

Hardrock Hundred Mile Endurance Run

July 8-10, 2011

Run Report by Rich DeSimone

Two grandfathers - Martin Miller and I at Kroger's Canteen Aid Station at 13,100 ft Virginius Pass - mile 67 at 7:45 a.m. July 9, 2011.



My memories of the 2011 Hardrock experience are remarkable. I want to thank all the Helena area runners who have supported and showered me with continual good wishes, encouragement and sympathy. It began last winter when I was informed that John Hallsten was 11th and I was 14th on the waiting list (140 runners are allowed to begin the Hardrock run). I received a call from Run Director Dale Garland on May 21 that I was officially an "accepted runner." I was horrified. I had been sort of training for Hardrock since February but it didn't totally sink in until the call came that I was officially "in the game."

I want to thank Hardrock multiple finishers John Hallsten and Tom Hayes for their patience with my endless questions about the run and I am forever indebted to Martin Miller who drove 2,000 miles to pace me and acted as my official training coach, race strategist, and fountainhead of enthusiasm and positiveness. Two critical recommendations of Martin's were to arrive at Silverton, Colorado (start of the run at 9,300 ft) at least 2 to 3 weeks before the run to acclimate to the high elevation (run elevations are between 7,800 ft and 14,000 ft averaging over 11,000 ft) and become familiar with the course, primarily by attending "Hardrock boot camp" (2 weeks of official trail marking, maintenance and reconstruction).

The day after Father's Day, June 20, I arrived at Ouray, CO, about 25 miles north of Silverton and an aid station during the run (mile 56) where Martin would accompany me to the finish. Martin had suggested I become particularly familiar with several portions of the course that had caused him concern during his 4 Hardrock adventures. I spent one day hiking from the Ouray tunnel toward the Yellowjacket Mine and from the tunnel to Ouray. During this hike I encountered several other Hardrock runners and was amazed by their friendliness and willingness to share their knowledge of the run. Deep snow depth prevented us from venturing very far above the mine.

The following day I was settled in my little tent at the Silver Summit RV Park in Silverton. John Hallsten had recommended this camping area although other than us folks from Helena, I only remember one other tent in the park in the 19 days I was there. The RVs were substantial. I felt like a little log cabin in the middle of New York City. One evening several of my fellow campers toured each other's RVs.

Several of them cost more than I would have ever imagined. I offered a tour of my tent but there were no takers!

I drove to the South Mineral Campground and hiked toward Ice Lake hoping to figure out the course up to Grant-Swamp Pass (~13,000 ft). Portions of the Hardrock course are on roads (29 mi.), trails (63 mi.) and x-country (10 mi). What is sporting is that the use of the term "trail" is pretty broad and very few trails have signs. In addition, there are intersecting trails (Continental Divide trail, Colorado trail system) that are well established but not part of the Hardrock course. During late June, to make things even more interesting, there was an abundance of snow at higher elevations that provided no clue to locations of many trails. Luckily, Hardrock runners were common and graciously allowed me to accompany them. I followed some experienced runners to Grant-Swamp Pass and got my first taste of crossing snow/ice fields. I am forever thankful for the runners who patiently explained how to properly cross these fields to a terrorized grandpa who was plotting revenge on "friends" who convinced me to enter the Hardrock lottery! The learning curve was steep but the abundance of snowfields during the next 2 weeks provided lots of opportunity to practice. The next day, I hiked toward Handies Peak (14,000 ft) but only got to Grouse/American Pass because of snow. I also covered the stretch from Grouse Aid Station to Engineer Pass that had been plowed for the jeep-rental folks. The last day I hiked some of the Little Giant country.

Trail marking began on Saturday June 25 and generally 15 to 20+ folks would meet at Charlie Thorn's house about 7 a.m. each day and be out for the full day. As Martin had predicted, this was a wonderful experience. Not only did I spend considerable time on my feet at high elevations learning the course but I met many incredible people. I would definitely recommend Hardrock "boot camp" to runners, pacers and anybody else who wants to show up. Charlie had to be away much of the time because of fires near his home in New Mexico but filling in were Jim Ballard, Kathie Lang, Joe Prusaitis, James Varner, and Steve and Deb Pero. Truly remarkable people - I will forever remember their humor and dedication and kindness to a first timer from Montana.

Being around these folks every day allowed me to feel very humble and almost normal. In Helena, when we mention we run ultramarathons people tend to slink away and hope they don't catch the disease we seem to have. At Hardrock I was the one who stared in disbelief at the astounding exploits I heard about. Mark and Margaret Heaphy from Polebridge, MT have 24 Hardrock finishes between them not to mention all the other 100's they have completed. There are about 75 folks who have completed Hardrock at least 5 times (allowing guaranteed entry each year which included 35-40 who ran in 2011). There were about 50 first time Hardrock folks (like me), so about 90 of the 140 runners had completed Hardrock at least once. Talk everyday was about running ultras and I was a little sheepish to mention that I had only run two 100's. Not only had these folks run many 100's, I also learned of the Brazil 135 mile Ultramarathon that allows a 60 hour time limit. If you are not doing anything in September consider experiencing Italy's *Tor des Geants* (Tour of the Giants) a 200 mi (330 km) event that allows a "very generous" 150 hour time limit!

All of us first time Hardrock folks kept a low profile but I am still astonished how experienced runners went out of their way to include us in activities. Not only were the San Juan Mountains treated with respect but all runners were honored and valued. If runners were not comfortable crossing an icy snow field or turbulent creek, they simply turned back without explanation or discussion. Somehow we all seemed to feel incredibly lucky just to be at Hardrock and enjoying every minute is what mattered. I was part of Silverton's 4th of July celebration which included Hardrock folks marching in the parade. Martin encouraged me to take it all in although by 8 p.m. I was usually in my tent remembering my age.

I learned that Hardrock is a lot about tradition. Many of the folks who started the run in 1992 are still involved. It was casually mentioned that a runner refused to kiss the Hardrock (required) at the finish line and 18 years later he is still not listed as an official finisher. Hardrock is not a race - please - it is an endurance run. Runners usually want to know how many Hardrock finishes you have (and how close to 5 you are) but running Hardrock and not finishing carried no stigma. One runner unabashedly shared that he had 10 DNF's and that he had only missed Hardrock when his father died and when his wife served their divorce papers (I'm shocked).

Leading up to our 2011 run, there was discussion about having to reroute the course leading out of Telluride (mile 72) because a private landowners had refused access. One option (the one that was chosen during the actual run) was to add 2-3 miles making the run about 103 miles. The concern was whether they were going to add time to the 48 hour time limit because there are usually a bunch of folks finishing toward the end of the time allowed at about a 1-2 mile per hour pace (in 2010 17% of the finishers were between 46 and 48 hrs). Experienced Hardrock folks knew the answer - they would never break tradition and add hours to the finishing time - and of course they were right.

One of my objectives during trail marking was to learn as much as I could from other runners about things like race strategy, equipment, and food and water at aid stations. The trouble was, everyone was more than eager to share and I was overloaded with information. My decision was to stay with the plan of action I had left Helena with. So I kept my 100 oz camelback, hiking sticks, microspikes and stayed with my plan for eating and drinking and equipment in my 6 drop bags. The only change of plan I made was to try and go a little faster than my projected 46 hour finishing time to bank hours I felt I would need because of lost time due to extra miles, lightning, rain, hail, high water crossing, mud, ice, and fog.

The weather during the first 2 weeks I was in Silverton was excellent. A little crisp early in the morning but the highs were usually in the low 70's with clear skies allowing several feet of snow to melt in the high country each day. However, as we approached the start of the run thunder clouds were starting to form by late morning and we were often greeted by dramatic thunderstorms. These weather systems stay for extended periods of time and are called the "monsoons" which are more typical later in summer. Extended weather forecasts were suggesting that they had apparently arrived a little earlier this year.

The run was scheduled to begin at 6 a.m. on Friday July 8 and John and Sue Hallsten arrived on Wednesday, and Martin on Thursday. John in his usual wisdom didn't attend the 4+ hour exhausting trail briefing. I learned about lightning and how to reduce the odds of being severely injured. As almost an afterthought, one of the runners who had a close call with lightning in a previous Hardrock was asked to share his experience. He casually mentioned the strike was pretty intense but short-lived and he continued the run. I learned of another runner that was swept downstream at a river crossing and amazingly had his cell phone in a zip lock and proceeded to call the race officials to be rescued. Although I had plenty to worry about, I thought overall I was as ready as I would ever be. Two major objectives were accomplished: 1) being acclimated to high elevations and 2) learning much of the course. I had hiked about 80 miles of the course and driven another 6 miles or so. Martin's arrival was very welcome. He definitely had a great deal of experience with 100 mile runs and his nature is cool and deliberate - attributes that would be crucial to the completion of this run.

So here we go - the 18th running of Hardrock is underway and I catch an immediate break of nice cool weather and cloud cover. I meet our Helena cheerleaders Martin and Sue at Cunningham Aid Station (mile 8.6) and all is well. At each aid station I am a little better than the average arrival times for a 48 hour finish. Clouds are evident and starting to build and luckily I am over Handies Peak (mile 36) before

the lighting but learned later that it was covered with lightning strikes and runners on top lost considerable time waiting out the danger. I arrived at Grouse Gulch Aid Station (mile 41.5) at about 6:40 p.m. in good shape. Martin and Sue were there and John had been through earlier and doing well. In their enthusiastic way they convinced me to wear lots of clothes entering the first night because somehow they knew it was going to be cold with lots of rain. In fact I left Grouse in a major rain storm accompanied by distant thunder.

I had previously been on the 5 mile trip uphill to Engineer Pass and, although it was raining intermittently, I felt fine. At the top of the ~13,000 ft Engineer pass it was really raining and going downhill toward Engineer Aid Station (mile 48) was to be my first Hardrock "moment." Basically I couldn't see very well in the dark and the hill, which only recently was frozen and snow covered, was now very wet, muddy, and slippery. I had my glasses on and it was tricky trying to coordinate head lamps, glasses that wanted to fog up and hats and hoods to reduce the ocean of rain. I was trying to catch up to some runners ahead of me because it was difficult finding the trail markers. My depth perception was compromised and I fell really hard on my back two times and realized the gig was up. If I continued this way I was going to get really hurt and not finish. Somehow I came to my senses and reminded myself that I had banked several hours up to this point and it was now time to use them. So I proceeded very carefully and arrived at Engineer Aid Station and felt compassion for the folks at the station who hiked in all the supplies for many miles and now were huddled under rain flies in a "monsoon."

I catch another break. I am wet to the bone and it was getting cold and I am thankful for the extra clothes. There are several robust creek crossing, and they were getting more robust all the time with all the rain. I kept thinking about the bottom of this drainage, Bear Creek, one of the spots Martin had concerns about. Basically it was several miles of delicate catwalks and cliffs with the trail covered with marble-size pebbles. With all this rain how was I going to negotiate this - the answer: "crawl baby crawl" if necessary - photo opportunity for the grandkids. The good news - it never rained down low so no need to crawl - I was ready though!

Into Ouray Aid Station (mile 56) at 2:45 a.m. and there to greet me are Sue and Martin looking surprisingly fresh and full of humor. I learn that John has some stomach problems but was off towards Governor's Basin. Martin is now accompanying me and is greeted by the longest and steepest climb of the run - up 5,200 ft over 11.2 miles. We're at Virginius Pass at 7:45 a.m. and the snowfields are still icy. The folks at the pass (Kroger's Canteen Aid Station) are yelling to use the rope but since I brought my microspikes I follow the footholds in the trail to the top. Martin (the purist did not bring his microspikes) goes up the ~140 ft rope hand over hand with an iron-will determination. The photo above is of us at the aid station which must be the highest on the planet (~13,000 ft) occupied by folks in goose down from head to toe.

We arrive at Telluride Aid Station (mile 72) at 9:40 a.m. feeling fine and glad to be ahead of schedule because sooner or later we are going to be on a peak during lightning. The added miles were on a road out of Telluride and it was a long hard pull to the top of Oscar's Pass. As soon as we headed downhill toward Chapman Aid Station here comes the thunder. Martin was boogying big time. The road was full of rocks/boulders but lightning is quite an incentive not to dally. We're into Chapman Gulch Aid Station at 2:40 p.m. and Martin learns that John is ok. More rain but onto Grant-Swamp Pass where an incredible amount of snow has melted and we catch a break in the weather with no lightning. Onto KT Aid Station (mile 90) at 7:00 p.m. where we miss the trail and must backtrack to the turnoff to South Mineral Creek which was bank full because of snowmelt and recent rains.

I had ignorantly mentioned that the worst may be over, because I helped mark the remainder of the course and although there was snow, there wasn't much ice. In addition, since night was coming on the course of lightning should be over. We were now in the timber and at about mile 92 when we meet several runners going the wrong way on the course. Basically they were returning to KT Aid Station to quit. We couldn't make any sense of what they were saying but somehow we knew something was really wrong and the potential for another Hardrock "moment" was in the air.

We are out of the timber and gaining elevation to eventually end up at Putman-Cataract Ridge at about 12,600 ft. What had discouraged the runners to quit was intense fog that made following the course nearly impossible. The course was now in the open, in a tundra basin without an established trail and in and out of snow fields. Hardrock trail marking is to say the least -- "modest." It is clearly stated in the Hardrock manual and repeated many times that runners are expected to complete the run without any trail markings. At this point we are going from one Hardrock trail marker to the next and the clock is ticking. Martin was the man and completely took the lead "the difficult we do immediately - the impossible will take a few minutes longer." We meet another runner and pacer and learned we were momentarily going the wrong way (of course we would have figured this out when we got back in the timber). We were fortunate that Martin and I had very good flash lights. When we found a reflective trail marker the other runner stayed with the trail marker until we found the next one. I was conserving energy and kind of punchy and made the occasional cursory search with my flashlight. Martin, on the other hand, was the energizer bunny - repeatedly marching up one huge hill after another looking/searching for markers keeping a clear head and a splash of humor. I was looking at my watch and it was evident to me that at the rate we were finding trail markers, the completion of the run would be following the second coming of Christ.

Since Martin had been to this portion of the course several times he knew that if we could find the top of the ridge we were home free. He knew that the trail followed the top of the ridge and would eventually lead, on a pretty good trail, to Putman Aid Station at mile 96 and then on a well established trail into Silverton. Remarkably we saw another flashlight up a hill. It was one of the Putman Aid Station personnel who had been radioed that runners were turning back and he better get his ass up the hill and help runners in the fog. The aid station guy happily informed us that we were on the Putnam-Cataract Ridge and although he would have stayed with us, Martin said he knew exactly where we were and to go on and help other runners. We actually only lost a few hours in the fog and we had quite a few hours to spare so although we had a Hardrock "moment" we actually were in pretty good shape at this point.

Into the last aid station at just before midnight and then down 4 miles of the worst trail on the planet. Nothing but one boulder field after another. Although we were tempted to use strong language, instead we laughed at how ridiculously difficult this trail was and how we needed to recommend that they come out and grease the boulders to make the trip even more interesting. We crossed Mineral Creek with the use of a rope and repeated shouting of "that's what I'm talking about" from the poor soul who was responsible for coaxing reluctant runners into the river to risk their lives. Every time a runner entered the boiling creek you could hear above the roar of water "that's what I'm talking about!"

We arrived at the finish line at 2:41 a.m. (44 hr 41 min) and who was there to greet Martin and I but our very own Sue Hallsten. I will never forget it - I don't think she slept for days and there she was cheering us on from the beginning to the end. John had come in earlier and she decided to be there when we came in and give us a ride to our tents. Martin ran almost 50 miles in nearly 24 hours. We gave her a big hug and I gave the Hardrock a big kiss.

The awards ceremony later that morning was packed. The first folks to be honored were the runners who didn't finish the run. Incredibly most of the runners that did not finish seemed to be there and stood up with pride to a rousing applause. Next we honored Joel Zucker (the only Hardrock death - due to complications from elevation related sickness). The Joel Zucker Memorial Scholarships now totals over \$31,000 and several of the most recent scholarship winners were in attendance. On top of Grant-Swamp Pass there is a memorial to him and the tradition is for runners to leave a small rock at the memorial - we did. We also received updates on former course director John Capps who has been ill but is doing better. The traditions of Hardrock run deep and people matter. Run director Dale Garland did an excellent job giving each of the 80 finishers their finisher's awards - a copy of a painting of Cataract Gulch by Deb Pero, one of the 2011 runners.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have finished Hardrock and credit Martin more than anything for his help. However, I found it a little hard to understand how 60 experienced 100 mile runners didn't finish. Certainly the added miles, lightning, poor trail conditions and difficult stream crossing had a lot to do with it but I learned in the last few weeks that there was more. I learned that runners assisted other injured runners and lost runners and the extra time cost them a finish. Other runners were on top of peaks and stayed with scared runners until the storms passed. Others found the creek crossings too much and decided to err on the side of safety and not cross, which cost them a finish. The bottom line here is that we were all in the game and if you finish you feel blessed and if you don't you feel blessed as well for the opportunity to have tried. So that's it - Hardrock 2011 - quite an adventure and it is waiting for you in 2012!