

Hardrock Hundred Mile Endurance Run, 2006

By Andrea Feucht

At 5:59 a.m. on July 14th, 130 runners stood in the pre-dawn light of Silverton, Colorado contemplating their fate for (up to) the next 48 hours. Nearly all would encounter appallingly direct sun, chilling rain, biting flies, the light of the moon, and fluffy sheep - and *then* the hallucinations would probably begin. Blisters, skin so water-logged it turns white, stomach and other GI "issues", sunburn, and pure exhaustion - all of it just to look at some high-altitude flowers and kiss a rock.

But after that 48 hours had elapsed and **eighty-one** runners - the highest number ever - had succeeded in not letting the course have its way with them, boy did they ever look happy.

As has become his custom, Karl Meltzer ran away from the field after taunting the other contenders for more than 35 miles, keeping them within sight and keeping their hopes alive. He may have decided that enough was enough after descending from Virginius Pass with the next runner about 20 minutes behind, for after another 6 miles of downhill road into Ouray that lead was stretched to just under an hour. Each and every aid station after that it was just a matter of stacking up small increments to that lead - 10 minutes here, 20 minutes there - until the end came in 27:07:55 with no one even close.

Not that the race for places 2-5 was uninteresting in any way - much drama can be seen just by looking at the splits as the race unfolded. Nate McDowell of Los Alamos tried to stick near Meltzer and kept up a fantastic pace even while losing ground to the leader, but the final story is hinted at in his "in" and "out" times for Grouse Gulch: in at 16:23 elapsed race time, out at 19:52. There are no times reported for the subsequent aid stations.

Also fighting for those top spots were Joseph Shults of Ophir, CO and previous winner Paul Sweeney. Sweeney held on to a very tight gap between himself and Meltzer but lost steam on the long climb out of Ouray, spending an hour each at the 50 mile and 57 mile aid stations. Shults kept a good pace throughout the run, only letting his grip on the lead eke away in small increments and never spending much time in aid stations. This gave him the momentum to finish in 2nd place with 30:29:27 - over 3 hours past the winning time. Sweeney recovered in the later stages of the run but couldn't make up the time lost and finished in 12th place with 34:16.

In the women's race a small "Battle of the Betsys" was taking place between two women who had each won Hardrock previously. Betsy Kalmeyer held a 10 minute lead over Betsy Nye for over half of the course before also steadily pulling away and earning her *fifth* Hardrock victory with a time of 31:53:51, kissing the rock to cheers and applause from the gathered spectators. Nye hadn't been left too far behind and rolled into the finish just under an hour later in 32:52:09.

At this 32 hour mark in the race, much was happening out on the course. Personal battles were being fought, skin was left behind in socks, food was unhappily deposited on the side of the trail, and yet through all of this most runners found it within themselves to just keep plodding. Even when eating, you just keep moving. When taking off your jacket or adjusting your pack, you just keep moving. All of this can add up and make a difference for a runner fighting the cutoffs.

When those little things do not make enough of a difference, you might decide to drop out. Or you can slow down enough that you time out at the next aid station. But when you reach the final, 91 mile aid station called Cunningham at exactly the cutoff and decide to keep going, you are taking a huge risk. Hardrock has very generous cutoff times, which means that when the rest of the back of the pack is taking nearly 5 and a half hours to do the final 9 miles, leaving Cunningham on the cutoff gives you just 4 hours to finish. Matt Mahoney took that risk and might have arrived in Silverton 30 or even 45 minutes past the final end time of 48 hours, but he pushed hard and made the end of his run even more bittersweet - standing in front of the high school at 6:06 a.m. on Sunday only a few minutes too late.

Other stories are there to be told by the runners themselves or just by staring at the splits - rest stops of over an hour in aid stations, segments that all of a sudden are twice as fast as the last one - or twice as slow. Each individual race has so many ups and downs, grins and tears. Just ask, and you're guaranteed to hear an amazing tale.

All through the weekend runners' positions were being frantically monitored by friends and crew in the high school gym as well as online - over 30,000 hits were recorded to the results spreadsheet webpage during the 48 hours of the run. Filtering in and out of the gym with obvious stress and excitement, the dedicated crew kept their promises to their runners - help them survive the course and the weekend.

The finish line aid station - where I was positioned during the final 24 hours of the run - saw periods of intensity, clamor and also lethargy. At one point on Saturday night I counted 7 bodies dozing away in their sleeping bags positioned in corners around the gym and on the bleachers. Some were runners who had given up on the race and were waiting for crew to return and others were pacers catching a nap before heading out into the cold to provide company to their runner.

A fantastic thing happens at Hardrock - each time a runner came down the streets of Silverton towards the gym, someone calls out "runner!" and nearly everyone in the gym gets up, toddles outside, and welcomes the runner back with applause and loud cheering. It doesn't matter if it is 5 p.m. or 4:12 a.m. - the effect is the same and it makes each and every finisher beam with delight as they plant a big kiss on the rock.

Race director Dale Garland is also on hand to see each and every runner in, a feat that is all the more amazing when he is delivering the post-race awards, standing and talking for over an hour after being awake for nearly 2 days straight.

Near the end of the run, as the clock ticked away past 47:30, just two more runners were expected. One was Matt Mahoney, mentioned previously, and the other was one of the most dependable Hardrockers in the run's history - ten time finisher John DeWalt. Just to think about him accomplishing ten finishes in 2005 at the age of 69 boggles the mind, and yet he is out again in 2006, age 70, going for number eleven.

47:45 passes and Dale is getting visibly concerned. Light is permeating the town for the third morning since the race began, and no John in sight. But then, around the corner, his shuffle is spotted and cheers begin from the crowd outside. The final 2 blocks are covered with a grin on his face and a bounce in his step to match the applause and yelling, before finally giving the rock a gentle smooch at 47:49:52 - "Plenty of time", as he put it.