. And in July, 2005, it was the place where Scott Jurek faced his first Badwater demon.

Touted as the world's top 100-mile trail racer, Jurek generally avoids pavement and had vowed he'd *never* run Badwater. Whether personal challenge or personal profit (there were rumours of appearance money) changed his mind mattered little in the thick of the race. He'd taken conventional precautions such as wearing lightweight sun-reflecting gear and holding back his pace, but was still suffering enough at Stove Pipe that his support crew implemented Top Secret Plan B: immersing Jurek in a cooler full of ice water. It was the first of five dunkings, and they'd prove remarkably resuscitating.

Runners employ many strategies to counteract the heat. Hydration and electrolyte management are paramount; most crews have a secret formula or two and a schedule for when to use what. Some, like Hawke, run with commercial drink preparations such as CarboPro, while others tinker with homemade combinations of essential ions and anti-oxidants. (Jurek, went the buzz, was doing something squirrely with pomegranate juice). Same goes for clothing: the lessons of Arab Sheiks notwithstanding, it still seems counterintuitive to see runners most fully clothed during the hottest parts of the day. (One German, bedecked head to toe to fingers to nose in a self-tailored white suit, gloves and face cover, was dubbed "the Alien.") In addition, smart runners' crews maintain a constant misting brigade to keep their charges moist and ensure that as much water as possible is evaporating from their clothing and not their body. But the biggest weapon employed against heat is training: running in absurd temperatures wherever and whenever possible, whether on trips to the tropics or, as in Hawke's case, in a home-built heat chamber where he could crank it up to unbearable while legging it out on a treadmill. "I ran in it a little, but mostly walked," Hawke says. "I figured out in 2004 that no matter how good a runner you are, you have to walk on this course-a lot. Which is weird because in real life I *never* walk; I'll drive around a mall parking lot for half an hour to avoid walking." Hawke would end up walking 25 per cent of the course-far more than Jurek-but would still arrive at the 90-mile mark ahead of him.

Walking not only helps relieve the wear and tear on the joints, but also gives racers a Zen-like opportunity to get in touch with their surroundings. As the leaders began the steep, 17-mile climb up to 4,900-foot-high Townes Pass, they could gaze back down over the string of runners stretching into the Saharan landscape and fully appreciate the inferno they'd been at one with.

**After the blast furnace of a Death Valley day**, night is a welcome anesthetic. Although the heat will take hours to dissipate, the shroud of darkness at least signals it can't get any worse.

If that sudden physiological relief doesn't motivate the runners, they can always draw inspiration from the desert's hidden life. Between sunup and sundown, nothing stirs in Death Valley. But as the land hands off its accumulated heat to a clear night sky, it also erupts in a startling display of organic commerce. Myriad insects and the bats, birds, scorpions and lizards that feed on them materialize. A scourge of rodents fans across the broken ground, drawing pursuing snakes, owls and coyotes into the range of runners' headlamps.

With the furnace temporarily off, those runners who aren't hurting too badly have a chance to get to work; the race's biggest battles always take place in the dark.

After a jarring, 13-mile descent off Townes Pass, the three frontrunners hit the Panamint Springs checkpoint at mile 72. Twelve hours in and over halfway through the race, Mike Sweeney still held the lead as he headed up the second major climb, a 15-mile, 3,300-foot ascent of the Argus Range. Jurek passed through a half-hour later, closely followed by Hawke.

To this point, Sweeney had set what was literally a blistering pace. But somewhere after Panamint Springs, the wheels had begun to come off. Slowing dramatically, Sweeney was passed by both Jurek and Hawke.

By the time he reached the 90-mile checkpoint at Darwin, Sweeney was still hanging onto third place. Still, the fact appeared lost on him. As were, in a revolving order rather like a CD player stuck on random, other key pieces of cognition-like where exactly he was, why he was gaining weight at an alarming rate (more than four pounds since the 72-mile checkpoint), why he wasn't urinating, and why his lungs were rapidly filling with the fluid he was unable to void.

Sweeney, in fact, seemed oblivious to his plight when his pacer, who'd run into Darwin yelling for a doctor, had taken aside the only available facsimile, an emergency medical technician named Dave Heckman, and walked him off into the darkness. While scorpions scuttled underfoot and Heckman and the pacer conferred, Sweeney milled around wearing a beatific smile like some kind of zombie waiting for someone to say "Go."

He was mumbling non-sequiturs and chuckling to himself. He tugged at his clothes, stared at the ground and struggled-mightily-to answer the simplest questions. Then, despite an air temperature around 30 degrees, he began to shiver, and descended into incoherency.

With 160 marathons under his belt, Sweeney had been forced out of a long-distance race for the first time only two weeks earlier. At the Western States 100, he'd developed a breathing problem that was treated with puffers as if it were exercise-induced asthma. But when it reoccurred at Badwater, accompanied by other symptoms, it was clear that asthma wasn't the issue. Dave Heckman had immediately sensed Sweeney's troubles were connected to hyponatremia-low sodium or "water intoxication"-brought on by too much fluid.

Hyponatremia is a serious condition: drinking too much water increases blood plasma and dilutes the blood's salt content; the endgame can be coma and death. Drinking as much as four litres in 20 minutes has induced a 40-hour coma in otherwise healthy travellers to desert tourist destinations. (The same thing happens to compulsive water swillers partying on the drug ecstasy.) But there's a kicker: because symptoms of hyponatremia and dehydration are similar, people often ply the victim-who's likely wavering on the edge of consciousness-with more water.

One of hyponatremia's rare but fouler manifestations is pulmonary edema, a condition more commonly experienced by high-altitude climbers in which fluid leaks into the lungs, eventually drowning the victim. Suspecting this-correctly-Heckman sat Sweeney down for 90 minutes, forced several urinations, did some blood work and sent him-reluctantly and only at Sweeney's insistence-on his way

(though Sweeney was closely monitored for the rest of the race).

Sweeney eventually rallied and toughed it out for twelfth place, but a day later at the awards ceremony, he still hadn't fully recovered, and couldn't recall exactly what had happened out there. "I remember we were looking forward to the climb out of Panamint and a chance to use some different muscle groups. Then things got kind of hazy..."

**When Hawke and Jurek passed the sputtering Sweeney**, the final duel was on. After trading leads several times over the first 16 hours of the race, the two runners remained neck and neck. Then, around 2:30 a.m., Jurek put on a burst of speed and accelerated by Hawke. "I think he was trying to make a point because once he passed he slowed to his regular pace," recalls Hawke. "And right away I saw I was gaining again. I'd led several times but not at a checkpoint, so I picked it up and came into Darwin 10 seconds ahead of him."

Though he now held the lead 90 miles into the race, Hawke harboured few illusions about his chances to win. With his toes blistering uncontrollably and with Jurek's ice-bath juju clearly working, Hawke knew that his rival had his eye firmly on the prize.

Shortly after they left Darwin, Jurek pulled away from Hawke once again. This time, Hawke decided not to try to close the gap. "I thought, 'What am I doing trying to keep up with this legend?' I backed it off and that was the end."

After the sun came up, Hawke didn't see Jurek again until the finish line at Whitney.

**The hero of the Brier family's escape** from Death Valley in 1849 was the reverend's wife, Juliette. Despite shrinking to 75 pounds, she nursed her husband through illness, cared for their children, loaded and unloaded the oxen, built fires and cooked. When an ox sank chest-deep in mud, she went in after it. Though four of the party died, Juliette survived.

You couldn't help but think of Juliette while watching the metronomic determination of 90-pound Pam Reed as she made the long descent into the flat and tedious Owens Valley. Though featured on CBS's *60 Minutes*, Reed's heroic accomplishments haven't paid off in sponsors. In her opinion, that's because she's not a chiselled, good-looking man-like, say, Dean Karnazes. In everyone else's opinion, it's because the bug-eyed trotter is a bit too freakish: she readily admits to an obsessive-compulsive streak that has seen her replace anorexic tendencies with a compulsion to run almost constantly; she refuses to use sunscreen, insisting it interferes with the body's cooling capacity, which leaves her with the complexion of an Inca mummy. None of this, however, impeded her from being the first to run 300 non-stop miles in March 2005 (yes, that's 11-plus marathons), nor from being the first woman to cross the 2005 Badwater finish line, reclaiming the women's title and posting a respectable fifth overall in the most competitive field ever.

Reed's story was but one that wrapped happily. Albert Vallee, 46, a mechanic from Chauvigne, France, shocked everyone by placing fourth in his rookie attempt. In another surprise, Charlie Engle, a 43-year-old TV producer from Greensboro, North Carolina, finished in third, improving on his 2003 time by 10 hours, grist for the mill of a documentary he was making on addiction in sport. Geoffrey Hilton-Barber became the first blind athlete to finish (brother Miles dropped out), and an excited Sigrid Eichner achieved her goal of becoming the oldest woman to make it to the end. Septuagenarian Jack Denness and one-legged Dan Jensen crossed the line together. In fact, the race saw an 83 per cent completion rate-highest ever-with 45 of 67 earning 48-hour belt buckles.

If the race's front end, decided long before the finish, had been anticlimactic, it was no less storied. As Jurek put the hammer down on Hawke, he zeroed in on another target-the course record. Running where most others walked on the final 12-mile climb, he crossed the line at Whitney Portal in 24:36:08, besting the previous, once-thought unbeatable mark by half an hour. Hawke, whose blistered and bleeding toes had slowed him, nonetheless hoofed it out in 26:33:00-an improvement of almost an hour over 2004 and the fourth fastest time in history.

After the race, the runners met the media. Jurek, a bottle of restorative green goo in hand, and Hawke, looking all too Canadian with his cup of beer, chuckled, swapped stories and played buddy-buddy while cameramen jockeyed on their elbows for a shot of Hawke's disasterized digits. The suppurating flesh and raised nails nicely summed up the physical cost of Badwater (one long-time participant had his toenails surgically removed to avoid the annual trauma).

For his part, Jurek was feeling humble in the face of victory. On the podium, he talked about being pushed to his limits only two weeks after the tough Western States 100. "This is one for the history books," he declared. "I came with respect for the race and its participants but I'm leaving with way more."

"Yeah, a fat cheque," joked Hawke. "Next year, your ass is mine."

The 2009 Badwater Ultramarathon takes place this weekend, July 13 to 15. In 2008, Squamish-based adventure racer Jen Segger took on the course, placing ninth overall and fourth among women with her time of 32:31:57.

This year's race is being hailed as one of the most competitive ever with athletes from 17 countries taking part. Just four Canadians are in the field this year, all of them hailing from Ontario: Iris Imhof, Robert Lebrun, Geoff Linton, and Monica Scholz.

You can follow the race online at [www.badwater.com](http://www.badwater.com).

Postscript: After finishing 2nd in 2004 and 2005, Ferg returned to Badwater in 2006 with the goal of winning. But laid low by a flu, he was only able to manage 4th place. He has vowed to return one day. A documentary DVD of the 2005 Badwater race is available at [www.thedistanceoftruth.com](http://www.thedistanceoftruth.com).

Leslie Anthony is the author of *Snakebit*, and currently working on his next book, *White Planet*.

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