

SPORTS

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Mike Roy/The Journal News

Anthony Portera, 38, is running today in the Badwater Ultramarathon. His goal is to complete the 135-mile course in 36-40 hours.

A long run across the desert

White Plains man to attempt 135 miles across Death Valley

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What the heck are you doing, the men in towels ask.

Anthony Portera explains to them why he's wearing a sweat shirt, ski cap, and two pairs of sweat pants in a sauna. And why he stands up in the 185-degree heat to

do squats. It's called an ultramarathon, he tells them. It's 135 miles, nonstop, through the hottest place in the United States. To get used to the 120-degree heat of Death Valley, he exercises in the public sauna while dressed for a snowball fight.

The men look more confused than ever. One hundred and thirty-five miles through Death Valley? For God's sake, why?

To see if I can, he answers. In his mind it's a sensible response. To the men sweating buckets beside him? Not so much.

You're crazy, they say. And so ends the conversation Portera, a 38-year-old White Plains resident, has had in the New York Sports Club sauna a million times over.

It's hard not to sympathize with the people around him. The man is crazy. It doesn't matter that he can hold down a commercial real estate job and keep a wife and two daughters. He's crazy.

"He's really into it," said Brewster's Wayne Bates, Portera's crew chief for the race. "He's a little obsessive."

He's also driven. Portera ran his

first marathon in 2004, and began looking for new challenges. That meant running longer and longer distances.

There is no prize money for the Badwater Ultramarathon. In fact, Portera is spending thousands of dollars out of his own pocket to equip his crew. There isn't recognition beyond the community of masochist endurance runners. Beyond the race's official charity, the Challenged Athletes Foundation, there is no good reason to enter.

SEE PORTERA, 2C

PORTERA: Battling the desert heat

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Yet 90 men and women, representing 17 countries, did. More were turned away.

Tomorrow morning they'll take off from Badwater, Death Valley, the lowest point (280 feet below sea level) in the contiguous U.S. They'll run through the day, the night, and the next day. By the time they reach the finish at the base of Mount Whitney they'll have covered 135 miles.

The average finish time is 44-48 hours. The record is 22:51. Portera would like to finish in 36-40.

"Staying awake is very, very difficult," he said. "You start to get renewed sense of energy as the sun is coming up."

Supporting him will be a crew of four to six people. They meet him at every mile marker to tend to his needs before driving ahead to meet him at the next marker. In the van will be water, Tylenol, duct tape, a spray bottle, coolers with ice, a foot-care kit, medical kit, salt tablets, arthritis medicine, and baby wipes (hint: there are no bathrooms in the desert).

"To be honest, most of the heat-related incidents are with the crew not the runners," Bates said. "Because



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White Plains resident Anthony Portera, 38, front, trains with running partner Dave James, 31, of Briarcliff for the 135-mile Badwater Ultramarathon in Death Valley, Calif.

they're so busy taking care of the runner that they forget to take care of themselves."

They aren't allowed to turn on the air conditioning because they can't afford to have the van break down. Portera went through it last year when he crewed for someone else. Now it's his turn to get pampered. If you can call it that.

He's run 100-milers before — Grand Tetons, Javelina, Rocky Raccoon. Every day he gets up at 4:30 and runs for an hour or more. After work he

heads to Rockefeller State Park in Tarrytown and goes another few hours. On weekends he goes for eight or nine hours straight.

That sort of training is old hat. It's the heat, not the distance, that he wants to be ready for.

"At first," he said of the sauna training, "it was brutally unbearable. At first it was very unpleasant. I would fidget. My heart rate started to rise. I was uncomfortable and impatient. But you get used to it as time goes on."