

Race Odyssey 2010: Leadville Trail 100 Miles

I arrive at Sacramento Airport, (Thursday, Aug 19th) two hours before my 9:35 morning flight to Denver. My wife, Jennifer and daughter Mackenzie drop me off with many hugs and kisses. Mack is not happy I will be gone for five days and she gives me Bean (a miniature stuffed green bean) to keep me company on the trip and during the 100 mile run.

I'm drinking my usual double tall mocha from the airport Starbucks waiting at terminal 14 and thinking about what lay ahead of me and a short conversation I had with Dean Karnazes during last May's Bay To Breakers run. I told Dean I would be running Leadville in August and he looked at me and said, "You mean Dreadville?" And my email to Lee McKinley when he said, "Have fun at altitude." What did I get myself into!?

I see Bill Finkbeiner walking towards me and all my worries disappear, well sort of. We planned to fly and rent a car together for the trip. I was excited to share this experience with Bill as he is an all around great guy and 26 (now 27) time finisher of the Leadville 100. He is known as The Leadville Legend in the ultra community.

As Bill and I discuss the race Don Zae approaches us and is also running Leadville. Don is going for the Grand Slam!

Bill opted to sit in the front of the plane and I make my way to the back. I see Don with two empty seats and ask the flight attendant to page The Leadville Legend to sit with us. Bill joins us with a slight red face. Bill enjoys telling running stories but not necessarily about himself so I did it for him over the next 5 days. Self titled, The Leadville Legend and his side kick Rick.

We arrive in Denver and part with Don. Bill and I make the two hour drive to Leadville and make it in time for our race bib/goodie bag and carbo dinner get together with all the runners at the 6th St Gym. Bill introduces me to Race Director Ken Chlouber and other historical race figures in Leadville. Ken told me if he did not see me at the finish line in 30 hours he would send out a posse to kick my butt.

After dinner I take Bill to the hostel and I head to the Super 8. I did not get much sleep that night and I think it was due to lack of oxygen at 10,200 feet and the text from Bill saying it was snowing in the mountains.....

Friday morning I head over to the gym for a medical check and weigh in. I hit the scale at 135 which seems about 3 pounds low. Bill checks in and so does Karen Thernka. Bill and I hit the Safeway and pick up supplies like Ensure for high calories during the run.

That afternoon the runners get a pep talk from Ken (You are better than you think you are and you can do more than you think you can!) and the course doctor (who was going for the Leadman Award (and got it!) I bring my drop bags to the gym and head back to the motel.

Friday night my pacers come in but not without a practical joke. Michell calls me (on the road to Leadville) with bad news. My pacer, (Brian Miller for miles 50-76.5) had one too many drinks (it was his birthday) and was taking altitude medication could no longer function and did not think he could help with pacing. They both arrive at the motel with smiles on their face and relief on mine....

We meet Julie Hughes, Ed Beci and family for a carbo dinner at Karen Thernka's cabin. Julie and Ed are Karen's pacers. Karen had her whole family at the cabin including husband\coach Kjell Framnes and daughter Olivia. Karen's aunt and uncle made an awesome dinner garlic bread, pasta and a salad.

Saturday, race day. I wake at 2am and prepare. Running shoes, shorts, tank top, hydration belt, hat and flash light. Eat a bowl of Raisin Bran and a banana. Brian drives me to the start and we meet up with Michell. Both Brian and Michell are like a brother and sister to me. I'd do anything for them and they would do anything for me. I check in and meet Bill 5 minutes before the gun goes off. A few pictures taken at the start (Bean attached to my race belt) and the blast of the shotgun starts the race at 4am. We are off on an adventure second to none. I've got 30 hours to make it back to the start and cover 100 miles in the process.....

Bill and I take off just ahead of mid pack. A few miles in we come upon families lining the street in front of homes blasting the Boss' "Born to Run." That got the blood moving. We empty out of a dirt road at mile 5 and start running along Turquoise Lake. The trail is narrow with roots and some rocks. In the dark the narrow trail looks like a snake of bobbing head lamps ahead and behind us. At the boat ramp (mile 7) I hear Kjell yelling for Karen. I turn to my right and yell as I am passing him but he is focused on helping Karen with something. I try staying with Bill but a few runners are set on moving up and split Bill and I. I don't see Bill again until mile 52.

I'm thinking I am moving too fast and look down at my watch. I am approaching the May Queen aid station (stay 5 minutes) at mile 13.5 and see I am at 2:17 (6:17am that's one hour ahead of cutoff) into the run. Perfect as my goal was between 2:10 and 2:20. I eat a tortilla turkey wrap and cantaloupe and top off my bottles. I take one salt pill and head out. The altitude has not impacted me yet other than thinking I was going too fast but Altitude keeps you from hammering.

I leave May Queen and now have a 10 mile run to the Fish Hatchery. I have one major (1,100 foot) climb at Sugar Loaf and then a down hill to the aid station. I start out along a narrow trail that is again rooty and rocky. Not able to really gain any time here and realize once out of it I would be power walking up to 11,200 feet. I power walk with authority and see Turquoise Lake below as the sun is coming up. It was beautiful. At 10,800 feet my fingers and toes start to tingle and my eyes are seeing flashes of light. I slow it down some and realize the altitude is starting to play ticks on my body.... I take 125mg of acetazolamide and press on.

I get to the top at mile 18 and I am along power lines. I start my down hill and come upon a man from Australia wearing a Tutu. He is in good spirits and keeps me entertained on the run to the Fish Hatchery. I make up some time here and continue to drink but the road is very rutty and I have to negotiate some steps. I make it into the Fish Hatchery (23.5 miles 8:30am) in 4:30. I am

an hour and thirty minutes ahead of cutoff. I take 8 minutes here and get my drop bag. I take in an 8 oz chocolate ensure for the 350 calories, eat some fruit and drop some fig newtons into my pouch. I eat a salt tab, top off my bottles and lose my flash light, gloves and long sleeve shirt.

As I head out I realize I need to take a potty break and hit the blue room. When I exit I run right into Kjell who says Karen is coming in now. Karen looks great and jumps in the same blue room I was in. I wish her luck and head out along a 3 mile paved road that leads me to the next aid station, Half Moon (7 miles). This part of the run is slightly up hill, just enough to feel the lungs burning but not enough to drop you into a walk.

At this point I am 25 miles into the run and everyone around me is shuffling at an easy pace or speed walking. I opt to do both. I would run a mile then power walk a quarter mile. I continue with this for the next 4 miles until I get to Tree Line (wide dirt road). Tree line is a makeshift aid station for families and friends of the runners. Since I had no one there I went into a walk to see how this small city of aid and people worked together. Folks were patting me on the back telling me I looked good and I would say, "yes but looks are deceiving." I move past Tree Line and headed for Half Moon a couple miles away.

I hit Half Moon (mile 30.5) in 6:30 (10:30am that's an hour and thirty minutes ahead of cutoff). I feel good but tired. This is where things start to get interesting. I take another ensure and some fruit. I top off my bottles and hit the blue room again. I stay around 5-8 minutes. Leaving the aid station I start off by walking as I start a series of 5 short climbs that lead to Twin Lakes 9 miles away. The first climb is 600 feet and I start to feel really tired. I think it is just because the sun is warm and beating on my back and the lack of quality sleep the past two nights. I get to the top of the first climb and think I sure could use a little nap. I try to run to the next climb a half mile away and cover a quarter mile but again I go into a walk. A sleep walk!! I can't keep my eyes open this goes on from miles 33 into the next aid station and up Hope Pass until mile 44 (I'll tell you what I did to get out of the funk later.)

Being tired and doing the up and down climbs really put me in a growing depression. At one point I was thinking of ways to bag the run but how could I do this to Brian and Michell?

On the last climb and down hill I see Twin Lakes out the corner of my left eye. It makes me feel good and the lakes are beautiful. Then, from behind I see Ray Sanchez flying past me mumbling something about making a 3 mile mistake back there.....

At mile 39.5, I stumble tiredly into Twin Lakes in 8:30 (12:30pm. Two hours ahead of cutoff). There were so many people there. I tried masking how tired I was. Got my drop bag and sat down. Drink an Ensure and eat some fruit again....Take salt and a GU. I asked someone at the aid station what I could do to wake up and he said the altitude is making me tired and there is not much that can be done about it and to just keep moving. I put my drop bag back and start to head out when I see Karen Thernka moving past me. Her whole family is there and I see Kjell coaching her to stay focused. I sit next to Karen and say "Hi." She looks shocked to see me. I ask her if I could run with her. I needed a friend to make it over the pass and as tired as I was I did not think I could make it on my own.

Karen stays at the aid station for a few minutes so I decide to walk out and into the meadow towards the river crossing. Karen catches up to me and we walk, jog the meadow and go through a series of calf and knee deep streams. Then comes the river crossing where we need to hang onto a rope to cross. The water is very cold but feels great on the knees and ankles. The water is not deep but moving and the floor is not slippery so we make it across fine. We run to the trail head and have covered close to a mile and a half.

We start the 3,400 foot climb up Hope Pass (12,600) and I am complaining to Karen how sleepy I am and that I want to take a short nap under a tree. She says no and we keep moving. I think the walk would have been awesome had I been fresh but I was 41 miles in now and all I could think of was how in the world am I going to make it up this mountain.

We continue up, up, up and then we see the lead runner flying down the hill. It is Anton Krupicka and his pacer. I tell him he is looking good and he smiles at Karen and I. We continue to zigzag up the trail and see a few more runners coming down but Anton has a good 20 minute lead on the second place guy.

We finally make it above tree line and see the aid station called Hopeless Pass. There are more people (runners and volunteers) there than I had expected. Karen and I see Lamas all over the place and they look at home at 11,800. I grab some soup, top off my bottles and take a GU. I am concerned about how sleepy I have been and decide to take one 500mg Excedrin to give my body a jolt of caffeine. I sit for only a minute while Karen is taking a blue room break. She sits for a few minutes to rest her legs and then we are off to climb the last 800 feet to the top.

The Excedrin kicked in fast and as I start the climb I get a surge of energy that sends me up the climb at a very fast power walk and I pass 10 runners to the top. I look back and Karen is a 100 yards back, looking good and making her way up. I know she is faster than me on the down hill so I do a full 360 to take in the view at 12,600 and take in the awesome cool wind and head down the mountain to Winfield 5 miles away.

I start running down the trail and it is loose rock with sharp turns that can lead off a cliff if you are not careful so I take it slow on the turns. Once I get into the trees things start to slow down and more runners are making their way back up Hope. I get in behind the Leadville Doctor who is trying for the Leadman and we talk some. Then I see Bare Foot Ted McDonald coming up the trail with Chris McDougall (Born to Run writer) pacing him. Ted has on his toe shoes. Looks cool. Ted will finish in 27:17. I tell him he looks good and he grunts back (remember thin air!)

I hit the road and make my way up the 2 mile stretch to Winfield. The dirt road is awful as crews are driving by and kicking up dirt and dust to the point it is hard to breath. I use my Buff to filter the air. This section takes forever as I walk/jog to the aid station. I see Bill F with a pacer about a mile out of Winfield and he says to keep moving. I get to the 50 mile mark and Winfield in 12:30 (4:30pm, an hour and a half ahead of cutoff) and stay for 15 minutes.

When I make the turn to the aid station I first see Julie Hughes and then Michell Duncan and my first pacer Brian Miller. I am tired and nearly out of my mind. I get weighed and only lost a pound. Michell brings me fruit to eat and I do my best to take it in. I also try to drink the Ensure

and I can't remember if sipped some, drank all or tossed it. The altitude had wrecked my mind. My bottles are topped off and Brian and I head out.

Brian is calm and cool. He assesses what I need and we walk out of the aid station. Brian knows when to run me and walk me (He did so much for me. He and Michell saved my run). We do so from Winfield to the trail head. On the way I see Don Zae, I said you look good Don and he said he didn't know about that.

Know we have a 2,400 climb over a very short distance and in my mind I can see me stopping every 50 or so feet to rest. I don't say anything to Brian and I put my life in his hands. He leads me up the climb and we start to pass runners. I tell Brian I am content taking it easy up the climb and that I could settle in behind some slower runners and walk it. We walked it alright and never stopped. Brian took me up the mountain with authority passing nearly 36 runners and not getting passed once. We hit the top at 12,600 feet and never stop. I take the lead down the hill and we continue to run to the Hopeless station. We stay only long enough to take in some soup and fill the bottles then off we run again non stop with Brian leading all the way down the mountain to the meadow. We make up so much time and cross the river and stream. The whole 10.5 mile crossing to Twin Lakes we must have passed nearly 50 runners and was passed by only 2.

We get into Twin Lakes (mile 60.5) at 8:10pm (an hour and thirty-five minutes ahead of cutoff and 16:10 in to the run) and Michell is there not believing we could be there so fast. She gets my drop bag and I change my socks and shoes. I loose the fanny pack and Brian carries two bottles for me. I eat fruit again and some soup. I take one more Excedrin and we put on our head lamps and we compete on who has the brightest light. I'm showing signs of waking up as the sun is going down.

I tell Michell we would make it into the Fish Hatchery around 1am and head out to Half Moon 9 miles away. This is the section where you climb 1,000 feet and then go into a series 5 drops and climbs into Half Moon. It is dark now and we power walk the climb and pass a few runners again. We continue to walk the hills and run the downs most of the way to Half Moon. I am complaining how long this section feels and Brian assures me we are doing great and making up time. The Moon to the east is beautiful and takes my mind off of the unknown.

We finally make it into Half Moon (mile 69.5) at 10:30pm (two hours and fifteen minutes ahead of cutoff and 18:30 into the run.) So we did make up a bunch of time. It is a ghost town with only a few runners hanging out by the warmer and one volunteer working on a woman who may have broke her foot. Brian says we are only going to be here long enough to get fluids and eat quickly and take off. We stay all of 2 minutes and I try to take in some soup but the noodles are not cooked and it taste awful. I toss it and eat some fruit.

We head out and have 7 miles to the Fish Hatchery where Michell will take over and bring me in the final 23.5 miles. Brian again is in a strict mode of running the flats and down hill and power walking any uphill. Most of the run is flat or down hill so Brian has me running and I am complaining softly I need to walk some. Brian gives in only when he feels we have gone far enough. I love that guy!! I truly mean it.

We get to Tree Line and hundreds of cars are still lined up crewing runners. It is a small city at 10,000 feet and some sleepy crew folks cheer us on as we run by. I tell Brian I have to pee and he says not until we get to the paved road. I make it and get a chance to stand and pee. I look up at the sky and see a billion stars. It was the most stars I have seen in my life. Truly awesome!

We run as long as we can and walk for short distances. Brian has made up so much time for me I can't believe it. We make it into the Fish Hatchery (mile 76.5) at 12:30am (Two hours and thirty minutes ahead of cutoff and 20:30 into the run). I know have 23.5 miles to go and have 9:30 minutes to do it in.

I get into the aid station and pull my drop bag. Brian says, "hey there's Bill!?" I am loopy and say hi. He is sitting on a bench eating and chatting with runners and his pacer. I pull out the last Ensure I have and sit next to Bill. I tell him I don't think I can stomach it. He says he got sick a few miles back and eat some ginger to help the stomach. Right then I feel something coming up and tell Bill I got to go out side. Brian sees me get up and looks concerned. I tell him I'm going to get sick and head out behind the tent. I heave quite a few times but nothing comes out. I have nothing in my stomach. My ribs now hurt and my spine is tweaked. I really was in bad condition. Brian comes out and I asked him to get some ginger from Bill. I eat it slowly (prescribed by Doctor Brian) and I start to feel better. I try to eat some soup again and some coffee. I take in a GU as this is the only thing I can stomach and try some fruit but that does not work.

Michell is not here yet so Brian calls her. She is in the parking lot trying to take a nap because she does not expect us for another half hour. She is surprised but tired as she has not had any sleep in over 24 hours.

Brian preps Michell on how to handle me and they both know the time Brian spent running me the last 26.5 miles paid off in allowing us to walk as much as we needed to get the job done. Michell would need to keep me hydrated and fueled and keep me motivated to keep moving. She did just that and more.

Brian bids us farewell and we walk out the aid station. We now have 10 miles to the last aid station May Queen. But we have a monster mountain in the way called Sugar Loaf. It comes at mile 80 and is a 1,600 foot climb at 1:00am. So I am tired and worn out and now I got to climb this thing? Michell pulls me along as we make our way up. We are in a power walk mode and again pass many runners. We encourage them and they us. The climb offers many false summits and I am aware of them so I can laugh them off. It takes us 80 minutes to climb to 11,200 feet. Once there we meet up with a runner who says we got it made now. We can walk it in if we had to. Michell had other ideas and we kept moving at a very fast walk. Once over the pass Michell asked if I could run. I said I could 60 miles ago but I am worried I'll crash and burn trying to run down the back side of Sugar Loaf as the road is rutty. We power walk all the way to the trail with some easy running. Once on the single track trail we have to walk as the trail is very rocky and rooty and not safe this far into the run. We can hear folks at May Queen but it is only a teaser as we still have to get around some of Turquoise Lake two miles away.

I am feeling ok but can't stomach much food or water. We make it into May Queen (mile 86.5) at 3am (Three and a half hours ahead of cutoff and 23 hours running) and I go into the tent where

it is way too warm. I start to feel sick again only due to the heat. I sit down only for a minute and try some potato soup and only get a sip or two. Michelle has to use the blue room and she says to stay put. The heat is too much so I head out the tent and I hear the aid station captain yell that a bunch of runners are coming in and that all pacers need to leave the tent. I see Michell in the tent looking for me and I gesture to come out. Michell asked how much I ate and I kind of lied to her. I said I ate my soup and she said how much. I said half. She said they only gave you half a cup so you only drank half of half a cup? I said yes..... I guess I was not making much sense at that point.

We leave the station and have 6:45 minutes to cover 13.5 miles around the lake and to the finish in Leadville. We again start off by power walking. A volunteer came up the road while we were walking out and she looked at Michell and me and said I'll see you at the finish line. This was the moment I realized I would be completing this adventure.

The trail leading around the lake was again rocky and rooty. At this point I could not stomach much water and only a GU when possible. I was afraid if I tried running I could fall and I also thought if I ran I would deplete any reserves I had in my system faster and not make it to the end so we power walked at 14-15 minute pace until the sun came up and we hit the road 5 miles to the finish. Then it got really, really bone chilling cold. Michell and I were both complaining about how cold it was. Once on the road Michell tried to get me to walk jog some and we realized we would power walk close to jogging speed so we walked for a mile or so then tried jogging some then walking. With 2.8 mile to go a married couple from Canada came up on us and the runner, Monica Scholz asked us if we want to get on the sub 28 hour wagon. I looked at my watch and thought; yes we can finish in less than 28 hours! We moved with them and found our power walking could keep up with their running so we stayed together until we got to 6th street and the finish was only a mile away. On 6th street I could hear the announcer yell out Bill's name as he came in at 27:39. His 27th finish in a row. Wow! He is the Leadville Legend!! An inspiration to all!

Michell and Monica said I should try and run the last half mile so I did. Michell took some stuff off me and I ran to the finish in 27:45:46 (Two hours and fourteen minutes to spare and 166 place out 647 starters and 363 finishers). Brian Miller was there to root me on and so were Julie, Ed, Kjell and Karen. Karen was pulled at May Queen (mile 86.5 timed out) as the first to be pulled there. It was disappointing as some runners were ahead of her by only a minute or two and were allowed to move on after also being timed out. I know if they had let her through she would have finished in under 30 hours.

Now I am home with my wife, daughter and dog Kona and happy to be!! Thanks to Brian and Michell (I love you guys dearly) and too Karen for training with me, Julie and Ed for motivation and training. I also want to thank my wife, Jennifer and daughter, Mackenzie for putting up with my crazy hobby. Bill F. Thanks for you friendship and wisdom!

See you on the Trail or Road!

Rick Santos