

Testing One's Mettle

It's not every day that one is fortunate enough to test him or herself against the mightiest of foes, that is, themselves. Saturday was one of those days for me; I trained diligently and planned accordingly to put myself in a position where my mettle would be measured. This past weekend, my personal trial-by-fire began at mile 29 with 22.4 miles to go in a 51.4 mile ultra-marathon.

As a backdrop, in February I was accepted to compete in "the world's toughest footrace," the Badwater 135 (BW). BW is a 135 mile non-stop running event that is raced in Death Valley, California during the scorching heat of summer. If a contestant is able to complete the race in 48 hours they earn the BW belt buckle and the personal satisfaction of accomplishing a superhuman feat. Preparing for any 135-mile foot race is demanding and requires a significant amount of training, discipline and determination. Much more training and planning is necessary for Badwater. BW is a playground of sorts for the best ultra-runners on the planet. BW is what I call the U.S. Open of ultra-running. It boasts not only the most elite ultra-runners from around the globe, but also includes weekend warriors like myself who have met the rigorous qualifying standards as well. All of the great ultra-runners in history aspire to win BW. There are roughly 100 athletes accepted into BW each year, all experienced and vetted in the sport of ultra-running. I find it a privilege to be part of it all.



Now, let me get back to Saturday's race where my personal test was set to happen. To further my training for the upcoming BW, last Friday I took the day off work and flew to Wilmington, NC to participate in the Cape Fear 51.4 miler. This race is run on trail, sand, surf and road. The race is put on by renowned endurance athlete and

acclaimed race director, Chris Kostman. Kostman is a visionary in the endurance community. He has created some of the best, most challenging and scenic endurance events around.

Fast forwarding to mile 29, I was running south along the surf at Bald Head Island, 4 hours and 47 minutes into the 51.4 mile race. My coach (Hall of Famer Lisa Batchen) provided me with a specific race plan, which entailed running for 10 to 15 minute intervals and then walking 1 minute for recovery. The plan was to follow this routine the first 25 miles. From mile 26 to mile 41, I was to only walk if, and when, my body deemed it absolutely necessary. At mile 41, with 10 miles to go, Lisa, who isn't one for taking things lightly, instructed me to push as hard as I could until the finish line. Since mile 29 I'd been running for 40 minutes without walking. I was feeling very tired and questioning myself on how much longer I could hold out. At that moment I told myself I was going to keep running and try to make it to the next aid station. I made it!

After some food, drink and refilling my water bottle, I immediately was back running. I was resolute about my commitment, clipping off the miles one by one. I deliberately avoided looking at my watch; I didn't want to know exactly how many miles I had left to go. In order to stay in the race mentally, I began breaking down the miles in shorter segments. I would see a flag, or a car, or people off in the distance and I would run to that spot. It didn't matter whether they were a 100 meters away or a mile; I would pick a spot and run to it. What I wasn't doing was walking; I was running without any breaks. I arrived at the Fort Fisher Aid Station at 7:04 p.m. with about 10 miles to go.

Somehow, I had just run 15 miles without walking. I kept telling myself, if you have to walk, walk; if you don't, don't. The next 3 miles I passed two runners that I'd been going back and forth with for the past 20 miles. It's hard to imagine that the three of us were not running as a group; we continued to pass one another. This kind of jockeying is undesirable for me. With 7 miles to go a rogue wave drenched my feet. My Sketcher Ultra-2s were soaked; I couldn't believe it! My feet were already feeling blistered and tender and now the moisture was sure to make things worse. This development had me grimacing about my feet. I was now thinking about each and every step I took and asking myself... Are my feet hurting badly? How difficult is it to step? Is the pain manageable? Should I walk? No way! Walking wasn't going to help anything and in reality was going to prologue my being out there gutting it out.

On March 19th the moon was full; a full moon heightens the force of the tide sending waves crashing against the shore. I was getting fed up; I had just passed the final hydration station with 6 miles to go. At my current pace it was going to take me just over an hour. The pain was catching up to me. I wanted to walk. I wanted to stop. I wanted this race to be over, but I had 6 miles remaining. I became defiant and decided to no longer avoid the surf. If the waves were going to slam against me, I was going to run straight through them. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line and that's what I decided to do. My determination was at peak state. I locked in and pressed forward. I ran the last 5 miles at just over a 10 minute pace. With 3 miles to go, I passed two runners that were ahead of me. It was of no consequence to me if I passed anyone. I just wasn't going to stop running until I arrived at the finish. As I came around the final bend, I could hear bystanders cheering me on. I had goose bumps as I crossed the finish line. Race director, Chris Kostman, congratulated me on running a good race. I was relieved to be done. I couldn't believe that I'd just completed those 26 miles without walking. I didn't think it was possible for me. It's like that old saying, "Anything is possible if you put your mind to it."



P.S. Train like there's no tomorrow.