

Running Briefs
c/o Tracey Martinson
1716 Reed Circle,
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Running Briefs

Running below zero: encounters of the other kind

By Gary Pohl

After the 2003 Equinox Marathon, the weather stayed mild. After running the "It Ain't Easy Hill Run" in shorts, I was lulled into a false sense of confidence which made me think that winter training would be a piece of cake. My wife Amy and I needed a winter vacation, so she suggested I look for a marathon "outside" where it might be warm. Sure, I thought in October, I can keep my training up. No problem. So I found the "Death Valley Trail Marathon" happening on February 7, 2004. After checking it out, it seemed just the type of oddball event I like, no huge crowds, trails, panoramic views, and hills. Just like the Equinox.

Put on by Envirosports (see link at the end of this article), the Death Valley Trail Marathon is limited to 250 runners, and usually sells out by early January. And no wonder, as it is run in some of the most austere beautiful desolation imaginable. It includes running the gamut of picturesque Titus Canyon, which starts broad and wide, runs past the ghost town of Leadfield, and then narrows down to a small trail before disgorging runners out onto a broad alluvial fan running down into Death Valley. It

starts outside of Beatty, Nevada, at an elevation of 3,400 feet, and the course climbs 2,300 feet in the first 12 miles, then descends 5,000 feet over the last 14 miles, ending in California in Death Valley National Park.

After registering on line, and purchasing airline tickets, I was committed. Thus began the first "running below zero" encounter when winter turned nasty. It is not easy to train for a marathon in the middle of a Fairbanks winter. My faithful training companion Nero (the infamous black lab) would shun long runs on the Old Nenana when it was below zero, and I managed only three 15 milers in the weeks leading up to February 7th. With insufficient training wiping out any hopes for a fast time, securing the t-shirt (which is not given out until you finish the course) became my goal.

The drive from LA was an experience. Getting through the incredible traffic and escaping the pressing, overbuilt environment was a feat. Driving through the Mojave Desert and to the dry mountain ranges surrounding Death Valley and watching the land slowly transform into isolation and natural beauty was incredible. Being the hottest, driest, and lowest

point on our continent, the mountains at Death Valley support little vegetation. The myriad of colors (dull red, buff, shades of brown, white, pale yellow, sepia, sea foam green) woven through complex rock formations reminds one of scenes transmitted back to Earth by the Mars rover.

We got to Stovepipe Wells, Death Valley two nights before the race, leaving only one day to (insufficiently) explore the Park. A reconnaissance mission was made to the terminus of the marathon course. Titus Canyon at that end is literally a vertical slit in the mountain face with the walls 500 feet above, and I became psyched for the race by thinking about what amazing things I would see in that canyon. We then checked out Furnace Creek, where the runners would board busses to be shuttled to the race start, and it was there that my bubble was burst. We were informed that there was snow way up in Titus Canyon, so for only the third time in 14 years, the Park Service was closing Titus Canyon. The race would be held on an alternate course. This was incredibly disappointing, to put it mildly, and we talked to several per-

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Running Briefs is published bi-monthly. Unlike two former editors, who write entertaining columns for real newspapers, Tracey writes marginal material for obscure scientific journals. So, please, if you have any exciting news that you would like to see here, please write it up and send it to Tracey at 1716 Reed Circle, Fairbanks AK 99709, or email at fntam@uaf.edu.

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Death Valley: running the Devil's Golf Course*(Continued from page 1)*

sons who were threatening to do Titus Canyon anyway. The alternate course ran along Westside Road (wash board dirt and gravel) through what is probably the most desolate place in all of Death Valley, the "Devil's Golf Course". And, it was an out-and-back.



Gary Pohl traversed the desolate Devil's Golf Course during the Death Valley Trail Marathon.

I elected to do the official race, which gave me experience in a new kind of "running below zero". That is to say, below zero feet in elevation. It began at 100 feet below sea level, and ran down to the lowest point in

North America at 282 feet below sea level. The entire marathon was thus below sea level. While the immediate terrain along the course was desolate, the mountains, including 11,000 foot Telescope Peak (15 miles away) loomed in all directions. The course runs through alkali flats and with incredibly sharp and rough mineral formations that

are coated with salt crystals. Nothing grows there. The more lush chaparral areas have sparse mesquite bush and plants with obtuse survival strategies. Fortunately, the weather

was perfect: clear skies, intense sun, a temperature of 40 degrees at the start, and 70 at the finish. Getting enough oxygen was certainly not a problem. The winning time was 3:04, and at 4:48 I managed to break the top 100.

Overall, the event was very well organized, and I would recommend it highly, particularly if you want to explore Death Valley in the off-season when it is not crowded and not too hot to enjoy. Plan extra time to see this awesome place. Check out the race and area online. There are runner's comments at www.marathonguide.com, and also photos along the course at www.trailrunnersclub.com.

On a final note, I received follow up email from Envirosports saying that the renegades who decided to run Titus Canyon ran afoul of the National Park Service. The Park Superintendent was considering whether to disallow future events along that course. I am hopeful that the selfish actions of a few can be overcome and that, next time, I get to do the Titus Canyon route.

The link for the race website is: <http://www.envirosports.com/events/displayevent.php?eventid=1025>.

The most interesting place I've run...

Editor's note: This is the first of several responses to the Running Briefs Poll published in the February 2004 edition. Look for articles from Larry Hallstrom and Michelle Mitchell in upcoming issues. Thanks guys! And, it's never too late to send in your very own contribution.

By Kat Betters

The most unique place I have had the pleasure of wearing my running shoes

would have to be Skopje, the capital of Macedonia. Macedonia is in Eastern Europe, on the south central Balkan Peninsula. My sister was living there at the time and I was staying for the 2 weeks following the birth of her first child, Leila, in April of 2001. I would walk down the street from my sister's apartment to the taxi pick up/drop off and ask to be taken downtown to

a hotel that had access to the river. The Vardar River runs through Skopje, and has a cobblestone street beside it that offers a pleasant place in which to run. Running on the streets is not really an option as drivers there are not accustomed to having to watch out for runners. So I would make my way down to the river every other day to run, soa

(Continued on page 3)

The rest of the story...

By Gary Pohl

By now, many have seen the cover of the 2004 Alaska (statewide) Runner's Calendar. There is a story behind this cover. Back in September, RCN President Steve Bainbridge (hereinafter "the Prez") noted that the statewide calendar always featured an Anchorage running personality. Wouldn't it be great, he promoted, for us to get a Fairbanks runner on the cover for a change? The RCN Executive Council agreed, and Jane Lanford, Tracey Martinson, and I were appointed as a committee to select a runner and then lobby the publishers of the statewide calendar to consider our request. This left us two daunting tasks: 1) figure out how to select out from so many awesome members in our running community, and 2) sell the idea to the omnipotent publishers of the statewide calendar.

The first task was difficult, to say the least. We had so many amazing and deserving runners to choose from.

In the process of deliberation, however, somewhat mischievous inclinations surfaced. We decided to pick the Prez himself, and to keep it a secret from him. Besides, his commitment to the running community and his performance as a runner really did make him a worthy candidate.

The second task was less difficult. I contacted Cindy Liggett, who is the editor of the statewide calendar, and she readily agreed to move our request forward at the annual statewide calendar meeting in Anchorage in October. At Cindy's invitation, and as RCN's calendar person, I decided to attend the meeting, and lobby in person for our cause. On the day of the statewide calendar meeting, my taxi driver had some difficulty finding Russian Jack's Ski Chalet, where the meeting was held. I got there 15 minutes late, to find that issue of the cover photo had already been decided. This was a blessing in disguise, as will become clear later.

Cindy informed me that they decided to put two persons on the cover, Brad Precosky, who brought the World Mountain Running Championship to Girdwood in 2003, and yes, the Prez! There was one condition, however: Cindy, also a bit mischievous, insisted that we keep it a secret.

The last task was the most difficult: keeping it a secret from the perpetually curious Prez. I had barely returned from Anchorage, when the Prez asked who was selected for the cover. It was a relief to be able to say "That mountain dude, Brad" and not be lying. I watched the Prez express both his admiration for Brad, and his disappointment that Fairbanks had been passed over again. But then he asked whom we had recommended as the Fairbanks candidate. Talk about being between a rock and a hard place! So, I mumbled something about getting there too late to make a good case for ourselves, and that we had had several

good choices in mind. With the calendars not due out until mid-January, the committee members had to side-step even more queries about who had been recommended, and when would the calendar come out.

Finally, the calendars came, and a sting operation was set up. The Prez was lured to the College Coffee-House (the easiest task by far). After a few minutes, we announced that the statewide calendars had come out, and nonchalantly tossed one, upside down, to him. He picked it up, turned it over, and...well, the accompanying photo pretty much tells "the rest of the story"...



Kat: mixed up with sheep in Macedonia

(Continued from page 2)

up the local lifestyle, and see the ancient ruins. Macedonia was under Turkish rule for ~500 years and some of their castles and mosques are near the river. There is a rather impressive fort built by the Turks that overlooks the river and the city from high on the river bluff. It was a real joy to run by this ancient, massive remnant.

Along the run I would often encounter shepherders and more often than not I would somehow end up mixed in with the flock. On more than one occasion, I was chased by sheep on their way to greener pastures. Many people would come to the river to play sports, have lunch, fish, chat with friends, and make the most of a sunny day.

And if it weren't for my pale Fairbanksan complexion (everyone there is olive skinned), blue eyes (virtually everyone has brown), and the fact that I was the only person I saw the entire time I was there either wearing shorts (simply not done prior to June), or running (can you think of one Macedonian track star?), I'm sure I would have blended right in with the riverside crowd!

Running Away from Home

Mercedes Marathon,

Birmingham, AL, February 8,

2004

Dietrich Hildebrandt 4:08

Bob Hildebrandt 5:39

L.A. Marathon, Los Angeles,

CA, March 7, 2004

Dietrich Hildebrandt 4:51:19

Bob Hildebrandt 6:30:09

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We can't do it without you...

By Steve Bainbridge

Looking at the Running Club North calendar, one notices a huge and varied list of events that includes training runs, track workouts, snowshoe runs, and competitive running events. These events, which span all 12 months of the year, are possible because of all the great folks in this community that are willing to volunteer their time to put them on. These events could not happen without them.

Having said this, we are always looking for new volunteers. Today's volunteers move on... to participate in new adventures

outside of the Fairbanks area, or to participate in new interests as influenced by changes in their personal lives. New volunteers help ensure that our calendar can remain one of the best in the state. New volunteers also bring new energy to our events, and help spark new events to reflect the current interests in the Fairbanks running community.

As most of you know, RCN provides track officials for high school track meets. We need lots of volunteers for this great service project. Looking forward, one of the challenges for RCN

comes with the news that Fairbanks has been chosen to be the host for the State track and field meets to be held in the years 2005, 2006, and 2007. This will require that we train a new group of volunteers, not only to officiate at the track events, but also to judge the field events.

As you can see, the opportunities to volunteer in our running community are plentiful and varied. Should you want to volunteer, or have questions, please feel free to call me at 452-8351 or send me an e-mail at runner49@alaska.net. We are currently looking for

volunteers for the Gold Discovery Run, an event put on by exclusively by RCN. This year's Gold Discovery Run will be held on Sunday, July 25th.

We are also looking for volunteers to help out at this year's high school track meets. Sharon Baker has once again graciously agreed to help out as the volunteer coordinator for this undertaking. Please give Sharon a call at 455-6689 or send her an email at badbob-baker@gci.net

My thanks to everyone for making Fairbanks such a great running community!