

2001 Hardrock Hundred Mile Endurance Run by Jonathan Thompson Silverton Mountain Journal

“He’s an idiot. God he’s stupid. He’s going to hear about this.” A short woman with an accent screamed these words while runners passed--apparently referring to a husband or friend participating in the run. I had heard similar epithets before, yelled out in despair and frustration by those whose spouses and loved ones had decided to try and complete this agonizing race.

We were at the KT aid station, mile 11.6 of the 2001 Hardrock Hundred Endurance Race, watching the runners come through looking fresh and fast and relaxed on an overcast Friday morning. There was no vomiting of blood or leaky cells or mushy feet here--the race was just beginning, the bodies not yet protesting violently against what the mind was telling them to do. That would come later.

Only the yelling woman was protesting and, as I listened to her ranting and raving, it became clear that she was berating husband, friend, or whatever for running too fast. He had passed through the first aid station way ahead of schedule, minutes before the strictly regimented time he had set for himself prior to the run.

That is the way, for most people, the 101.7 mile journey is done. He who does not deliberately pace himself early on is likely to have problems later and a runner’s crew is likely to chide him for going too quickly. A fast start in any other race may be a good strategy, in this one it could lead to permanent physical damage.

In that respect, this year’s Hardrock Hundred was looking like it might get ugly. Lead by a lean and lanky Karl Meltzer, of Salt Lake City, the first group of runners was already setting a fast pace, leaving the first aid station up South Mineral Creek less than three hours after the Silverton start.

The leaders passed through the first aid station as if it were not even there, and about 20 minutes later, Silverton’s Lisa Richardson came jogging down the road, her long, blonde hair waving in the wind and an enormous grin on her face. She looked as if she had just jumped off the cover of Running magazine. Chris Nute was a few minutes behind, clearly relaxed and feeling good. Forty minutes later, Silverton’s Mike Luther came through, sticking to a slow but wise pace and in good spirits. It seemed, at that point, as though Silverton would have three finishers this year.

Only seven miles separate the KT station and the Chapman station, located just above the small hamlet of Ophir. That was enough for Meltzer and Curtis Anderson, of Evergreen, to establish a lead. They started up the steep, long climb to Oscar’s Pass three minutes ahead of a spirited chaser, Jan Fiala of Corrales, New Mexico, and several minutes before anyone else. As splits came in from Telluride, Virginius, and Governor, 28, 32, and 36 miles into the race respectively, it became clear that Meltzer and Anderson were not ready to let up--the blistering pace continued.

This was neither Meltzer’s first year of racing the Hardrock nor his first year of setting a pace that almost no one else was willing to match. In 1999, the last time the run went in the clockwise direction, the then 32 year old runner went out way ahead of the field, timing into the Ouray aid station (mile 43) in 10 hours and 10 minutes. Meltzer dropped out of the 1999 race within ten miles of the finish line.

At Ouray this year, Meltzer’s pace was only four minutes slower than in 1999. He and Anderson left Ouray together at 4:17 in the afternoon. Hans Put, of Astoria, NY, and Grand Junction’s Robb Reece were the closest chasers, 26 minutes behind.

The women were setting a mean pace as well. Salt Lake City’s Ruth Zollinger and Sue Johnston, of Vermont, flew into the Ouray station just less than an hour behind Meltzer and Anderson, running neck and neck with last year’s overall winner, Kirk Apt, of Crested Butte. Kathy D’Onofrio (Truckee, CA), Betsy Nye (Tahoe City, CA), and Emily Loman (Boulder) remained within striking distance. And Steamboat’s Betsy Kalmeyer left the Ouray aid station 30 minutes behind Zollinger, refusing to be rattled or taken out of her race plan, in spite of the pace.

Nute jogged into the Ouray station at 7:22 p.m., looking happy, relaxed, and fresh. He was somewhat ahead of his projected pace and explained, “It’s raining out there. I got here a little quicker so I wouldn’t get cooked.”

His crew was spearheaded by Carolyn Erdman, who has attempted the Hardrock three times and this year abided by her promise not to do it again. They ran around frantically getting Nute’s pack ready,

powdering his feet, getting dry socks, and forcing him to eat. He took a swig of beer and ate some pizza with Canadian Bacon and pineapple on it.

"Tom," said Erdman to another crew member, speaking with patient urgency, "Let's encourage Nute to take some food with him." They gathered Butterfingers, Spree candies, and chocolate covered espresso beans--a fairly typical diet for a Hardrock runner.

Richardson came into the aid station a few minutes later, still grinning and conversational but "starting to feel it." Meanwhile, I'm starting to feel the 200 yard walk up the hill to the aid station.

Nute and Richardson crossed the tunnel over Highway 550 on the Bear Creek Trail together just as dusk fell. As the sky cleared and the temperature dropped, both were smiling and hammed it up for the cameras. As they climb out of sight along the steep and sometimes treacherous trail, Richardson's husband Darren said with some dismay, "Before, this sounded cool. In reality, it is brutal."

From Ouray, runners climb 4,175 feet, or 703 feet per mile, to the next aid station. Meltzer's strategy, revealed after the race, was to power the climbs and ease up on the downhills, the exact opposite of Hardrock Hundred conventional wisdom, which calls for walking the climbs and running the descents. He employed that strategy successfully on this leg of the race

and retained his lead, but as he approached the Engineer aid station, Meltzer had a moment of doubt.

"I thought maybe I did go out too fast," Meltzer said later. He began to get disoriented and suffer from what he called a "sugar bonk." Anderson, who was dropped early in the climb, caught Meltzer at this point and paced him into the aid station. But disoriented or not, Meltzer was not ready to waste any time resting. He spent only one minute in the Engineer aid station, complying with the second part of his twofold strategy.

One of Meltzer's goals coming into the race was to set a low record for "downtime"--the amount of time spent at aid stations resting, eating and changing clothes. He carried a laminated card tied to his fanny pack that told him what to do in the aid stations so he "would not have to think." And never once during the race, which involved creek crossings and rainstorms, did Meltzer change his shoes or socks. "That takes time," he said.

Meltzer left the Engineer station alone with Anderson following five minutes later. Hans Put remained the closest challenger.

In ninth place overall at Engineer was Zollinger, the first of the women, followed closely by Johnston. Like Meltzer, Zollinger was holding to her pace, and it looked like the women's victory would go to either her or Johnston. But the race had a long way to go, and the runners were not even to the infamous Grouse Gulch yet.

Grouse Gulch aid station, located just south of Animas Forks, is known among Hardrock alumni as the station with the best food, the most comfortable digs, and as the place where runners drop out of the race like flies.

This year was no exception. Calling it quits at Grouse, which most people reached in the dead of the first night of the race, were 26 runners, among them a disproportionate number of whom came from the lead group. Anderson, arriving at Grouse with Meltzer, never made it to the next aid station. Loman and D'Onofrio, helping to push the pace among the women, were out as well. Johnston, sharing the women's lead only a few miles earlier, shuffled into Grouse Gulch hours later and would go no further.

Meanwhile, things were changing amongst the leaders. Meltzer's pace was not having the desired effect on Put, who had been slowly gaining on him. And Apt, although still over an hour behind the leader, seemed to be making a surge, moving up to fourth place.

But it would be the next 13 miles, which included an ascent of 14,048 foot Handies Peak, that would really shake things up for the leaders. By the time they reached the 70 mile mark at Sherman, Meltzer had extended his lead over Put to almost an hour. Apt moved up to third place, but was two and a half hours behind Meltzer.

The real excitement was happening in the women's race, however. Zollinger retained the lead coming into the aid station, but it was rapidly being gobbled up by Kalmeyer, whose moderate pace had made a gradual surge during the night. Kalmeyer left Sherman before Zollinger and she never looked back.

Kalmeyer's strategy was almost the opposite of Meltzer's. "She relied on patience," noted race organizer Dale Garland, while Meltzer "forced the issue."

"I made sure I stopped at aid stations, took my time, and ate a lot," said a beaming Kalmeyer after the race. She is what Garland calls a "very smart runner" who runs her own race, no matter how fast others are going, the result of "confidence, experience, and success" said Garland.

The remaining 30 miles of the race showed that either approach can be successful. Meltzer's winning pace became a record-matching pace which transformed into an unbelievably fast, record-shattering pace, even though he accidentally submerged himself up to his waist in Pole Creek. Running to the tunes of String Cheese Incident, which played on the portable tape deck he carried with him throughout the race, he arrived at the last aid stations before they were even scheduled to be open and left his pacer behind on the final leg of the run. When he crossed the Silverton finish line at 8:39 on Saturday morning, he was so far ahead of schedule that only a few people were there to see him break the old record, set last year by Apt, by nearly three hours.

Kalmeyer's finishing push was similar, and she moved ahead of everyone but Meltzer and Put, finishing third overall, breaking the 30 hour mark, and besting her own course record by almost two hours. Her effort was enough to inspire post-race talk of a day, not too far off, when a woman wins the overall Hardrock title.

"I feel awesome. I can't believe I ran that fast," said Meltzer following the race. Shortly thereafter, George Foster brought the 5'11" 130-something pound runner a cheeseburger, which had to be a welcome relief after sustaining himself entirely on a diet of Gu, Succeed, protein gel, E-Caps, and a few orange slices for the previous 26 hours. He remarked, with some amazement, that he had not ingested one ibuprofen during the entire race.

In most races, the drama ends after the first three finishers cross the line. At the Hardrock Hundred, the drama is often just beginning.

Those that run into Silverton on Saturday morning and early afternoon are competitors--athletes that are racing against one another and their own best times. But even as they cross the line and give the finishing stone the traditional kiss, there are many others still out there in the mountains with thunderstorms, steep climbs, 30 or more miles, and another night of trudging along still facing them. As Meltzer devoured his greasy cheeseburger, James Ballard was somewhere on Handies Peak. He would be the 64th and last official finisher, kissing the rock at 4:55 the next morning.

In the world of the Hardrock, it is people like Ballard who are considered the real heroes of the race, truly exemplifying the spirit in which the run was first started. And no less admired are those that man the aid stations and the radios, a dedicated group of volunteers that must remain for countless hours in rainstorms and through the night until all the runners are accounted for.

As the first runners came in, Darren Richardson stood in front of the school gym, awaiting word of his wife and looking like a poster child for tormented spouses of Hardrock runners. At about 2:15 that morning Lisa had jogged slowly into Grouse Gulch and told Darren she felt great, but that it felt like she had blisters on her feet.

"I feel like I'm running on pins and needles," someone remembered her saying. When they took off her shoes, they were confronted with a terrible sight.

"Her feet were like mush," said Darren, who worried about the possibility of permanent damage. After donning a new pair of shoes and dry socks, Lisa had continued onward into the night, and now Darren was waiting to hear if she would make it to Sherman and if, at that point, she would decide to drop out.

"It's terrible," said Darren on being a Hardrock spouse. "It's like she is out on a little dinghy way out on the ocean and you don't know how she is doing and there is nothing you can do. You can't be with her all of the time or you would be as crazy as her." His eyes are ringed by dark circles and worry. He has not slept since the race began.

"You never know," Claudia Moe, Luther's girlfriend, added. "You never know where you should be." Luther, apparently the victim of a flu virus since early in the race, dropped out at Ouray the previous night.

It was not long before the message reached Darren and the helpless worry could subside: Lisa needed a ride home from Sherman. Still feeling great and able to power the uphill, the pain in her feet was simply too great on the downhill.

As Darren's worries eased, the tension rose among the crew and friends of Nute, a former Silvertonian and current Durango resident. Word arrived that he was suffering from respiratory difficulties-

-possibly the early stages of pulmonary edema--near the Pole Creek station. A few hours later, he was airlifted out by helicopter and brought to Silverton, where he soon recovered and was "taking a bath and drinking a beer."

Although Team Silverton was out of the running for this year, expect to see at least one of them at the start in 2002. Richardson reportedly vowed "never again" a few hours after dropping out, but when asked the next morning if she would compete next year, she replied, "I don't know," and was already going over the run in her head, thinking of what she could do differently. Luther said he will definitely enter next year's torture test, and Nute, having completed it in the counterclockwise direction once already, may wait until 2003, when the course will go clockwise again.

It is tempting, like the woman at the KT aid station, to yell at these people, to tell them they are idiots and stupid and obviously have too much time on their hands and that they should do something productive with their time and energy. It is easy to call them obsessive-compulsive-addictive freaks of nature--especially when the stories roll in about the woman who ate too many ibuprofens after falling down and was puking up blood; or the guy whose lungs were filling up with fluid and needed a helicopter to take him out; or one of the leaders who only came to his senses and quit after actually passing out while running.

But when you watch these people struggle through the night, you might be able to see something else. It is as though the spirit that led the miners to risk life and limb, that led the settlers to build roads up mountains and build boarding houses hanging off cliffs, smack dab in the middle of avalanche paths lives on in these people. And in some ways, even as we condemn their behavior, it is difficult not to admire them, as well.