

## The North Face Endurance Challenge 50 Mile Championships - San Francisco - 2012

by Gary Gellin

The North Face Endurance Challenge (TNFEC) 50 Mile Championships has become a monster of an event and people feel strongly about it in different ways. For me personally, there is a little bit of most everything that I seek out in a premier trail race: an interesting course, a beautiful venue, a deep competitive field, a gathering of the tribes from around the nation and even the world, a modicum of media hype, and a healthy stock of reliable and repeat volunteers. Peace and tranquility may be the only elements that are lacking. Judging by the volume of race coverage (16 features on one media outlet alone), the plethora of photos, and the heated message board discussions, there is no doubt that TNF San Francisco has the cache of a world championship event, albeit in our own little world of trail ultramarathon.

How did this event attract such a large, competitive field? You offer \$10,000 for first place and it just snowballs from there. Heck, I'm racing the guy who's racing the guy who's racing the guy who quit his job as a plumber in Spain to be a professional trail runner. In short order you have people from around the world running your favorite trails with you in your own backyard. A local runner, Michael Stricklan, who started in the third wave of the 50 mile race sums it up very well: "The unbelievable turnout of world class runners from Team Salomon, our local favorites from The North Face and other amazingly talented runners coming from numerous countries is a treat of an experience for relatively new ultra distance runners like myself. To rub elbows at the starting line with these down-to-earth 'beasts' on the trail makes the TNF 50 that much more of a spectacle of a race. It seems like no matter where in the world you're from we all still have the same spirit and mutual appreciation for getting out on the trails and enjoying a fantastic run."

TNFEC in some respects encompasses all of the growing pains in our sport. Most event promoters want their event to grow and many ultras will offer shorter distances and even relays to attract more numbers. TNFEC runs for two days and has more distances to choose from than any other race I'm aware of. I can't argue with this logic, but many participants would like to see a focus on the ultra distance only. For some it is a simple matter that the resources for supporting additional races will invariably detract from the marquee race. For others, both elite and non-elite competitors, it has created a truly visceral response as best exemplified with the following anonymous quote: "It's not about course marking. It's not about volunteers. It's about the structure of the race - of jamming 6lb of shit into a 5lb bag." and "...it sucked having the marathoners and the 50kers out there.... If we'd all felt as ticked off as (some of the elite competitors) deservedly do, there'd be a f'n revolution." I have seen this exact same love/hate relationship in the cycling world with the Sea Otter Classic in Monterey, CA, an event with over 10,000 people competing in many different styles of bike racing. It draws big crowds but also turns off some elite competitors who feel they are compelled to race a national calendar event that doesn't provide focus on their particular race. To the credit of TNF, they have decided to build their own race series and reach as many runners as possible. This race, the "Championship", is the last event in the yearlong series across the U.S. and is not an elite competition in and of itself. A lot of people don't realize that the event management company, which is not located in

California, does a good job at hiring experienced local "ambassadors" for important tasks such as course marking and volunteer coordination. Adam Ray and Christine Chapon are two of those people and they are both huge forces of good in our Bay Area trail running community. The presence of many repeat volunteers with some aid stations being adopted by local groups is a testament also to the belief many people have in the event.

Earlier this year, Bryon Powell of iRunFar.com started out his preview of another granddaddy event, the Western States Endurance Run, with "It's become trite, but once again, one of, if not the best 100 mile field of all time will be lining up in Squaw Valley..." That preview listed 34 top contenders in the men's race - certainly a tough one to make odds on. In Bryon's preview for this year's edition of TNFEC, he listed 74 contenders in the men's field alone - all of a similar caliber to that of the aforementioned Western States list. The women's elite field was similarly stacked. On race day there would be over 100 runners starting in a separate elite starting wave - a number unheard of for a trail ultramarathon in North America.

The race started in pitch darkness at 5AM. A continuous light rain had already begun. We were in the middle of being inundated with a week-long "atmospheric river" as my elite-running, amateur meteorologist friend Leor Pantilat described it. At least it wasn't cold. We were to run two 23-1/2 mile laps of a shortened course located primarily in the Marin Headlands with a total of elevation gain of approximately 9000 ft. Unfortunately, the trails that the race showcases normally - those of Mt. Tamalpais and Muir Woods - would be eliminated due to severe weather-related concerns from the State Park. For me that was okay. Running in circles is not my typical routine, but when you bring on the competition, the stimulation returns. As my good friend and local legend Victor Ballesteros once told me "...it's like the saying about the worst day fishing... Even a mediocre course has its eventfulness. I've never run a course and thought it wasn't worth it. Look at Ruth Anderson. It's a 4.5 mile bike path around a reservoir."

An enormous group hammered up the first climb in driving rain at breakneck speed. I sat in 25th place or so, already well in to the zone for a fast 50k effort, not a 50 mile one. My strategy was to run within myself and not get drawn out in the opening miles. In a 10k you can get drawn out at too fast a pace for a mile or so. In a 50 mile race with this level of competition, you can get drawn in to the red zone for 10 miles or more before there is a sorting out. I didn't feel the pressure to count the heads in front of me. As long as I still had some of the usual suspects close by - Dave Mackey, Hal Koerner, Joe Uhan - I knew I couldn't go too wrong.

The descent to the ocean on the Pirates Cove trail was pretty interesting. It was still pitch black out, the sideways rain was driving even harder, the trail was slick as snot, and the fog was dense. Before the race I was certain I'd hit aid station number 3 at Muir Beach well in to twilight, but the pace had been hotter than I expected and it was necessary to carry the headlamp all the way to mile 17.

There was all of the expected puddle jumping on a rainy day such as this, but the mountain of mud on the back side of the course was almost comical. After more than a thousand shoes had traipsed up and down the very steep fire road leading to Muir Beach, the road turned to chocolate fudge.



Over the muddy edge! (goes the author). Bob MacGillivray, Drymax photo.

I had the sense that I was moving up in position, but it was not clear at all how many runners were up ahead. My guess at the halfway point was that I was around 20th place. With 6 miles to go, Nathan Yanko, who would normally be racing but was a spectator this year, told me I was in 10th place. I was skeptical, but blew through the last major aid station with renewed energy and began the last big climb up Marincello fire road. All of a sudden I could see last year's champion, Mike Wolfe from Missoula, Montana, in the distance. Mike ran a super gutsy race and worked very hard in the early miles in an effort to reel in a breakaway of 3 runners. It was an eternity, but I eventually caught and passed Mike. We exchanged some words of support and I sped off in pursuit of whatever carnage there might be up ahead. On the final descent I caught Shaun Martin who was then running in 9th place overall. Shaun, from Chinle, Arizona, is a fierce competitor who I had raced against earlier this year at Way Too Cool and who pushed me to course record pace that day. Ahe'hee' shi' dine' (thanks my friend - in Navajo). Uncharacteristically, I hadn't yet suffered from inner thigh cramping the entire race, but the twinges kicked in with less than half a mile to go. I backed off a tad while weaving my way through a wall of marathon distance runners just starting their race, and cruised in to the finish in 9th place overall, less

than a minute behind Adidas team member Sylvain Court from France, and good enough for 5th American, 1st Californian, and 1st in the 40 plus age group. I finished ahead of some big names I hadn't expected to, at least not all in the same day, so I earned a friendly jibe from 4th-placed Adam Campbell for being a sandbagger (his words, not mine).

Something must be said about Miguel Heras. I really like this guy even though we could barely understand each other. Miguel's brother Roberto is a four-time Vuelta a Espana grand cycling tour champion, so he shares some good genes. Geoff Roes made a prediction that "a European will win overall". He didn't say whether it would be the Spaniard Miguel or 2012 UTMB winner Francois D'Haene. Clearly, Miguel Heras is a world-class athlete at a rarefied level. It was relayed to me that he is the biggest threat whom superstar Kilian Jornet sees amongst his own competition. There was no one in that elite field whose second lap pace was anywhere close. There were a lot of gutsy performances in an attempt to take a podium position away from Heras, but in the end he prevailed. An unfortunate wrong turn made by several early race leaders caused a tremendous amount of confusion. Miguel was not in that group and had no idea until literally *after* he finished the race, while he was standing by a heater inside the medical tent, that he was the race champion!

There were some amazing performances in the women's field. While there isn't the space here to give praise to every individual, I want to recognize the 8th place performance of Tina Lewis from Boulder, Colorado. While she didn't catch the rising force from Bend, Oregon, 2nd place Stephanie Howe, she moved up consistently the entire race and ran some of the most even splits amongst everyone, including Miguel Heras. Local runner Caitlin Smith did an amazing job at 4th place overall after having been largely absent from trail running, let alone ultra running, this entire year. Bethany Lewis from Salt Lake City, not related to Tina, ran an extremely gutsy race, having been poised to earn a podium spot early on, but eventually faded to 9th place.

Here are some quotes from others who raced or worked at the event.

Adam Ray (local TNF Ambassador in charge of course marking and design; Skyline 50k Race Director):

"...you are making a very fair point that we are trying to do too much at one time - so either do it right, or do less... the Challenge reaches tens of thousands of runners, and inspires a lot of people...so the guiding principle is to reach more people. And the North Face has done a lot to make sure that the race is tied in locally... It's completely authentic."

Christine Chapon (local TNF Ambassador in charge of volunteer coordination):

"This is my 4th year working for TNF Endurance Challenge. ...I still feel that I am supporting and giving back to our running community whether the race I am helping with is a corporate managed race like TNFEC or locally produced like Miwok 100k. ... Contributing to support the rookie racers is so gratifying, seeing the last 50 mile runners crossing the finish line always bring tears to my eyes, and Saturday, many of them were in tears. ...Over the 4-5 years we have established a tradition of "regular" volunteers (aid station, among the course marshals or course markers, pre-runners and sweepers but even at the Festival). Many of them are

experienced ultra runners, some are race directors themselves or part of our running community."

Victor Ballesteros (took a rest day from competition to help pace rookie 50-mile runner David Souza):

"It was truly inspiring to witness such a high profile event; versatile enough to draw an incredibly stacked field of elite athletes, as well as provide the rest of the field with an overwhelming sense and feeling of being equal champions!"

David Souza (rookie 50 mile runner paced by local legend Victor Ballesteros):

"For me it was one of the best experiences of my life for sure. I loved the vibe, the spirit of the people out there and comradery. I'm already planning my next one."

Sage Canada (Olympic marathon trials runner, first year trail ultramarathon racer, and strong favorite for overall race win):

"My goals going into the race were as follows: 1. Don't get lost. 2. Don't bonk. 3. Don't fall and break a bone. I totally failed on the first 2 and I was working on the third one up until I DNF'ed. I definitely left some blood out in the mud there!"

Geoff Roes (2-time podium finisher, absent from this edition due to illness):

"I've run the NFEC 4 times and I have yet to meet anyone running the 50 miler who thinks it's a good idea to have all the different races going on at once. There are a lot of good things about this event, but hopefully this year's difficulties will be the straw that needed to break to get TNF to schedule the 50 miler as a standalone event... and yeah, starting after sun up certainly would make things even less likely to go awry. Why not do some of the shorter distances on Friday, the others on Sunday, and the 50 miler between them on Saturday. Doing it this way you might even get several of the runners from the shorter races to come out on Saturday and watch the finish of the 50 miler, and the championship atmosphere they always try so hard to create might actually come about organically."

Adam Campbell (Salomon International Team, 4th place 2012, 3rd place 2011):

"I love racing the TNF50 because of the quality of field that it attracts. I choose some races based on their aesthetic value, or as a reason to travel and I choose others because I know that they will attract some of the top runners in the world. This race has a bit of all of that. I love San Francisco, I quite like the trails in the headlands and the field is always world class. The prize money and late timing of the race, changes the nature of the event. There is a lot of nervous energy in the opening miles and the highly runnable terrain really increases the intensity of the effort. It's a treat to end a long season against a quality field and it becomes a celebration of the sport to have so many top runners from around the US and the world toeing the line."

Cameron Clayton (3rd place and new convert to trails from elite road racing):

"...You were always surrounded by other competitors. The race and experience was incredibly motivating both during and after the race."

More pictures!



The author with last year's TNF Champion, Mike Wolfe. Matte Trappe Photography photo.



First time 50-mile finisher David Souza with pacer Victor Ballesteros. Holly Harris photo.



The author trying to explain to Dave Mackey, one of the most successful ultramarathon competitors of all time, something he probably already knows. Holly Harris photo.



Done! Brett Rivers, San Francisco Running Company photo.