

SAN JUAN SOLSTICE 50 RACE REPORT

JUNE 21, 2008

The San Juan Solstice 50-Mile Run around Lake City, Colorado is touted as the hardest and most beautiful 50-mile run in the country. It lives up to its billing and then some. 2008 marked the third time I have run this ultra (previous runs were in 2005 and 2006) and for me it has been a battle every time. Just ask my feet. This year proved to be especially tough, but despite her best efforts, the San Juans could not keep this Oklahoma boy from conquering her while spending every second being awed and inspired by her breathtaking scenery, frigid waters, expansive landscape, rocky terrain and quad-crushing slopes.

My adventure started on Wednesday before the race. I left Oklahoma City in the afternoon and planned on stopping when I got tired. That happened to be in Walsenburg, Colorado at the Knights Inn. I saw no reason to push it any further. After a good night's rest and surviving being locked out of my room in nothing but a pair of shorts I was on my way to Lake City. I was greeted in Lake City by my 13-year-old daughter Abby, my parents and my nephews. My folks live in a cabin on the north side of town part of the year. They also have a fifth-wheel and that became my private home-away-from-home for my time there. When I walked into the fifth-wheel I found balloons, streamers and signs claiming my superiority to the common man. One sign even claimed me to be "cooler than a ninja". What a fan club I had.

I spent the rest of the day Thursday and all day Friday resting and preparing for what I knew would be a tough Saturday. I talked to my gorgeous wife Angie several times. She could not make the trip because someone had to stay home and actually work. I also missed my two other daughters; 16-year-old Elizabeth, who was and still is at the time of this writing attending the Oklahoma Arts Institute at Quartz Mountain studying Creative Writing, and Kate who is currently at Dwight Mission Church Camp having a blast. I am also blessed to have incredible friends, and received well-appreciated words of encouragement from the infamous Pirana Brothers. You can learn more about the Piranas at www.piranabros.com.

You can do a race like this without a crew, but I was fortunate enough to be crewed by my Dad and Abby. This was the third time for both crewing for me at this race and they were like a well-oiled machine. My Dad is an old runner and understands the needs of runners; even though all he did was run in circles and jump obstacles on the track in high school and at Oklahoma State University. I appreciate my Dad more than I could express. My kid is not too bad either. She gets it from her mother.

Friday evening Abby, Dad and I attended the pre-race dinner and meeting. This meal is catered by a local chef, I believe his name is Bruno, and it is a wonderful meal. This may be the real reason I keep coming back. I learned about the race particulars, including the depth of the water crossings up Alpine Gulch, and prayed the skin on my feet would make it through this race. If so, it would be the first time. I greeted a few familiar

runners, the RD, and dropped my bag in the “Carson” pile. This race allows three bag drops, but I only took advantage of the Carson Aid Station to do so because my crew would be waiting for me at Williams Creek (mile 15.7) and Slumgullion (mile 40). It was then time to go home and to bed.

I awoke at 3:00 a.m. for a 5:00 a.m. start after another great night’s sleep. I was taking it easy getting ready when all of a sudden the CO monitor went off after it decided it did not like the aerosol sunscreen I applied. I feel bad about increasing the size of my Carbon footprint. Next time I will apply lotion. Anyway, I finished preparing for my day in the mountains, proudly sporting my Team Pirana colors, orange and black of course, and somehow talked my Dad into giving me a ride downtown. I figured I would be on my feet enough today. My Dad slowed down to about 40 mph so I could get out and I was ready to run. My pre-race fun continued with a broken zip tie holding my race number on and a couple of trips to fertilize the downtown Lake City landscaping. The temperature was a perfect 38 degrees Fahrenheit. Great running weather. It never got over 80 or so all day. The starting elevation was 8,600 feet.

5:00 a.m. came quickly, and before I knew it we were underway. In fact, I was still standing on the sidewalk messing with my camera when everyone started running down the street. Let me say a little about this camera. My great friend and fellow Pirana Brother t3 and I were driving along the road a couple of weeks ago. I showed him an advertisement in “Outside” magazine for an Olympus Stylus 1030 SW digital camera. This thing is awesome. It is waterproof, shockproof, freeze proof and has been known to deter the overthrow of small countries. Well, t3 took one look at the magazine, picked up his cell, and had his assistant find one. The Piranas, who are known to be hard on equipment, needed it, and if a Pirana needs it, well, enough said. It was absolutely perfect for this race. Even I could operate it and not tear it up. In fact, I was like a tourist, snapping photos every chance I got.

By now you are probably saying “*#@&” would you just tell us about the race.

The race heads one block south to a stop sign, hangs a right, then a left and you are on Henson Creek Road surrounded by canyon walls and running alongside Henson Creek. Before I reached that stop sign I just knew that Matt Carpenter’s 7:59:44 was in jeopardy. After the stop sign I knew I was in jeopardy. Oh what a foreshadowing for the day! The race starts in the dark, but only the first-timers at the SJS50 have lights. Rookies! The road is well lit by the moon and by the time you reach the Alpine Gulch trailhead at 2.5 miles, it is light enough to see. The runners veered off the road and onto the trail. After about _ mile the fun really begins.

This part of the world received records amount of the white stuff this past year, and as you could guess, the creeks were up. In fact, the race staff informed us at the pre-race meeting that there would be ropes at the crossings, and to definitely use it one at a time. This made the crossings a little slow because you had to wait in line to cross. It was a good time to visit with your fellow runners and talk about shrinkage. After about two crossings I was numb from my thighs down. Crossing those creeks was an absolute blast. I even scored some great photos. There were seven deep crossings with ropes and countless other “water obstacles” on the way up Alpine Gulch. I was passed by a few

runners and passed a few on the way up. My “climbing gear” seemed to work pretty well all day. You climb through trees, grassy areas and snowfields on your way up to the Alpine Gulch Aid Station at the seven mile mark to over 11,000 feet. This is a minimally supplied aid station because everything has to be packed up the same trail we ran in on. The guys there, as they were at all aid stations, were absolutely great. While they were filling my two water bottles with HEED, my drink of choice during the race, I emptied my shoes of gravel, took some photos and was thinking how nice it would be to have them cook me up a campfire breakfast burrito.

I left the Alpine Gulch Aid Station and was greeted with another 2,000 plus feet of climbing to well above tree line. The view was incredible and energized me. I ran well and even screamed down hills on this section of the course. I met a runner named Jay who lived in Colorado Springs but was raised in Oklahoma. His wife was from Purcell. I heard there was one “dateable” girl from Purcell. I guess she left before Weeble (fellow Pirana) could corrupt her, or she was smart enough to stay away from him.

The way down to Williams Creek, which dropped about 4,000 feet, was also met with snowfields, water, rock slide areas and incredible scenery. I felt better on this section than on any other section of the course. (I did keep having recurring thoughts of how I fell along this trail in 2006, broke my hand, and had to carry ice for the next 35 miles.) I made it down the trail in one piece and into the Williams Creek Campground at 15.7 miles where I found my crew, and was cheered for by everyone there; most of which were related to me and under 14 years old or over 62. Actually, the spectators and volunteers at all the aid stations were incredible and very supportive. I was thrilled to be there. My crew took care of me. Abby even rubbed my aching quads with “The Stick”. I felt like a king, a tired king, but a king none the less. I put on dry shoes and socks for the last time and noticed a little hot spot on my right heel, but I was not too worried about it. Maybe I should have been.

Before I go any further let me say that keeping photos of my girls in my pocket and talking to them throughout the day kept me going. I would also be in a tough section and call out to my friends for help. I remember one occasion asking Big to give me his massive legs for a little while so I could rest mine. It worked for a while. As all ultrarunners know, the mind tends to go to some strange places when you are out there redlining it all day. But, for me it really helps to concentrate on those that matter most in life to me to help push away the pain.

I left Williams Creek Campground on a tear with my Mother trying to take my photo. What is it about grandmothers and cameras? The road out of WCC is a county dirt road that feeds in one direction to Lake City and in another direction to wilderness and some incredible homes and camping areas. The race followed the latter. I moved up this road feeling pretty good. I stayed with a pack of runners the entire way up the county road. After about 2.5 miles we turned and headed up, and I mean up (about 2,000 feet in 3.5 miles), Wager Gulch jeep road which is basically a series of switchbacks. This “road” is strictly an ORV road. A couple of motorcycles even passed us on the way to the Carson Mining Ghost Camp. I went up most of the way with a girl named Journey. I remember thinking what a cool name. I bet her parents were hippies. There was only one unavoidable water crossing on this section of the course; by far the fewest on any section.

At the aid station one is rewarded with an incredible view, a cool old mining camp and well-needed refreshments. My drop bag was waiting for me.

I must add that the Carson Aid Station had some real cuties and it was easy just to watch them work. While my bottles, three bottles this time, were being filled I took this opportunity to examine my feet. I found a huge blister on the end of my right big toe. I never get blisters there, and how could you when all I did was climb for the last couple of hours? Anyway, I lanced the blister, drained the liquid from it and wrapped it in moleskin and duct tape. I also duct taped my right heel that was still feeling as if it might be having issues. I only had 29 miles to go. What could happen? I grabbed a handful of pretzels, thanked the mountain hotties and headed up toward Carson peak and the Divide Aid Station 9 miles away. As I headed by the old Carson Mine I could not help but wonder if I could claim this trip on my taxes since I was going by a mine site. I made a mental note to myself to ask Goose, the Pirana Brothers' number cruncher.

After leaving the Carson Aid Station, runners are on a road, if you want to call it that. This particular piece of engineering wisdom is steep, rocky, was covered in snow fields and felt as though it would never end. After what seemed like my entire 40s I finally reached the top of Carson peak and the Continental Divide Trail. This is where the course tops out at 13,334 feet. No matter how one is feeling at this point it is hard not to appreciate God's big world when you are standing on top of it.

This section of the course is absolutely beautiful. The visual effects make it hard for one to not stop and stare. The terrain is a rolling section across peaks above tree line. There are steep ascents and descents, fist-sized tufts of soil and grass, various sizes of rock fields, endless amounts of runoff, some stiff wind and slushy snow fields. It was during this part of the course that my quads and I had a few disagreements. It also turned out to be the section that kicked my butt the most. I passed a few other runners on this course, but the majority of what I saw in terms of human forms was backsides getting smaller and smaller. However, I never missed an opportunity to encourage someone else or offer my knowledge of the course and advice. In retrospect, why would anyone listen to someone they passed like a freight train on uppers who looked as obviously pitiful as I did? I did meet some great people on the mountaintop. I do not remember all of their names, but I was having trouble remembering my own by then. Just before the Divide Aid Station runners drop out of the sky and into a marshy meadow of sorts. Soon after, we entered an incredible pine forest. I had to navigate fallen trees and step over logs on my way down. I met up with a guy from San Francisco, and we talked as we ran. No matter how bad you are hurting, it is nice to know someone else is also hurting. It seems to dull the pain for all involved. We exited into a clearing and went up a little to the Divide Aid Station. I needed this place. I arrived there about 3:15 p.m. It had taken me well over three hours to get there from Carson.

The Divide Aid Station is the remotest place on the course. You have just come nine miles from Carson and have nine miles to go to Slumgullion. There are no drop bags and no crew at the Divide. All supplies are brought up on ATVs. You are strongly encouraged not to drop here if you believe in any way that you can make it to Slum. I never contemplated dropping, it is just that at this point I was in that "pushing cutoffs" mode and was not sure if I would see Slumgullion before the dreaded 6 p.m. cutoff. I had

about 2 _ hours to make it. In fact, my crew had been there since about 2:30 p.m. For this reason, I sent word to Slum via the great volunteers at the Divide that I was dragging and making Slum would be close. I was not going to quit. The guys at the aid station filled my three water bottles and I was on my way.

For the first couple of miles I was all alone. And then I saw an angel. Her name was Brenda. She and I were both hurting and desperately wanting to make it to Slum before 6 p.m. We pushed and encouraged each other for several miles. My quads were thrashed, but there is something about a pretty girl that will motivate a guy to press on. Not unlike Big who always manages to find the girls on the course and run with them. Most of the time he just manages to slow them down. I think he would be a lot faster if he would stay away from the fairer sex. We should change his name to Don Juan. Sorry for digressing. Well, Brenda and I ran together until we got to the descent down towards Slum. She left and I did not see her again until Lake City. As I have previously mentioned, my downhill skills lack. The majority of the road/goat trail down into Slumgullion is steep with rocks of all shapes and sizes there just waiting to snatch you up. It was somewhere along this section that my big right toe kissed one of those rocks. I am not talking about a peck on the cheek. I mean a passionate kiss with every part of your mouth like you get from your wife after you have just bought her an expensive gift, and it is not even her birthday or anniversary!

I traveled down to Slumgullion as fast as I could and avoided any more major mishaps. As I came within 500 yards of the aid station I found two of my nephews, Shawnee (10) and Brendan (7) on the course. They led the way for me as I “rocked” into Slumgullion Aid Station. I made it with about 10 minutes to spare. I did not get a photo here, but my mother did manage to accidentally get a shaky two-second video of me hobbling into camp. I had planned on changing shoes/socks here and doing a little foot repair if needed. Time did not allow time for a pedicure. In fact, I did not even sit down for fear of seizing up. My crew flawlessly met my needs and I was on my way towards Vickers and the Finish Line.

About one mile past Slumgullion as I was heading into the Vickers Ranch section with a days worth of shaken HEED, Black Cherry Cliff Shots, bananas and pretzels on my stomach, Mother Nature made a call on speed dial and I answered it as soon as I found some semblance of cover. I know you wanted to hear that, but I got a great photo of my lonely pack by the trail as I communed with the elements. Thank goodness I stuck a little TP in a Ziploc.

I found new life and was on the trail again. The course designers are cruel individuals. They run you through some rugged country all day and then after 41 miles decided to make you climb 2,000 feet in about three miles. The climb up Vickers is gorgeous and it will test your mettle. I kept pushing on. I passed a couple of people going up, but really did not see anyone until right before the aid station. I had met Geoff Scott from North Carolina a couple of nights earlier and had a nice visit. He is getting ready for The Hardrock 100 and has completed Western States six times. Earlier in the day Geoff had also kissed the trail, but with his face. He looked like heck, but what a cool story he has to tell. His wife was pacing him the last 10 miles and they were cruising. We ran into the aid station together, the great volunteers topped off my bottles and we were on our

way. Geoff's wife invited me to run with them, but that only lasted a few blocks until we started heading downhill.

The run from Vickers Aid is a little less than four miles, but you drop about 2000 feet in three miles before you get to town. Yeah, my quads really loved this, but I pushed on.

Every run for me has that moment that you would call your "high point"; no matter how low you are feeling. It is that part of every race that your mind goes back to when you remember that day. Well, my "moment" was 2.5 miles from the finish when I looked down the trail ahead of me and spotted my 12-year-old nephew Rain. Rain was bounding up the steep slope like a mountain goat on steroids. The plan was for Rain to meet me at the bottom of Waterdog Trail and run into town with me. He decided not to wait at the bottom and met me on the trail. I was so glad he did. He energized me, pushed me and kept my spirits up. As we ran I told Rain his job was to talk to me, tell me about himself, and be encouraging. I did not feel like talking, and he did his job perfectly. Waterdog is a rocky, steep series of switchbacks. I did not enjoy it at all. I was struggling for each step and Rain was running, talking and answering the cell phone, all while running on the side of the trail, which is even rougher. Did I mention he was wearing road running shoes? That young man can run. I was proud to have him as my pacer. Thanks Rain. You're the Man! If Rain were a Pirana his name would be Waterdog.

A couple of runners passed us coming down, but once we got into town we were on fire. Rain could have easily left me but he did not. As we approached the finish area we handed off my camera to Shawnee and headed for our moment of glory. The whole family and tons of spectators were there cheering us on. I did not know whether to yell, laugh, curse, or cry. I think I did all the above. Some finishes are anti-climatic. Not this one. It was a great moment, not so much because of the brutality of the race and the way my body felt, or finishing in 15:54:27 just barely beating the cutoff, but because I got to share it with a great guy named Rain and a supportive family. I just wish Angie, Elizabeth, Kate and the Brothers could have been there.

As a side note, I thought I had made the cutoff with less than six minutes to spare, when in fact the race staff had extended the cutoff to 16:15:00 to account for the slow water crossings earlier in the day. I would have pushed anyway. I am just glad it was the Summer Solstice, the longest day of the year. I needed every second of it. Prior to the race I felt better than I did before the previous two times I did this race, but as we all know, some days you feel like you could fly and some days the run kicks you in the groin.

Now for a medical update. My quads took a hit, however, after a few days my legs feel great. I am a believer in post-race recovery drinks and ice baths. In my case Recoverite did the trick. In regards to my feet, I am relieved to report that I did not receive the "Ugly Feet" Award at the post-race festivities for the third time. I did lose my right heel cap, have a busted right big toe and a black big toenail on my left foot. Other than that I am OK. I am determined to complete this race next time with no feet problems. I thought I had it licked this time with different shoes and double-layer socks, but I was dealing with a lot of water and steep slopes. My plan for the future is to maybe tape my feet and invest in some gaiters. I am open to suggestions. I will persevere!

The post-race festivities the next morning were great as usual. The food provided by the local bakery was great and the awards were cool. I now have three green hats and deserved every one. The cool thing about the SJS50 awards presentation is that every finisher is recognized, even those that finished after the cutoff. They did run 50 miles after all, they just do not get a hat. After they give the overall awards, they start with the last finishers and work their way back. Needless to say, you could have held your breath until I received mine. But who cares, this race is about finishing and enjoying the day. Even when I was hurting I could not think of any place I would rather be.

For those who like numbers, the overall race winners were Nate McDowell who finished in 9:19:26, and Anita Ortiz, who finished in 9:53:42. There were 164 starters and 130 finishers under 16:15:00.

I had trouble sleeping that night due to some chest congestion, which I always get after a race, it is just amplified at altitude. However, the next day we went over to my sister Sarah's house for lunch, where I had salmon. Sarah and her husband Rich live north of Lake City with their three boys Rain, Shawnee and Morgan. After lunch I tried to watch television but soon crashed for a few hours on the couch.

Abby and I took our time getting around the next day and headed toward OKC after lunch. Thanks again to my wonderful parents for their hospitality and a relaxing time. I know I can be a bit hard to deal with, especially around a race, and I appreciate their not pushing me off any mountains or hooking an exhaust pipe up to the RV while I slept. Abby and I made a stop in Creede, Colorado on the way home and saw an old mine (another tax write-off?) and fed a few chipmunks. We had a great drive back and even stopped in Clinton, Oklahoma at the Route 66 Museum. I am already excited about running the MotherRoad 100 (motherroad100.com) again in November. We got home Tuesday afternoon, and after unpacking I immediately went and got a shave and a haircut and then took Angie and Abby out for sushi/salmon. This Pirana loves salmon.

The San Juan Solstice 50-Mile Run was a great race. I will be back several times. You can't beat doing something you love with the people you love. You don't have to be fast to run this race, you just have to keep pushing. It does not matter if you win or lose, finishing is a victory, and Rain was a welcome site. Thanks again buddy.

Maverick

Great is the road I climb, but the garland offered by an easier effort is not worthy the gathering.