

**The Lean Horse Ultra**  
**Hot Springs, South Dakota**  
**8/26/06**

Part of the Hiways and Byways series by Lyle Clugg

It is hard to know where an idea comes from, or when it takes hold to become foremost in your mind. In the last few days, Jo and I have discussed the subject, and neither of us can remember exactly when we started talking about running an ultra-marathon. Maybe it came about from all those years of watching my friend Joe Prusaitis do the Hard Rock 100. One hundred miles of grueling trail running in 48 hours, but somehow, he always seemed to have a smile on his face and he came back year after year to face the ultimate challenge. Neither of us had any interest in trying a one hundred mile race, but the idea was probably planted there.

Maybe the idea came from my almost thirty years of “competitive” running. I started running after competing in several cross country ski races. Skiers referred to them as citizen races. They were fun events where everyone from little kids to grandparents participated. The race was against yourself, and everyone was glad you were out there doing your best. You didn’t have to win to be proud of yourself. My first running race was like that, too. Over six hundred participants, and every one a winner. It was so different than my years of grade school track competitions. There, I competed in many events, and I always brought home a ribbon. It was always the last place ribbon. I was no good at running. I hated the competition and always being last. By junior high, I stopped running and never did it again until I was 36 years old and had been doing the VJC ski race for several years.

After all those years of running, I had done just about everything I wanted to. There weren’t many challenges left. I’d done a number of marathons. I’d set my best times. All that I had to look forward to was getting older and slower. Now, my major accomplishment in a race is just finishing it.

After I moved to Colorado eight years ago, I was introduced to trail running. It brought a whole new joy to running. Instead of pounding the pavement for miles, you got to run through the woods and onto the plateaus, stopping occasionally to appreciate the scenery. Some of the challenge was not getting lost on the run, but mostly it was the varying terrain that made it so much fun.

Still, until last year there was no thought of doing anything longer than the local running club’s five mile trail races. The one exception was doing the Pikes Peak Ascent five years ago. That was sort of a mixture of a road race and a trail run. One thousand runners climbing Pikes Peak on the Barr Trail after starting in downtown Manitou Springs. It was more of a long hike than a run.

In September and October of last year, Jo and I traveled out east to see my grandkids and got in a lot of hiking and biking. By the time we got back, my foot was hurting pretty

bad. I checked with my doctor and he referred me to a local podiatrist. My appointment wasn't until the end of November, so for a month I endured a painful foot. In the meantime, our friends John and Ginny Blaylock started talking to us about going to Texas to do the Bandera Trail Run. Joe Prusaitis, of Hard Rock fame, was the race director, and John thought it would be a good way for Jo and I to enter the world of ultra running. By definition, that is any race longer than the marathon, 26.2 miles. I was interested and knew it might be fun, but the way my foot felt, I couldn't go ten miles, much less thirty-one.

John's philosophy of trail running is changing, too. He has been running ultras for years, and has completed two one hundred mile races and a number of fifty's and shorter. He loves being out on a lonely trail for hours, battling only himself and the elements. But like the rest of us, he is getting older and slower. It just doesn't stop him from trying. The important thing he was trying to get across to us was to set a goal and try to meet it. If you don't make it, just do the best you can. In all my running years, I have never started a race that I didn't finish. It takes a different perspective to enter a hundred mile race, run eighty-four miles of it, and call it a success. I didn't realize how much of an accomplishment that was. Over the years I've found that anyone can complete a marathon if they really work at it. I now know that is not true of an ultra-marathon. We were in a whole new ball game.

But John's talk about the Bandera Trail Run was falling on deaf ears. By mid-November I could hardly walk. I didn't hold a lot of hope that the podiatrist was going to find anything he could fix. I was fully expecting him to say that that my foot was wearing out, and that all I could do to help it was not to work it so hard. At my appointment, he looked at my foot, X-rayed it, scoped it with ultra-sound and declared that I had a neuroma, an inflamed nerve in my foot. Treatment can consist of staying off of it – not an option, or surgery – also not an option that I wanted to contemplate. He said that a newer option was to get a shot that completely killed the nerve. He recommended this option since he said that the nerve wasn't really necessary for walking, only for transmitting pain, which it was doing quite well. I had had enough pain, so I opted for the shot.

After a few days of soreness from the shot, I was amazed at how good my foot felt. For the first time in several years, it didn't hurt. Suddenly, I started training with a vengeance. Jo and I decided to go to Bandera. She said she could do the 25K race, and I would do the 50K. 15.5 miles was longer than anything Jo had run before, and 31 miles added 6 miles onto my longest run. The scary thing was that the race was in five weeks, not nearly long enough to train for a race of any distance.

The thing that tipped the scales for us in selecting that race was that it was a loop course. They also had a 100K race, which consisted of two loops of the 50K course. The cutoff time for all three races was 24 hours, and all of the aid stations would be available for the entire time. I could practically crawl the course and make it under the cutoff time. In addition, Joe and Joyce Prusaitis were the race directors, and John, Ginny and Jean-Jacques d'Aquin from Montrose would be there to provide mental and physical support.

If I was going to do an ultra, this was the one. Jo was happy to go on the trip and much happier that she didn't have to run 50K.

So we headed off to Bandera, and we completed the longest races of our lives. I was hurting for a week, but I survived with no permanent damage. Not long after Bandera, John started dropping hints about the Lean Horse. He plans well in advance of races so he can train properly. At the time, I had no interest in doing any more trail running. I had already signed up for the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary Motorola (now Freescale) Austin Marathon. I'd be going back to Texas just five weeks after Bandera, so I didn't need to think of anything else.

John didn't press the issue. I would be training for the marathon so we could all keep running together. However, he did throw out the idea of running the inaugural Antelope Island Buffalo Run. Antelope Island is the largest island in the Great Salt Lake. Participants could run either a 25 or a 50K, and it was in the middle of March. It sounded like a pleasant way to spend a spring day near Salt Lake City. Jo and I both signed up for the 25K before I ran the Austin Marathon.

Austin turned out to be miserable. I did well, considering the amount of training I had had, and the fact that I had planned to walk most of the course with an old running friend of mine, Charlotte Grove, who now lives in New York. The only trouble was the weather. For fourteen years, the Austin marathon has been lucky with the weather. This year it looked like it might even be too warm to run. Two days before the race, it was 83°. It has never rained on the race. This year we started the race in freezing rain and 26°. It never got above 36°. The guys at the front of the pack loved the cool temperatures, but a lot of us were pretty uncomfortable.

At least the weather at Antelope Island promised to be pleasant, but God has been breaking a lot of weather promises this year. Every time I checked the weather forecast before the race, it seemed to get worse. The evening before the race they were forecasting rain or snow for the next morning. Luckily, the wet weather held off until we finished our 25K. It was 35° and windy when we started, and it looked pretty dreary. In four hours, we only saw a few minutes of sunshine, but there wasn't any rain.

Even with the lousy weather I encountered at my last two races, I was still excited about running. For the first time in almost ten years, I was running injury free. I hadn't run a marathon since 1997 because it seemed like every time I would decide to start training for a marathon, something would happen to me. I know it is important to build up my training miles slowly, and I would always do this, but sooner or later, I would pull a hamstring or something would happen to my back. I was beginning to accept the fact that I was getting older and that my body may be wearing out. The biggest differences now are that most of my running is on softer surfaces, and that I am going much slower.

Jeff Galloway, an Olympic runner turned running guru, espouses the philosophy that all runners should take a walking break occasionally. He preaches the ratio of eight minutes of running followed by a one minute walk. This is very convenient during a marathon

because typically the water stations are placed a mile apart and I used to run at about eight or nine minutes per mile. Later in life I have highly modified his method to the point where I seem to walk eight minutes and run one. Actually, I try to keep the ratio at one to one, but at the longer distances, I don't succeed. Whatever I've been doing seems to be working. I am very slow, but I can keep going almost forever.

John Blaylock continued to press us to sign up for the Lean Horse Ultra. He wanted Jo to do the 50K and me to do the 50 mile race, but both of us agreed that was a bit aggressive. It would double the length of Jo's previous long race, and almost double mine. I remembered the pain I was in after the 50K in Bandera, and I wasn't sure I wanted to add almost 20 miles to that distance. John kept stressing the fact that Lean Horse was a much easier course. Bandera had been a true trail run, with lots of rocky climbs and descents. Lean Horse was a rail trail, with no more than a 3% grade, lots of easy access for plenty of aid stations, and a nice crushed gravel surface. We knew the trail well, but the distance still scared us.

We were going on trail runs with John, Ginny, Jean-Jacques and Sandy Nelson several times a week. Everything was feeling good, and so finally at the end of April, we sent in a check for \$170 with our registration forms.

Now the training began in earnest. I had set a nominal goal of 30 miles of training runs or the equivalent each week. I knew it should be closer to 40 miles per week or more, but I wasn't sure my body could handle it. When I was seriously training for marathons twenty years ago, I was able to maintain 40 miles a week, but that was twenty years ago, and I can feel the difference. What surprises me is that between April and August, I rarely went under 30 miles per week. Even more surprising, I had many 40 mile weeks and even several 50 and 60 mile training weeks. Even at my best twenty years ago, I had only done 60 miles a week once in my life. I was feeling pretty good about the way things were going. It was going to be slow, but I was beginning to think I could make it.

I was worried about over training, because in my recent past, that has always been my bugaboo. A couple of weeks before the race, when nothing had gone wrong, I was feeling pretty happy. Then it happened. A twinge in my left hamstring, the one I had seriously pulled while skiing over five years ago. I eased off on my running altogether, and just walked. I had gotten in as much training as I was going to. Two weeks of relative rest was the best. I wouldn't notice my hamstring again until well into the race.

A week before the race I started checking on the weather forecast. One of our big concerns the entire summer was that it could be blazing hot during the race on the last weekend in August. I can remember being in Custer on Labor Day weekend at least twice before. One time, I was hiking and it was 100° followed the next morning by a low of 33°. The second time was the Black Hills marathon. It started out at 33° on race morning, and by the time I finished four hours later it was 83°. However, our upcoming weekend looked great. They were saying we would have highs in the low 80's during the week, but a cool front would pass through and by Saturday the high was supposed to be 70° with clear skies, perfect weather for the race. Just bring the sunscreen.

Before we left, we had one new task to do. Ultra runs give you the opportunity to leave drop bags at some of the aid stations. You can have just about anything in the bag that you feel will be helpful during the race. For example, in my first drop bag at Pringle, mile 16, I would have a 5 oz bottle of Hammer gel. Hammer gel is one of many brands of almost pure carbohydrate that I and many runners take as they run. Over the years I've preferred to run with 1 oz packets of GU, but on longer runs, they are pretty cumbersome. Hammer gel comes in large bottles that you can transfer to 5 oz squeeze bottles that are easy to carry and refill. We've learned a lot of new tricks from John in the last few months.

In addition to my gel, the drop bag would contain some Band-Aids, salt tablets, a Clif bar and Advil, more necessities of the long run. There was also a pair of dry socks. John recommended that the socks be in a baggie in case of rain. If the drop bags weren't covered properly, they could get wet and you don't want to be changing into wet socks. With the forecast of clear skies, I thought it unnecessary, but I humored him. He's done a bunch of these and knows these little tricks. The last thing you want is to be worrying about these little things when you are on the trail. The biggest hurdle in a 50 or 100 miler is mental, not physical. The most important thing for this drop bag would be a place for me to discard my extra clothes. Since the temperature at the start was forecasted to be in the low 40's, I expected that by mile sixteen I would be peeling off some extra layers.

I planned on two other drop bags, one at Custer, mile 28, and the last at Oreville, mile 39. In addition to the standard supplies Custer would contain a different pair of shoes. I had purchased a new pair of shoes a month ago, but had some problems with the stitching in one of them. I had gotten replacement shoes only two weeks before the race, not nearly far enough in advance to be satisfied that they were going to be comfortable for the entire race. My three year old shoes were in the bag, just in case. I also had a dry short sleeve shirt waiting for me. This was also the stop where I put my Petzel headlamp. I knew I would be running in the dark for a while, so I gave myself plenty of time to spare. My Oreville bag had the standard supplies plus a long sleeve shirt and a windbreaker. Temperatures could be back down into the 50's by the time I finished, so I knew they could come in handy.

We left for Custer on Wednesday the 23<sup>rd</sup> and the forecast was still holding. It was going to be a nice day. When we got to South Dakota, we drove through Edgemont to check out the very beginning of the Mickelson Trail and see what restaurants were available in town. John had this crazy idea that after the race we were somehow going to have some energy left. He wanted to take two days to do a bike ride on the entire length of the trail. On one day, we would bike the 45 miles from Custer to Edgemont, and then two days later ride the 64 miles from Deadwood to Custer. Edgemont is a dusty little town without much to offer except the trailhead, but at least it had one restaurant that looked pretty decent. From Edgemont, we headed north and stopped at the Minnekahta Trailhead, mile 16.2 of the Mickelson Trail. This is the start and finish of the 100 mile race. My race would take me past trail mile post 65 where I would turn around and finish at the High Country Guest Ranch. This was also the furthest aid station for the 100 mile race, and

they would be seeing all of the aid stations twice. They turned around another half mile beyond my turnaround.

We drove north on SD highway 89 and then US 385 so Jo could get an idea of what her race would be like. The trail roughly parallels these highways from Minnekahta to Custer. Although it is not a steep grade, the trail rises almost 2000' in the 28 miles to Harbach Park in Custer. About 25 miles of Jo's run would be uphill. The good news is that it is a beautiful trail, at least after the first few rather blah miles.

We checked into the Chief Motel in Custer on Thursday afternoon and went up to visit John and Ginny at the Crazy Horse campground on the north side of town. True to form, John had planned that we would eat dinner with them and then we would go for an evening walk on the Mickelson Trail, starting about a mile from their campground. He wanted to be sure exactly when it got dark so he knew which drop bag should have his lights and spare batteries. John tries to plan everything in advance, leaving nothing to chance. The sun went behind the hills at 7:24, and by 8:00 it was pitch black. If my run took me longer than 14 hours, I was going to be doing some night running, too.

We slept in on Friday morning because Friday night was going to afford little sleep. After a cheap breakfast at the Wrangler Restaurant, thanks to discounts from the motel, we headed off to Hot Springs to check in for the race and pick up our packets. We took a leisurely drive through Custer State Park where we saw an unusual number of wild animals. The buffalo were out in large numbers, as expected, but we saw lots of deer and antelope during our morning drive. The weather was cool and cloudy that morning, so maybe they were out and about rather than relaxing in the shade.

We arrived in Hot Springs around noon and drove straight to the Chamber of Commerce building to get the packets. Jo was number 201, and I was number 118. The numbers identified which race you were in, with sub-100 numbers being the 100 milers, 100-199 the 50 milers, and 200 and up the 50 kilometer runners. The shorter race entrants got a race t-shirt in the packet, while the 100 milers got a nice polo shirt emblazoned with the race logo. Other than that the packet contained the usual flyers, Hammer gel, supplements and other non-notable items that you get at every race. There were no pre-race instructions, since these had been distributed via the internet. The web has enabled major improvements for races, handling everything from registration, information dissemination, communication and results publishing. Races that don't utilize the internet are now a rare breed.

We had to be back at race headquarters at 3:00 for the pre-race briefing, so we headed out for lunch and a prolonged stop at a gold jewelry discount store that Ginny had told Jo about. She managed to buy some beautiful rings before we headed back for the briefing. As we turned around to head for the C of C, John and Ginny drove by on their way to register.

Back at race headquarters, all the participants were milling around waiting for the meeting. We deposited our drop bags in the appropriate containers and purchased our

last minute supplies from one of the few vendors at the expo. Most vendors don't bother coming to a race where there are only 160 participants, but one of the busiest booths was staffed by a guy who was running the 100 the next day. When the meeting started, one of the first announcements was the fact that the weather forecast for Saturday had changed. Instead of cool and sunny, it was expected to be cold with considerable periods of rain. The South Dakotans were eagerly anticipating rain, since they hadn't had any in months. The rest of us were a bit dismayed. Most of us hadn't planned on rain, even if we had prepared for it. I would carry my rain jacket and see what happened.

Race director Jerry Dunn reiterated the information about the course, mainly stressing how easy this was going to be. He was very clear that unlike many ultras, we were not going to get lost on this trail. All we had to do was get on the Mickelson Trail and stay on it until we came to the respective signs for the turnaround of the race we were running. Last year he had started the 50K race about three miles down the road so that it would end exactly at Harbach Park in Custer. The start was separate from the other two races, but most of the course was the same. The participants didn't like this because the 50K runners never got to see the other runners. This year everyone started together and everyone had a turnaround before they came back to the aid station where they finished. The 100 milers would come all the way back to the start.

The major item I took away from the briefing was that Jerry was going to be very lenient with the cutoff times. Most trail runs are very strict about their cutoffs. If you don't make it to each aid station by the required time, you are pulled from the race because there is very little chance that you will make it to the finish by the official cutoff time for the race. For example, the Lean Horse 100 milers had a 24 hour cutoff time for the race. More difficult races have cutoffs of 30, 36 or even 48 hours, but if you don't make it under the cutoff, you don't count as a finisher. Since Jerry's intent of this race was to get as many people as possible to finish the 100 mile race, he said that if you felt good and wanted to continue, you could take as long as was necessary. I was very happy to hear this since my cutoff was 14 hours, and I wasn't sure I could make it in that time, but I was pretty sure I could finish somehow. I knew that Jo would have no trouble whatsoever with her 10 hour cutoff. She wasn't so sure. These times may sound pretty liberal, but neither of us had ever done this before and we were really worried about it.

After the short briefing, we all headed over to the Flatiron Restaurant for a feast of Buffalo Burgers or Brats and all the trimmings. Most shorter races, including 10K's and marathons, usually have the traditional pasta dinner so you could load up on carbs. Ultra runners seem to like their protein, and they like a lot of it. All the Montrose folks were sitting at the same table, and we were joined by Bill Heldenbrand of St. Joseph, MO who was camped near Jean-Jacques. Bill was a little guy, 60 years old and a fast runner, and could he pack away the food. We began to notice when he came back from the buffet line with his fourth heaping full plate. On Sunday at the post-race brunch, we counted five plates full by the time we left. He may still be there trying to fill his hollow leg.

We had a somber thirty mile ride back from Hot Springs to our motel in Custer. It had begun to sink in that we were really doing this. We carefully checked our equipment;

laying out socks and shoes; pinning our race numbers to our shorts; deciding once and for all which shirts we would be wearing; reviewing once again the contents of Jo's new shorts pockets and my Camelbak. We knew it would be pretty cool at the start. The big "IF" was the rain. Would we need to wear our rain jackets, or would it be sporadic enough that our long sleeved polyester shirts would be enough? Lots of questions with no good answers. Tomorrow would bring those answers.

Jo still couldn't believe that I was setting the alarms for 3:30 AM. Notice I said alarms. I've been training for too long to have the day screwed up by oversleeping. I can't just wake up, slip into my clothes and go like my step-daughter Mariann. If she is staying near the race start, she can set her alarm for fifteen minutes before the race. I need time to wake up and get my head around the day. I dress slowly, eat, stretch and try to once again plan my day. I've gone over it in my head a thousand times, but one more time isn't going to hurt. I woke up before the alarms went off, so I got up and turned them off before they woke Jo. She had said that 4:15 would be early enough for her. The Blaylock's were picking us up at 4:50. We had about a 45 minute drive to the starting line. The buses from Hot Springs were leaving by 5:15 for their 15 minute trip. Jerry had asked us to be there by 5:30 for the 6:00 AM start so that everyone had a chance to do a final check in before we started.

Ginny would drop us off at the starting line and then be our "crew" for the entire race. She would meet us at several aid stations throughout the race and provide physical and moral support when needed. If John made it back to Custer, mile 71.7, she would then pace him to the finish. Pacers are another unique feature of ultras. In this race, after someone running the 100 mile race reached the High Country Ranch at mile 51, they were allowed to have another runner join them to "pace", i.e. provide moral support and guidance. "Muleing" isn't allowed, meaning that the other runner couldn't carry any supplies for the racer. They are just there for you when it is pouring rain in the middle of the night and you want to quit.

We arrived just before 5:30 and the parking lot at the Minnekahta Trailhead was almost full. Runners were milling around in the rain, yes rain, getting a last bite to eat or waiting in line at the pit toilet. Jerry wasn't there to sign us in yet, but a few minutes later the three buses from Hot Springs arrived. The runners sitting on the first bus took a long look at the rain and didn't budge. They were already signed in, so they saw no reason to stand around in a cold rain. The thermometer in John's truck said it was 52°, warmer than expected, but still pretty miserable. After about ten minutes, the rain stopped and things began to look up. We could begin to see the first hues of daylight and thought that the day might not turn out too bad after all. I finally signed us in with Jerry and made my final pit stop before the race. With only ten minutes to go, I was heading back to the truck to remove my rain jacket when the showers started up again in earnest. Oh well, I could deposit it in my first drop bag, even though I disliked the thought of carrying it for sixteen miles.

Jerry shuffled us across highway 18 and through the gate on the trail. We were still trying to get everyone through the gate when people just started running. The race had

begun. There are many races where you can't hear what is going on at the front of the pack, and this one was no exception. I was off on the longest journey of my life. I've gone further, but never in one day on foot. The day held promise of some new experiences. I could only wait to see what they would be.

Although the sun wouldn't rise for a few more minutes, it was light enough to see the miles of trail ahead of us. Near the trailhead, we were on a fairly open plain, gradually sloping up the hills into the forest. John and I were together at the start, and I could see Jo's yellow rain jacket slowly pulling away from us. Jean-Jacques was too far ahead to see, even though I remembered he was wearing only a short sleeved shirt and shorts. I was wearing my shorts, but I had a short sleeved shirt, a long sleeved shirt and a water resistant jacket. Thank God for the new high-tech polyester shirts that wick water away from your body. If I had been wearing a plain cotton shirt, I would already be freezing.

We had all agreed that we would run our own race. Although we had been training together at the same pace for the last nine months, it wouldn't take much to separate us during the race. If someone stops to take a pee or tie a shoe and the other one has to wait, it upsets the rhythm of the run. If each of you stops every time the other one stops, you lose a lot of time, so we agreed not to do it. Both John and I were stopping frequently to take a pee, and it was never coordinated, so we continued to jockey back and forth. One of the mantras of distance running is to be well hydrated before the race. The problem with that is the number of stops you have to make. During training, we can always find a tree to step behind, but on these wide open plains, there wasn't even a bush to hide behind. Everyone has to go, so you learn to adapt.

John and I walked for most of the first mile as we had planned earlier. So had Jo, but she walks faster and did a bit of running. After we were warmed up, we started our run/walk routine to pick up the pace. We were doing well, keeping the pace under 15 minutes per mile, even including pit stops. John had turned on his iPod and was dancing along to the tunes. After six or seven miles, he was having too much fun and I felt we were pushing the pace a bit too much for me. He had to go faster than me if he wanted to finish the 100 in 24 hours. I hoped he wasn't burning too much energy dancing to those tunes.

We were still pretty much together when we reached the George Toal aid station on Argyle Road at 8.8 miles. It consisted of two RV's, one parked on each side of the trail with their canopies stretched out between them. I found out quickly that there was a gap between the canopies where all the water drained off each canopy. I couldn't get much wetter since it had been raining for over two hours by this point. I felt my slimy socks sliding down into my shoes, so I stopped to quickly pull them up. I told John to go on since he hates waiting at aid stations. Ginny and I like to take a little time and relax. One or two minutes of rest can be of great help later.

John was only about 50 yards ahead when I left the aid station, and I slowly closed the gap. When he decided to run again, I was just ending my short run, so he pulled away once again. We kept up this dance for the next five miles. He would get a little further ahead and I would work to catch him. I finally admitted to myself that I had to slow

down a bit or I was never going to make it to the finish. He pulled away again, and by mile 15 I lost sight of him for good. There were still several people behind me on the trail, but by this point they had dropped back far enough so that I couldn't see anyone behind me. From this point on I wouldn't see another runner going my way. I met a few, including Jo, when they were coming back from the 50K turnaround. After mile 35 I began to meet the leading 100 mile runners on their way back to the start. Other than that and the aid stations, I was alone on the trail for the next eleven hours.

Jo was the first of the three of us to pull into the aid station at Pringle, mile 16.2 Jean-Jacques was so far ahead that none of us would see him for quite a while. As planned, Ginny was waiting for us at Pringle. Thank God some things go right. Jo was soaked and cold, so Ginny got her a dry Gore-Tex jacket out of the truck, which helped her a lot. Even though she was wearing Gore-Tex, it was soaked from both sides. Just as she was leaving, John caught her. He breezed on through, since he just likes to grab some food and keep going if possible. They stayed together for a while, but John was moving along well, so he finally pulled away. I finally arrived at Pringle, and Ginny said they had left only about five minutes before, which made me feel good. I didn't have much in my drop bag because all I had planned to do was to drop off warm clothing. I kept everything I had and wished I had something warm and dry, but no such luck. I did have dry wool socks, so I slipped those on. The pair I was wearing was soggy, and my feet were wrinkled from being wet for four hours, so a dry pair really felt good. I was in the aid station for about six minutes, but it was a good break. Ginny headed out for the trail with her container of chocolate éclairs to tempt me back into action. They tasted wonderful and I knew I had to get moving before she would give me any.

The next section of trail up to the White Elephant aid station at mile 19.5 was the section John said he hated. It stays right next to the highway, and when he did it last year it was hot and dusty and you breathed all the car fumes. Today when it was wet and miserable and I was all alone, it was nice to see cars occasionally. Several people honked and waved, and it felt good to see someone who appreciated what you were doing. After almost an hour along the road I arrived at White Elephant where a shelter was set up in the parking lot just off the trail. I stopped and grabbed some snacks and talked for a minute. The woman who was crewing for the two Virginia women behind me was asking if there was a porta-potty at any of the aid stations. They are few and far between on the trail. Actually, if you are biking, they are quite adequately spaced, but for runners, you have to make do when you can. The next one is at Harbach Park in Custer, 12 miles away. I hope the two ladies could improvise. The good news for me was that there was still someone behind me.

I kept slogging along, putting in the miles as fast as I could. My pace between Pringle and White Elephant had been in the low 15 minutes per mile range, but between White Elephant and Carroll Creek it slowed to 16 minutes per mile. I seemed to be working just as hard, or harder, but I was starting to feel worn out. After Carroll Creek, I couldn't get the pace down to less than 18 minutes per mile. I was starting to worry because to meet the cutoffs, I had to be at 18 minutes per mile, and aid station stops only slowed the pace. I crested the hill for the descent into Custer at right around the 25 mile mark, and my

pace started to increase again. I had been going up for most of the 25 miles, and I guess it was just getting to me. One other thing helped. After seven miserable hours, the rain was finally starting to let up. This, along with the downhill stretch, helped to raise my spirits.

I passed mile 26 and reveled in the fact that I had just completed a marathon, the 14<sup>th</sup> time I had gone that distance. Almost immediately it struck me that I still had almost another marathon to do today. Elation followed by dejection. Almost the first building you see as you arrive in Custer is the Purple Pie Place. Boy, would I love to stop in there and finish off one of their wonderful pies. The next place I saw was the Chief Motel. A warm shower and a soft, dry bed sound really wonderful. All I have to do is step off the trail and cut through the back yard of the motel. By the time I got to Harbach Park at mile 28.3, I was really wiped out, both mentally and physically. I seemed to have very little energy left. I was depressed and ready to quit. But Ginny was there, all bouncy and cheerful and urging me on.

At least my drop bag was waiting for me. I flopped down on one of the picnic table benches in the shelter, slathered my wrinkled feet with Vaseline, and put on another pair of dry socks. It felt so good to put on a couple of dry shirts. I was still cold; but having dry shirts raises the spirits. My rain jacket had finally dried and it was no longer getting wet. I wasn't willing to leave it behind, since the weather could break again at any moment. Ginny urged me to finish some of the chicken soup left over from yesterday's dinner. You don't feel like eating anything, but you know you need the nutrition, so you force it down. The warm soup felt so good on the way down. I was able to have a good portion, plus a couple of sandwiches that the aid station had ready. I always try to find the highest calorie food I can eat. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, M&M's, oranges, bananas, you just stuff in as much as you can. Plus, I had another bottle of Hammer gel in my bag. I was almost ready to go, and so Ginny headed for the trail with the éclairs. That got me on to my feet and somehow headed out once again after only twelve minutes of R&R.

John had gotten to Harbach first, and here he also went through the ritual of changing socks and clothes. He doesn't hang around aid stations very long, but you do what you have to do. Just as he was leaving, Jo struggled by. She was avoiding the aid station, because she knew if she stopped, she would never get started again. She waved at Ginny and kept going. John was just leaving, so he fell in beside her. She said that he was feeling good, and could have easily pulled away from her, but that he stuck with her for 1.3 miles until she reached her turnaround. She was ready to quit, and may not have made it without his support. She made it to the flags marking the turnaround and wished him luck in his quest while she turned and headed for home. Every time she crossed a street, she knew she was almost to the finish. And then she would see another street. It didn't seem nearly this far on the way out. Having someone with you makes the time go faster and easier. Now time seemed to have stopped. She finally crossed highway 16A and turned the corner towards Harbach Park, now only three blocks away. That is when she saw me coming towards her.

We were so happy to see each other. I was happy to see that she was still going and looked pretty good. She was happy for two reasons. First, I was still vertical and moving. She was afraid I might have had to quit. The other reason was that she wasn't going to have to wait around for me to get to Harbach. We had agreed that she would wait to see how I was doing. The first words out of her mouth were, "I think I'm going to puke." She was exhausted, cold, sick to her stomach, and ready to quit. With only a quarter of a mile left to go, I knew she would make it. If she puked, so what? She had just completed the longest run of her life in 8 hours, 7 minutes and 5 seconds. Pretty good for a 64 year old lady.

This 65 year old guy was struggling, mainly with the demons in my head. I had made it almost 29 miles, but 21 more miles seemed almost impossible. I forced myself to think that I could make it at least two more miles and call it a 50K. I would go to the turnaround, and then bag it. By the time I got to the flags, I was feeling a bit better. The chicken soup must be taking effect. I knew the route ahead of me, since I had biked it last June. It was a pleasant little loop, well away from the highway. I was seeing deer coming out to browse, and everything was looking better. I made the decision to make it to the Mountain Trailhead aid station at mile 33.3. A mile or so later, I came to a bench alongside the trail. I was so tired; I just sat down to rest. After a few minutes I struggled to get started again. The demons were really arguing now. John's mantra kept going through my mind, "Relentless Forward Motion". I just had to get going. I kept plugging along and all at once I saw a tiny patch of blue sky. My hopes shot up. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all.

I finally arrived at the Mountain Trailhead. They were probably surprised to see me, since no one had been along in over half an hour. The volunteers were eager to help me. I had forgotten to fill my Camelbak at Harbach, and it had been bone dry for several miles. This was the second one I had gone through today. I asked them to fill it one half to three quarters full, since that should hold me for the rest of the day. I got a turkey sandwich, PowerAde, and some other snacks. Once again I was buoyed up and ready to go.

Sometime soon after I left the aid station, I began to notice that my right heel was beginning to feel hot. This wasn't a good sign. I sat down on a rock at the side of the trail and pulled my socks up. They tend to slide down into my shoes as I run. Within a mile, I was feeling it again. Once again, I sat and pulled off my shoe. This time I saw the blister that was beginning to form on my heel. I pulled a blister preventing Band-Aid out of my pack and applied it to my heel. I just hoped it would work. I took off once again, now getting seriously concerned about my pace. For the first sixteen miles, I had done well in building up some reserve time, but these stops were seriously eating into my reserves. I really noticed how little I could relax at aid stations. I had to get in and get out as fast as I could. This is the first race I've ever done where that time pressure always seemed to be there, and after ten hours, it was really beginning to wear on me.

At about mile 35, I met the first 100 mile runner coming back. I was walking downhill at this point, and he was comfortably running uphill, 65 miles into his race. I went almost

two more miles before I met the second 100 miler, and he looked good, too. From here into Hill City, the stream of runners was fairly constant. I encountered most of the over 50 runners in that stretch. The last ones I met looked as bad as I did, except they had 45 miles to go and nighttime was falling. I was extremely happy that I was quitting at 50 miles.

My foot felt a little better with the Band-Aid on it, but I noticed that I was favoring that foot as I walked. I had tightened my laces so the sock wouldn't slide down as easily, but it was making the top of my arch sore. I don't think I can win this battle. I finally made it into Oreville at mile 38.7. My feet were really hurting now. The heel was hot, but the bottoms of both feet felt like hamburger. I had one more pair of socks in my final drop bag at Oreville. I changed socks again, putting lots of Vaseline on both feet. I saw that the Band-Aid wasn't sticking to my slick foot, so I gave up on that, hoping dry socks and Vaseline would get me through to the end. I also had one final long sleeved shirt, so I changed that, too. I didn't have a dry short sleeved shirt, which would have been nice. I had planned to be wearing only a short sleeved shirt at this point, and I would change into a long sleeved shirt and take along a jacket if I thought I would need it. Little did I know that I would be wearing two shirts and a rain jacket. I kept the rain jacket with me because the weather still looked iffy, and it would be getting dark soon.

After almost fifteen minutes in the aid station, I was off again, trying to keep the motion going. It was getting harder by the minute. The last five miles had been mostly downhill, so I had clicked off a few 15 and 16 minute miles when I wasn't stopped to check my feet, but I had to keep that up and it wasn't easy. Finally at mile 42 I was beginning to see the outskirts of Hill City and I thought to myself, "Only eight miles to go." Then my brain clicked in and figured out that at my pace I still had two and a half hours to go, if I was lucky. I was at the point in the race where the mind was really starting to play games with me, and I was losing. Right about then, I passed Jim Kerse. Jim is from New Zealand and he has been staying with Jean-Jacques for a while and doing a number of 100 mile runs with him. It was good to see someone else that I knew. He said something to me, and I was so unfocused that I wasn't really sure what he had said. It sounded like John was waiting for me at Hill City, but that didn't make any sense.

A few miles later I cruised into Hill City. Surprisingly, I had been doing sub-18 minute miles since I left Oreville. Maybe dry clothes do make a difference. Or maybe it is the horse approaching the barn thing. When you are nearing the finish line, you speed up to get it over with. In Hill City, the sidewalk on one of the side streets is the Mickelson Trail. You stay on the sidewalk for about a half mile until you cross the highway and get to the aid station at mile 44.3. Just as I got to the sidewalk, I met Ginny coming the other way. She was talking on the cell phone to Jo. After a shower and a good nap, Jo was feeling great again. She said she was feeling fine and she would drive up to meet me at High Country Ranch. After we hung up, Ginny explained Jim's strange message. John had decided to call it a day at Hill City. He hardly had the energy to go another step, so he knew he couldn't finish the 100. It must have been all that dancing to his tunes. Ginny convinced him to rest at the aid station and then finish with me. That way, it

would count as an official 50 mile finish. If you stopped at 45 or 55, it didn't count as anything. You had to make the decision at the 50 mile mark. A number of people did that as a result of the miserable weather. Several others changed to 50K from 50 miles. As I see it, finishing any of these distances is quite an accomplishment. After today, that feeling is even stronger.

After waiting for 45 minutes, John was cramping up, so he headed off for the finish and Ginny started walking back down the trail looking for me. We walked the few blocks back down the sidewalk toward the aid station. She commented that I was listing. I was favoring my sore heel so much I was leaning in the other direction. Just as we were ready to cross the street to the aid station, Jean-Jacques appeared. He was over 55 miles into the run and he said his feet were killing him. He didn't look like he was going to make it, and his mind was telling him to throw in the towel. He chatted for a moment, and then took off down the trail.

I took a quick six minute pit stop in Hill City. I was gobbling up everything in sight. They had M&M's, cookies and other sweet delights. I couldn't seem to get enough, but I had to get going. I said goodbye to Ginny and headed off on the final leg of my journey. I had forgotten that the last five miles was uphill again. It was obvious to me that I was struggling, since I could barely maintain a 20 minute per mile pace. Several times, I remember just stopping and standing. It was getting harder to focus on my goal, even though it was getting much closer. But I knew I was going to make it, because there was nowhere else to stop. There were fewer and fewer 100 mile runners. The ones I was now meeting really looked tired. There was no way some of these folks were going to make it, but they were still trying. I grunted words of encouragement as I passed, and they did the same.

With about two miles to go, darkness had fallen. It was about 8:20 in the evening and the sun was long gone, what little we had seen of it today. The trail is white crushed gravel, so I kept going without a light. I could see enough to easily stay on the trail, and there was nothing to trip on or bump into. Or so I thought. Suddenly, three bikes passed me going down the hill. Only the first had a light and the others were trying to stay on his trail. They had ridden from Leadville in this weather and had full panniers on their bikes, long overdue on their schedule.

After several more minutes, I saw another light coming down the trail. It could have been the last of the 100 milers, but it seemed to be moving to slowly. Finally, as the light got closer, I heard Ginny and Jo talking. They were coming to greet me and walk with me to the finish. We walked the final half mile to the ranch, but I wasn't done yet. I got some PowerAde since my Camelbak was once again dry, grabbed a cookie, and headed off for my final mile. I told the aid station volunteer that I would be back in 20 minutes. Once again I staggered off into the night, with Jo and Ginny leading the way. I was never so happy to see some flags wrapped around a fence post. We turned and headed back for the ranch. Although I was trying as hard as I could, those final two miles took 43 minutes. At the finish, I stopped my watch at 14:57:59. The volunteer was long gone. I was the final person he was waiting for. He assigned me an official finish time of

14:50:30 and then left. Amazingly, the two Virginia women behind me finished in 16 hours and 23 minutes. John had finished in 14:02:06, but he would have been much sooner if he hadn't waited for me. He was still almost an hour ahead of me.

Ginny gave me my reward of a few more chocolate éclairs, and then I collapsed into the front seat of our car. Jo headed me south for my much needed shower and a short night's sleep. When we got to the motel, the first thing I did was to peel off my socks and have Jo look at my blister. By now, it covered most of my heel and hurt like Hell. I couldn't put any weight on that foot, once I got the feeling back into it. My tightly tied shoes had turned the tops of my feet black and blue. Anywhere my clothing had rubbed between my legs or on my arms, I was chafed and bleeding. I crawled in the shower and relaxed, and then Jo lanced my blister. I took a Vicodin and crawled into bed and wanted to die.

The next morning I struggled to walk to the restaurant a block away. Jo didn't want to eat, so I went alone. I was so slow getting back that she was about ready to come looking for me. We had to leave soon to get to the award ceremony and brunch in Hot Springs. When we got there we were very happy to find that both Jim and Jean-Jacques had finished the 100. Most surprising though was the fact that Jim had faded to finish in 27:23:50 and JJ had come bounding back to life and finished in 26:23:30, gaining about an hour and a half on Jim during another rainy, miserable night.

The award ceremony was both joyful and painful to watch. Every finisher was recognized for his or her accomplishment, with a silver and gold belt buckle for the 100 mile finishers and a key fob for the others. As each name was called off, the runner would limp to the front of the room to receive their award, or in the case of many 100 milers, they would stand patiently by their chair as Jerry walked over to give them the award. One young stud bounded up to the front to get his, accompanied by the catcalls from the rest of us not so fortunate to be able to move.

Three of the folks from Montrose brought home a trophy, thanks to age and perseverance. Jean-Jacques, who is 67, finished in second place in his age group. It is hard to imagine anyone his age going any faster, but another 67 year old beat him by almost two hours. Jo took 1<sup>st</sup> place in the 55 to 64 year age group, since she was the only woman to attempt the distance. I took second in my age group behind another 65 year old runner. Luckily, Lou Joline didn't count. He is 74 years old and finished 35 minutes ahead of me, but since he had signed up for the 100, he wasn't eligible for an award. The same was true for John, but it in no way diminishes their accomplishment.

On Tuesday, just three days after the race, Jo, John and Ginny started out to bike the entire 108.8 miles of the Mickelson Trail. They did 45 miles the first day, skipped the next day and finished the ride on Thursday. John wisely skipped the last 16 miles of the ride. I was so wiped out that it hurt just for me to sit in the truck and provide aid to them along the trail.

A few weeks have passed now, and the memories of the race are fading. John is already looking for the next race he would like to do. I've decided I've done enough 50 milers in

my life. Jo and I made a pact that 25K is a fun distance and the longest we want to do in the future. I finally stopped limping a few days ago, my hip has stopped hurting, my chafing is pretty much healed up, the blister is almost gone, and things are getting back to normal. Well, almost. Today we are watching the clouds scud by as the temperature drops. The four of us, the Blaylocks and the Cluggs have signed up to do the Partners charity bike ride this weekend. The distance is 105 miles and it goes over Owl Creek Pass, which from our house looks like it may be snow covered. Will we ever learn?