

RACE ODYSSEY 2011: WESTERN STATES 100 MILE

Squaw Valley June 25th 4am: My pacer, Brother and best friend Brian Miller says it is 39 degrees when we park the car at Squaw Valley. Once out of the car I say, "It's got to be 38." We head for check-in to get my bib and jump on the scale one more time. I weigh in at 138 and eat a couple of blueberry muffins and drink some orange juice. We sit and wait in the confines of a warm room as I look out the window to the start line and ponder what lies ahead.

Brian snaps me out of my trance and says, "You think you might need a head lamp at the start?" I look to the East and see a sliver of light coming over the mountains. I then look to the West and see the 2,500 foot climb out of the valley. I'm thinking that's going to be a walker ... "I should be ok without one." I say to Brian.

It is now 15 minutes to the start of the race and my nerves are calming as a voice comes over the speakers to gather around the start line. Brian and I make it out side. He wishes me good luck and gives me a hug. Brian says, "I'll see you at mile 62." I ask him to make it mile 60.5 and run me in from Bath Road. He makes no promises. I hand him my sweats and I run a quick check. Hand held, hat, sunglasses, GU, Supply belt, Chip time, Bib, ToeSox, (got to love my ToeSox), arm warmers and gloves. I feel ready to do this.

With one minute to go, I inch my way up to the front and see a man wearing what looks like the Mad Hatter's hat but it has the colors of the Slovenia National Flag on it and along the side of it says SLOVENIA. I say, "Excuse me" and tell him good luck and that Brian's mother, Andrea, is from Slovenia and that Brian (and I) are pulling for him! David Kadunc from Ljubljana, Slovenia did not disappoint as he finished in 83rd place with a time of 22:48! David shakes my hand wishes me luck and the clock is at 15 seconds and counting. I look at the 2,500 foot climb to my right and a shotgun blast goes off! 30 hours to make it to Placer High School.

We lurch forward to what seems to be a thousand flash bulbs going off. My first thought was, run the first 100 feet and then fast hike the next 4 miles. I shuffle to the far left and see Brian looking for me. I yell to him "Slovenia is ahead of me, Slovenia is ahead of me!!" but he does not hear me. Brian tries to take a picture of me passing and then he is out of site and I am pushing hard up the mountain with 374 other ultra-runners. Few are talking as the altitude is impacting our breathing. There is no snow yet as the beginning of the climb was cleared by snow plows.

We are moving nicely and I hear chatter but do not join in. I am now 30 minutes into my run and I look over my shoulder to see the valley and the lake getting smaller. I see Mike Cook near the top and he gives me a thumbs-up. I make it to the 4 mile mark and the escarpment (elev. 8,750 ft.) in an hour and five minutes. Not bad but then the sun is up and I look out to the west at a vast expansion of snow and ice. Greg Soderlund was right when he said we would have 15 plus miles of snow and ice to transverse. Without traction devices (not legal) but only my ToeSoxs and Brooks ASR's to keep me moving I start my trek across the High Sierra.

The temperature is cool and my main concern now is keeping my footing (for the next 15 miles) in the ice and snow. Ahead of me I see runners working hard to keep their balance and I am no different. Runner after runner negotiates the downward left slope with cautious steps but it does little as many slip and slide their way across the mountain. I am stepping carefully over deep circular ice holes and it's like Indiana

Jones trying to avoid stepping on the booby trapped stones in Raiders of the Lost Ark. Only thing is Indy gets a retake if something goes wrong and all I get is a DNF at the grandest 100 miler of them all.

I get past the ice holes and now I am navigating a steep slope to my left side. I try to apply a little more pressure to my right foot so I don't slip down the mountain. All is working as well as expected and then at mile 6 my right ankle gives way with an outward turn. The ankle turn hurt enough to where I tried to relieve pressure but dropping down to my knees but then the momentum took me nearly 100 feet down the mountain sliding on my right side and gaining speed until I crash into a U-shaped landing where I lay there wondering if I just DNFd at mile 6?

I looked up and a few runners stopped and yelled down to see if I was ok. I waved them on and pulled down my sock to see the damage. The ankle was already starting to swell and my leg was cut up from the sharp ice. I knew I had to get back up to the trail markings as fast as I could to see if I could continue on with the run. I had to get on all fours and crawl slowly up foot by foot so that I would not slip back down. I took a few minutes to make it back up but I was there.

I stood back up and started to walk and my ankle felt like my funny bone got hit with a baton. You know what I mean? It was the same feeling I got at mile 38 while running TRT 100 in '09. I knew if I started to run some I could see how bad it was. I started off running slow and it hurt but not the kind of hurt that will put you out of the race. At least not me. My next concern was not doing anything that would roll it again for the next 94 miles. That would not be easy but I really had no choice. One or two more of those during the next 94 miles would end my run.

A mile later I hear a friendly voice behind me talking to another runner about the snow levels on the course two weeks before the race. I turn back and I am happy again. It was none other than the Leadville Legend, Bill Finkbeiner. Bill was running for his 17th WS finish. We chat and I follow him step for step the next 5 miles and he is cutting a true and safe route and we avoid many falls along the way.

Relief is in sight. A couple of miles shy of Talbot Creek Aid Station I come across a 30 foot creek crossing with water temps just above freezing and above knee depth I'm thinking my ankle is going to love this. Man, was I right and boy was it cold. We needed a rope across it so we would not get swept down stream. Once at Talbot, (mile 13 and 3:08 into the run) I lose a shirt, fill up my bottles and eat some fruit.

From Talbot I continue down hill and we get out of the snow line and head along Poppy Trail for the next 6.6 miles. This is such a beautiful area with French Meadow Lake next to the trail. So much shade and the single track trail was so soft. You could not help but run this area fast for all the reasons mentioned and the fact it was a slight down hill the whole way. Later, I find out (from Bill Carr) my average mile pace between Talbot and Poppy Trail (6.6 miles) was 7:34 mile pace!

I make it to mile 19.6, Poppy Trail Aid Station in 3:58 running time. I feel good and weigh in at 137 pounds. I take some potato and salt, some fruit and fill my bottle. I waste no time here and take off towards Duncan Canyon. The next 4.2 miles is slower as the heat of the day starts to shine down and we go through an area that has very little shade with a small climb to Duncan Canyon. I back off the burners and make it to Duncan Canyon, mile 23.8 in 4:49 running time.

I spend a few minutes here and find my weight is back up to 138. Good weight but I'm thinking I have more sodium in my system than I need. I only eat fruit here and drink very little water. Next I have a major climb out of Duncan Canyon along a burned area and there is absolutely no shade for the next few miles. The climb is brutal and by mile 28 I am all alone but I see a man jogging down the trail as I make my way up. As he gets closer I see that it is Tim Twietmeyer. As we pass each other he puts out his hand

and says (in a messiah kind of way) “Rock on my Brother.” I was at a low point during that climb due to the heat and exposure but seeing Tim was perfect timing.

I make the 1,000 foot climb out with spirits intact but not feeling the best and hit Mosquito Ridge Aid Station (mile 31) in 6:38. A 12:50 pace overall and 177th place out of 375 starters. Not a bad 50k... I hit the weigh in and now I am at 139 pounds. Not good. My stomach is not processing fluids and it is starting to swell some. I make a decision to not drink or eat for the next 3.4 miles along the ridge and see where that puts me when I get to Miller’s Defeat.

This section was above 6,000 feet and some more climbing to do but not bad. I was concerned about my weight so I walked once I got back into the snow. Once out of the snow and on my way to Miller’s Defeat I started running again but the slow going out of Mosquito Ridge slowed my overall pace to 13:27 and put me into 181st place at mile 34.4 (time running 7:43).

I checked the scale again and was down to 138 and I was getting hungry again so I drank and ate some and started feeling good again. I ran most of the next section to Dusty Corners and made up some time over the next 3.6 miles (and so did other runners) as the course was shaded and slightly down hill to the aid station. I hit Dusty Corners (mile 38) in 8:24 (187th place).

The 5.8 mile section between Dusty Corners and Last Chance is a slight down hill all the way and this is where I meet up with Craig Sowash from Newberg, OR. We had been passing each other the whole day and finally we decide to help each other out by keeping company and pacing each other. It worked well at the right time and we got to know each other. I mentioned to Craig my wife’s grandmother is turning 90 in September and that we would be making the trip to celebrate in Portland. Craig said we could get together and run the Multnomah Falls Trail for some fun.

We get to mile 43.8 (Last Chance) in 9:37 with a 13:10 pace and I am in 195th place. Doctor Marty Hoffman takes care of me and I weigh in at 138. Looking good but feeling tired. Dr Hoffman fills my bottles and says I look good and tells me to take off. I wanted to wait for Craig as he was getting a quick bite to eat. I can still eat so I take in some soup and fruit and wait only a few minutes. Dr Hoffman tells me the canyons are only at 85 degrees and that there is a slight breeze at the bottom. “Yes!” I say and feel good now.

Craig and I head out and run the dirt road to the trail head to make the 2,000 foot switchback drop to the bottom of the canyon. We are discussing how to run this part and both agree we want to run but at a very controlled pace. I am very concerned about my ankle rolling. We also decide once we get to the bottom we would jump into the creek to cool off before making the climb up Devil’s Thumb. The Thumb is a brutal 1,800 foot climb during the hottest part of the day and if you don’t approach this section with caution, preparation and the right attitude it will eat you alive and spit you out.

We make it to the creek feeling good. I show Craig the best spot to jump in. Craig goes all the way in and I go up to my thighs. We sit there for about 5 minutes and see many runners crossing the bridge looking down at us. We wish them good luck and the way I figured it, we’d be fresh coming out of the creek and catch them on the way up. Out of the water I look at my ankle and the swelling is still there. Also, my little toe and the toe next to it as well as my big toe have blood blisters on them with the little toe blistered to the point you can’t see my toenail. It must have started when I was fighting to stay upright in the snow. My left foot was always on the down slope of the trail and constantly fighting for balance. I knew I needed them taken care of once I got the Michigan Bluff.

We make the climb (37 switchbacks) up the Thumb with a fast hike that would have made the average runner proud of us. Craig led me down Last Chance so I lead him up Devils Thumb. We passed most of

the runners we saw at the bridge and make it to Devils Thumb (mile 47.8) in 11:05 and in 200th place. That 4 mile stretch between LC and DT took 1:28 (not bad if you think about the stop at the creek)! Denis Zilaf takes personal care of me once I get into the aid station. I again weigh in at 138, Denis sits me down only for a minute and then wants me out of there. I have some great soup and drink some coke and eat some fruit. Craig changes socks here, which I had already done once I got out of the creek.

Craig and I now are heading down to El Dorado Creek and this downhill is rocky and long. We make to mile 52.9 and there are many runners sitting and standing, eating and resting. It is hard for Craig and me to get some food. We get what we could, fill our bottles and head out. The hike to Michigan Bluff (mile 55.7) was a fast walk as we had to climb out of El Dorado Creek with around 2,000 feet of climb over the next 2.8 miles. My blisters now are compromising my run and I realize to make it to the end they need to be looked at. Michigan Bluff will be the place.

I make it into MB in 13:28 and a 14:30 pace. I am now in 204th place. I see an angel up the road by the name of Julie Hughes. At this point I am not eating much and my foot is in bad condition. Julie brings me over to the aid station and I see Deb Paquin and Kim White who are working the station. Kim fills up my bottles and tells me I look great and that she would see me at the finish line. I tell Julie that I have blisters that need looking at. Julie is concerned if I hang out too long I may not get going again and asks me if I could make it to Foresthill and get my toes looked at there. I say yes and I'm ready to leave when Deb overhears us and says, "This is the place to take care of all blisters!" I wish I could remember his name but this man (doctor) puts me in a chair and reclines me back. It takes him 20 minutes to take care of three blisters but he is amazing!! All three had blood in them. He cut them open removed the skin and put some cream and powder on them. Then he taped them up and I was good as new. My legs were starting to cramp up from sitting but my feet were A-OK!

Julie tries to get me to eat something but all I can put down is some soup and some fruit. She walks me out of the station and assures me I do not need a headlamp the next 6.3 miles. She tells me the next section is runnable. She gives me a big hug and a kiss for good luck and jumps on the bus and heads to Foresthill.

Craig is now gone and I am tired and lonely. The next section is going to be mentally tough for me if I have to go it alone. Ahead of me is a runner that is walking. I catch up to her and quickly introduce myself. Her name is Erin and she is from Oregon. Just my luck, another runner from Oregon. We talk about the course and Oregon and that this is our first WS. She told me she is determined to finish (and she did in 28:37). Erin and I wonder if we are going to make it to Foresthill before dark and we push on running the flats and downs and fast walking the ups.

We make it to Bath Road and part ways. I see Brian coming down the road from the aid station and yelling above him I see Heather VanNes and she is hooping and hollering my name. I smile and throw a big kiss to all and say, "I love you!" Believe it or not I'm feeling good at this point and give Brian a hug. It was good to see him! He asks me if I can run and we do so up Bath Road alternating running and walking up the hill. Next I hear a howl that would scare a mountain lion. At the corner of Bath Road and Foresthill Road I see Josh Hart and Michell Duncan. Josh's howl gets me pumped up and we start running to them.

Josh asks me if I want a beer and I say no thank you but maybe later. Michell asks if I need anything and I'm feeling ok so we tell them to meet us at Foresthill (mile 62.) Brain and I are now on the downhill side of Foresthill Road and running the last mile into the aid station. We get there before dark at 8:22pm and 15:22 into the first 100k (211th place). I'm thinking not too bad. I get weighed and sit down next to my crew (Ed, Julie, Brian, Michell, Josh, and Andrea Hamel - thanks Andrea for the orange slices) for a

quick breather. I am having a tough time eating at this point but manage to eat some of Julie's awesome bean burrito and some fruit.

I take only a few minutes here and I get up. Brian asks if I can run and we start out along the road and I feel good but as fast as I can say "I feel good" I start to up-chuck and take a detour next to some park cars. Brian waits and starts to talk to a friend who wants to see what running 100 miles is all about and the nice man brings his two children along for encouragement. All the while I am heaving on the back side of a car. The man's daughter and son are interested in what I am doing and peek around the car. I smile at them and tell them I am ok as chunks of cantaloupe come out of my mouth.

At that point I feel great again and walk over to the father and Brian and apologize to him for his children seeing me this way. He was very nice and cool about it. His children wish me well and we head on to Cal 1 (Dardenelles) 3.7 miles away.

We are back to running mode as we make our way to Cal 1. It is getting dark now and I turn on my headlamp. We hit mile 65.7 and quickly move through the station. The sun has set and with it the air is cool but not cold. The setting sun brings me back to life as I am singing The Police song, "Bring on the Night, I couldn't stand another hour of day light!" Brian laughs and we continue on.

It is now 10:40pm and we are approaching Peachstone (Cal 2) aid station. 70.7 miles in and seventeen hours and forty minutes of running. My average pace is currently at 14:59 and the five mile stretch between Cal 1 and Cal 2 averaged 15:51. I am alert and feeling fine and Brian tells me we can only stay long enough to get some food. We do it quickly and then move on. We cover the next 7.3 miles in two hours and make it to Rucky Chucky by 12:41am.

The station captain, Chuck Godfredsen was there and gave me a hug. He assessed what I needed sent me to the table to get some food. Brian said the boat has room for one more runner and that we better get going. I grab some food and we get on board. Next to me are Brad Rogers and his runner Tim Ruffino. We talk some as the skilled rower takes across the fast moving American River. In past years you must cross this part by holding onto a rope slung across the river but this year the snow runoff raised the water to levels where you could not touch the bottom. No need to drown 20 miles from the finish.

We get across to Rucky Chucky (Far) and head up the hill with authority. We get to Green Gate and see Leslie Carboni. She checks on me and I tell her I'm doing fine. It is now 1:15am and I am in 180th place. I sit for a moment and Julie Hughes is trying to get me to eat but my stomach is not going for it. I grab some orange slices and a burrito Julie made. This is where I say goodbye to Brian (with Brian pacing me we were able to move from 211th position to 180th) and hello to Michell who would be taking me the last 20 miles to the finish.

Michell sees that I still have my legs and she runs me as much as possible on the flats and downhill. She is focused and does not rest, moving by fast walking or running. We make it to Auburn Lake Trails aid station in an hour and forty minutes and the time is now 2:54am. The weather was perfect at the time of the morning. We were neither cold nor warm. My headlamp was working great but my stomach was not. Again, I could not stomach much and realized I'd have to make it the next 15 miles with little food or fluid.

Michell and I have been there before and in rougher circumstances at last year's Leadville 100. We were veterans now and could handle the fact I would not be eating much to the end. This allowed us to move quickly through the aid stations. As long as I was able to weigh in without getting pulled I would make it to the track at Placer High.

On the way to Brown's Bar I got a second wind and was running at a nice pace and moved to 167th overall. We made it to Brown's Bar by 4:09am to the sounds of the Beatles "It's been a hard days night" and yes it was so appropriate. I loved it. Again we moved through the station while folks were drinking beer and wine. Charley Jones was there and he looked like he was in great condition. I knew I would be seeing him again before the finish line.

My last hurdle would be trying to make it through the medical check point at Highway 49 (mile 93.5). It had been 10 miles since I had anything to eat or drink and my bottles were still full. As Michell and I were nearing the highway I emptied my bottle to make it look like I had been drinking. I knew that if the medical personnel made me eat or drink I'd be stuck there because I knew I could not hold anything down.

The sun was just showing signs of coming up as I turned off my headlamp. Josh Hart was there to greet us and I handed him everything I did not need. Michell ran to the blue room and I got on the scale. If I went below 132 I'd be in some trouble. The scale said 133. The doctor asked me if I had been drinking and I said yes. She looked at me like I was not telling the truth. I said my bottle is almost empty and showed it to her. The next moment seemed like an hour. She again looked at me and said "You can go but I want you to eat something on the way out." I was relieved and as Michell exited the blue room I grab some orange slices and we hurried out of there.

We fast hiked up to the meadow and started running the flats. Michell told me we needed to run as much as possible. She was able to run me for about a mile then I had to take a piss so while I was taking care of that I hear a runner hammering down the hill. It is Charley and he looks focused. He sees me and stops to check on me. I tell him I'm ok and to move on. He really looked great and ended up finishing in 25:47!

We continue running all the way to No Hands Bridge and mile 96.8. We don't even stop. We say hi to all including Jessica Hein and Tony Overbay and run across the bridge. The Christmas lights are still on and it is close to 6am.

We are now in familiar territory. I can smell the barn as we head up to Robie Point. We see Michaela Burgess and her husband Dustin. She waves us past and Michell tells me we have 1.3 miles to go and if we can run it in 15 minutes we would run under 26 hours. The only thing is the next half mile is uphill. I do my best and continue running slowly up the hill. An onlooker asks Michell how far we had gone and when Michell said 99.5 miles the lady just stood there and stared at us. The only thing that came out of her mouth was, "And you are still running!?? At that point Michell started to get emotional saying she was so proud of me. I thank her for being my friend and pacer and that she was like a sister to me. We rounded the corner and I saw Ken Crouse (captain of safety patrol) I yelled to him that I made it!

Michell and I hit the track and there is my daughter Mackenzie throwing away her mommy's Starbucks cup. Jennifer is cheering me on and I yell to Mack to run with me. She jumps on the track and we run hand in hand to the finish line. We crossed in 26:01:07 and in 153rd place. I never felt better. What a way to finish. What a great journey.

Rick Santos