

The Sheik of Araby? Nope, it's Badwater Bart running across the hottest place on Earth—Death Valley.

Dear John,

*Remember when you ran Western States a couple of light years ago and what a struggle that was? A mere fun run compared to this. This is the tale of Badwater Bart and, after I'm through,*

I guarantee you'll want to be on the starting line next year.

The only place to start this is the beginning. At the 1989 Super Show (the largest trade show for sporting goods manufacturers) in Atlanta, we visited Hi-Tec, a Modesto, California, shoe company which sponsors the Badwater 146. George Hirsch, our publisher, mentioned to them that if anybody from RUNNER'S WORLD could do this race, it would have to be Bart Yasso. No one else would even consider *running* (in July!) from the lowest, hottest point in the United States (Badwater, at 282 feet below sea level) across the floor of Death Valley to the highest point in the lower 48 (Mount Whitney, at 14,495 feet). That's 146 miles.

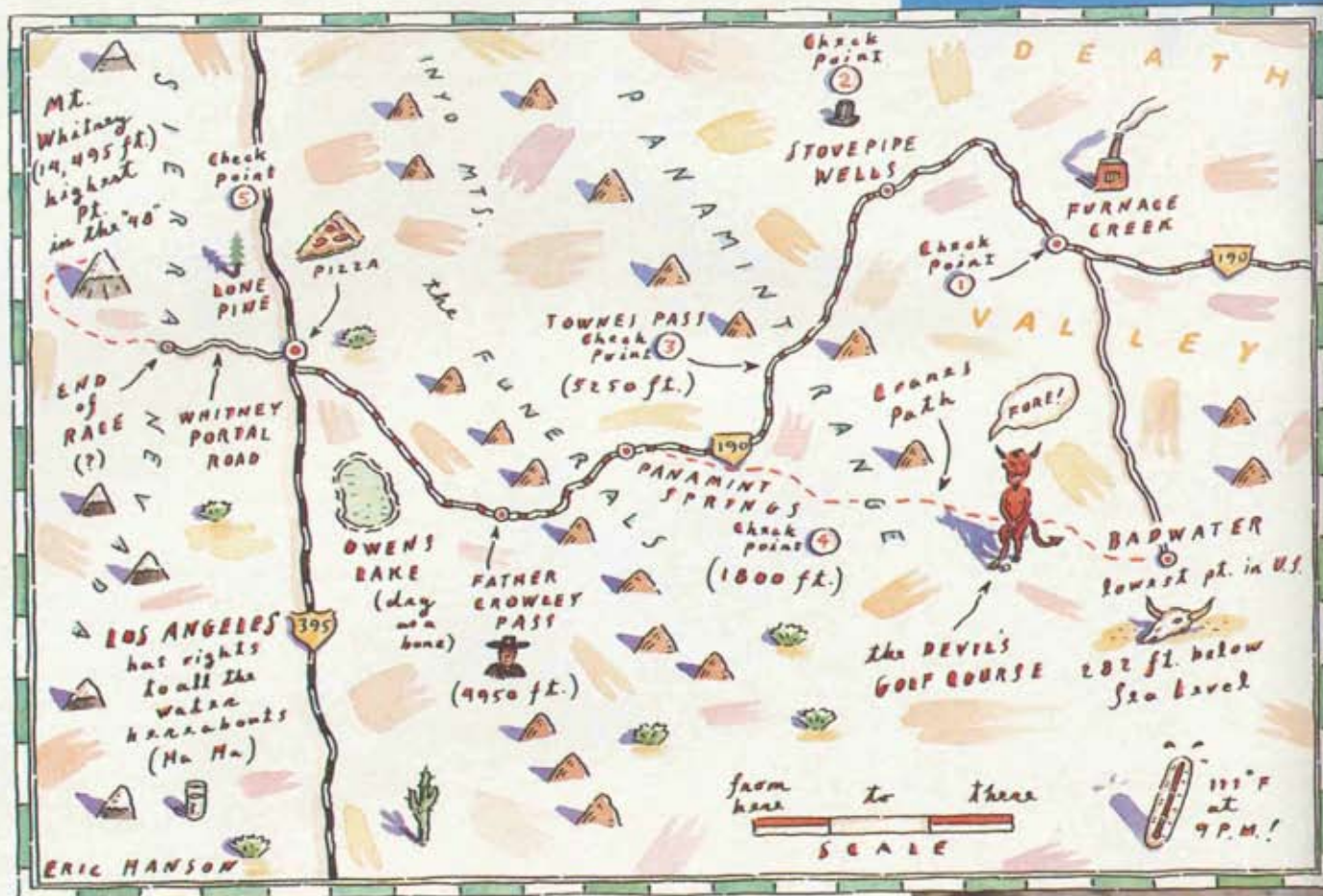
Ironically, the very idea of running Badwater was so un-Bart-like. He hates hot weather and runs about as well as a polar bear whenever it's above 60. Unlike you, he had never run an ultra, didn't know how to train for one and thinks the fanatics who run ultras are sick. But Bart is the sanest man I know, and once he decided he was going to go from point A to point B and have a good time doing it, nothing was going to get in his way.

A little history: People have been doing this Badwater-to-Whitney insanity since the late '70s. I did a story in 1978 on Al Arnold, who was the first to run the distance by himself, but the race wasn't organized until about five years ago. Since then, 15 of 88 people have finished.

When Jane Millsbaugh, promotion director for RUNNER'S WORLD (Bart's boss), and I first committed to crewing for Bart, neither of us thought he'd actually do it. But here we were at the end of July driving toward Furnace Creek, California, about 150 miles due west of Las Vegas. Once in Death Valley, we stepped outside our RV for a reality check. It was 126 degrees. The wave of heat was so overwhelming that when we took a leak, it instantly evaporated.

Furnace Creek consists of a hotel,

BY BOB WISCHNIA



bar, gas station and museum (wagons and mining equipment) just outside Death Valley National Park. When we filled up with gas, the temperature had dropped to 124 degrees, but better news: There was a ripper of a tailwind!

After a briefing for runners and their crews in Furnace Creek, we drove 18 miles down to Badwater. Badwater is nothing but a garbage can and a sign saying it's the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere. Way up on a cliff is another sign pointing out sea level. Out past the garbage can is a dry salt-lake bed. There haven't been more than a couple of drops of water in it since Ronald



A novel approach: Adrian Crane skied across the salt flats.

Reagan was doing "Death Valley Days," which did about as much for the local economy as Reagan did for air controllers.

The runners posed for pictures, drank a lot and tried to stay calm. There were six participants: Bart; Dr. Barbara Alvarez and Angelika Casteneda, 46-year-old twin sisters from Austria who live in La Jolla, California; Tom Possert, the defending champ, who had driven from Indiana; Jim Walker, who had dropped out the year before at 96 miles; and Adrian Crane, a 34-year-old experienced British "adventurer," who lives in Modesto.

Crane has done a lot of wild things, including running the length of the Himalayas, so running across Death Valley the conventional way was a little boring. He planned to cut the tangent to Mount Whitney by using cross-country skis to cross a dry lake bed, then climb a couple of mountain ranges in the pitch black of night, emerge on another dry lake bed and from there continue to the main road, 75 miles into the race. Doing so, he would cut about 30 miles from the course. Last year, Crane had tried running across the salt flats but had broken through the salt crust so often that his legs were too trashed to continue.

His game plan would turn out to be the controversy of the race, but at the time, we figured he'd end up turning around and

Hot?  
It was broiling.  
Fun?  
You bet.

backtracking. Or get lost and die. He had covered much of the route a few weeks earlier when he cached water in various spots. Bottom line: Adrian clearly knew what he was doing. He had topo maps, lights, a compass and 12 water bottles. Still, seeing him set off into the darkness was spooky.

After runners and crews synchronized their watches, the race got underway at 9 P.M. on Wednesday, July 26th. Possert started like it was a 10-K. Bart didn't sprint after him but was so energized he took off like a charged-up greyhound. As I mentioned, there was a strong tailwind, but it was so hot it felt like a firestorm.

The first 18 miles from Badwater back to Furnace Creek are a long uphill grind. Nothing extraordinarily difficult, but it was tough for Bart, Jane and me to settle into a rhythm. We hadn't formulated any plans, and since we didn't have any idea how Bart would react to the heat (111 degrees at the start), we decided to leapfrog a half-mile at a time: give him water, creep up a half-mile, wait and start over. That way, we'd always be able to give Bart a bottle of Exceed and then a few minutes later exchange it for a squeezer of ice water.

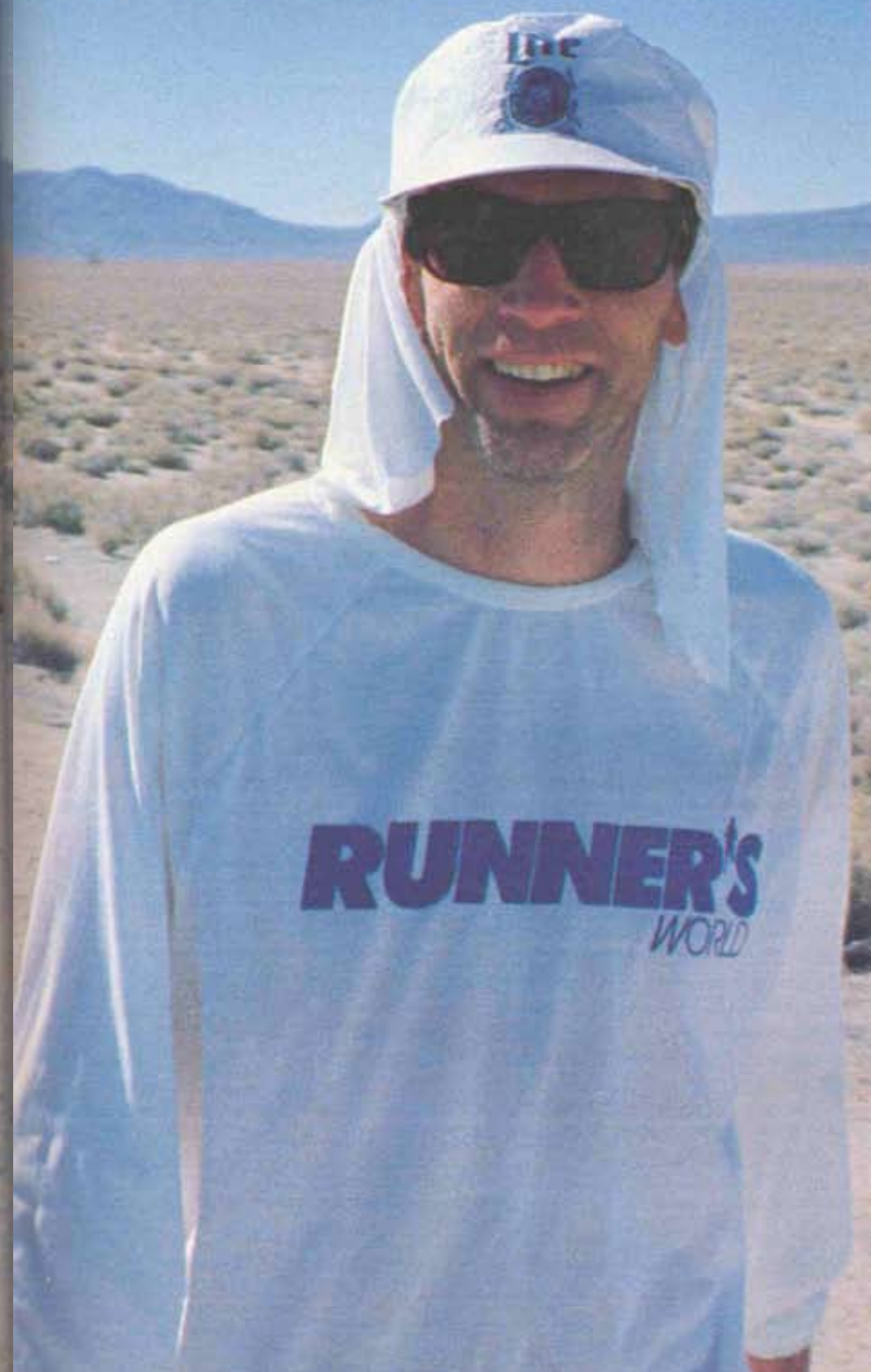
Bart was enjoying himself, but running way too fast. The trick for him was to hold back and run 10-minute pace so he could run for 12 hours before resting. We figured (incorrectly as it turned out) that if Bart could run for 12 hours straight (at 6 miles per), he'd be out of Death Valley before the next day's heat. Then it would be clear sailing from there.

Problem was, Bart had never run more than 26 miles at a shot. Nor had he ever run this slow. So running through the blackest night in suffocating heat was exploring uncharted territory. After a couple of miles, the field had spread out, and we didn't see any other runners for the next 75 miles.

We were out there alone, together. After Bart passed the first checkpoint (Furnace Creek—the last remnants of civilization) it felt as if we were in outer space, but we had to force ourselves to ignore the Big Picture. It would have been self-defeating even to consider how far we had to go. You know, 18 miles down . . . only 128 to go.

The best thing about the situation was our team feeling. Anything Bart did, we did together. We had to feel that way. We had to be more than just a crew, separate and distinct.

After getting past Furnace Creek, we began to get a feel for the race. Don't get me wrong: It was disgusting, smelly, hot, and we were never comfortable. We couldn't run the air conditioning because we didn't know if we could make it to Lone Pine (120 miles away) on one tank of gas



DEAR JOHN



Ice Age: It worked wonders for Bart.

with the AC on. So we roasted. Nothing worked. The cruise control DNFed, as did the refrigerator. All the ice melted and the food spoiled. But worst of all, the tape deck and radio were dead. No tunes! Jane and I had counted on singing our way through the night with musicals (hers) and the Dead (mine).

I was afraid I wouldn't be able to stay awake and do my part. Functioning under sleep deprivation isn't one of my strong points. Neither is going without solid food for 30 hours. But on we pushed. After awhile, we began to enjoy the stark landscape and unbelievable silence that enveloped us. There were a zillion stars, shooting stars every second. No sounds, interruptions, nothing. It was kind of mystical, scary and surreal all at once.

Bart continued to plow ahead in his custom-made Coolmax outfit. It would be great for reflecting the sun in the heat of the next day, but that evening he overheated and ran the rest of the night in his underwear.

The logistics: Bart ran with a flashlight, and either Jane or I would meet him outside the RV every half-mile with a water bottle, a handful of pretzels, maybe a melted PowerBar or a fig bar, cold pizza and always a new joke.

Jane joined him after midnight for 10 miles, but soon after she got back in the RV (around 30 miles), Bart had a bad patch. Nothing dramatic, but his body temperature was climbing and some of the fun was leaving. He got into the RV, and we turned on the AC for a few minutes to cool him down. Then Bart and I went for a 4-mile walk through the night, and we

talked about all sorts of metaphysical esoterica.

We saw the lights of Stovepipe Wells, the next checkpoint at 45 miles, for 3 hours before coming to it. After going for so long, we were hoping for something. Anything. A 7-Eleven? An all-night sushi stand? Fro-yo? We arrived about 4:30 A.M., just before first light. There was nothing there except a couple of shacks and a closed gas station.

As we plodded through Stovepipe, the Hi-Tec crew, who were cruising the course, came by and told us Possert was puking, could barely walk and was only about 3 miles ahead. Possert badly wanted to set a course record, and his crew was pushing him. Jane and I weren't into that action at all. We were worried that Bart would get competitive and, even worse, that he might win. That would be nice, but it would also mean coming back to defend his title, which didn't sound too inviting.

It was becoming evident that nothing was going to get in Bart's way. We'd had our doubts before the race, but after 10 hours, it was already apparent he was going to finish. Completing the race was never in doubt. There were no hysterics, no ill words spoken among us, no pushing on our part ("C'mon Bart, you can give us another 5 miles") . . . nothing like that. It was just Bart having the time of his life.

A few miles beyond Stovepipe, the Hi-Tec guys dropped off Steve Flanagan, the East Coast sales director, who wanted to run 15 miles with Bart. Jane and I were flattened so Steve was a welcome relief. This half-mile leapfrog routine was awfully draining for us. You'd think it would be

DEAR JOHN

fairly leisurely, crawling along at 10 mph, but there was no time to do anything except drive a half-mile, give Bart fluids, mix up some more, ice a few water bottles and drive another half-mile. Bart was obviously tired, but at least he had the adrenaline of the run working for him.

Bart did plenty of smart things, but the smartest was to bring along a dozen pairs of Tiger X-Calibers, his favorite shoe. Even though the shoe was discontinued several years ago, he had stockpiled enough to carry him through the '90s. He would switch pairs every hour, which did two things: It kept his feet from getting too hot and the midsoles of the shoes from getting



How hot was it? It was so hot that the heat off the pavement was measured at over 150 degrees and seared Bart's legs.

too mushy. Since he doesn't normally wear socks, we would spread gobs of Vaseline on his feet so he wouldn't blister. It must have worked, since he only had one nasty blister on his foot the entire way.

Somewhere along the line, I passed out for 45 minutes and began to feel better. So did Bart. We knew there was one killer mountain range (the Panamints) to get up and over before he got out of Death Valley. Flanagan told him it was a tough 3-mile hill, but Flanagan's from Boston and had never been over the course. As Bart started the climb, we could see it was going to be a lot longer than 3 miles.

Flanagan bailed out long before the climb got serious, and Jane took over pacing Bart up the mountain, which climbed for 17 1/2 miles. I'm not talking a long, gradual climb; parts of it were hands-on-the-knees, bent-over stuff. Bart had trained on Pike's Peak, but this was much harder. He went from sea level to 5,000 feet, about 15 percent of the total elevation gain of the entire race (30,000 feet), at maybe 3 miles an hour. At noon, Bart crested the top (Towne's Pass) and was finally out of the valley of death.

Almost as bad as the climb, however, was the descent—10 miles back down to sea level. We fantasized that it would be the greatest downhill in history on a bike, but on foot, it murdered Bart's quads. I walked with him, but after 3 miles, I blistered so badly and had such rotten shinsplints, I had to hitch a ride down. By the time Bart finally got to the bottom of this monster, he was in the middle of a dry lake bed that's a bombing range for fighter jets.

Jane and I were completely zonked in the RV, waiting for Bart, when some yahoo top gun buzzed us. This fly-boy was about 50 feet off the ground, going supersonic right over the top of us. A couple of nanoseconds later: KABOOM! It felt as if he were coming through the window. Scared the life out of me. Jane was so tired, she slept through it.

By 2:30 that afternoon, Bart had run 75 miles and made it to a place called Panamint Springs. It's at the foot of the Funerals, another bitch of a mountain range even steeper than the Panamints. Bart had been running for 17 1/2 hours straight, and none of us had been to bed since Tuesday night. (This was Thursday afternoon.) After the hell he had been through, the Funerals were too tough for Bart to tackle without rest and real food. We needed some, too.

Before we left Panamint, Adrian Crane emerged from the desert and hit the road. He had skied across the salt flats and climbed in the middle of the night to a pass at 8,200 feet, where he had celebrated his

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Clip and mail to: Bart Yasso  
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birthday. He had then headed down into the valley and bushwhacked across the desert. Despite the shortcut, however, Possert had still beaten Crane to Panamint by a few hours.

After we had peeled Bart off the road and packed him in ice, we headed to Lone Pine at the base of Mount Whitney, 53 miles from Panamint. (This was perfectly legal as long as Bart resumed the run later at the exact point where he had stopped.) We had reserved a room at a motel there. The other runners planned to sleep in their vans and then keep going, but since we didn't care about whether Bart "won" or "lost," we were going to sleep in an air-conditioned room. Once in Lone Pine, we had some pizza, phoned home and passed out—three to a bed—at 8 P.M.

Get this: We're eating pizza (Bart's favorite food—he could run around the world fueled entirely on pizza) in Lone Pine next to this guy who's obviously a runner. Bart starts talking to him and tells him he's running across Death Valley. The guy's amazed and, as they talk, mentions he lives near L.A. but is actually from Pennsylvania. Where? A little town you'd never heard of. Yeah, where? Emmaus (our home, too). Finally, they recognized each other. Unreal!

We hoped it was a good omen. Next morning, we got up at 2:30 A.M. to drive back to Panamint. We had no idea how Bart's body would react. He could have been one big lactic acid block, but he said he didn't feel too horrible. On the drive back, we passed Possert. A few miles behind him was Crane, who had taken his first and only break at 119 miles—a 2-hour nap, which was supposed to last an hour, but he and his crew had slept through their alarm clocks. That extra hour would cost him dearly.

As soon as we hit Panamint, Bart and Jane started the climb. Bart was totally "on" and powered up the 10 steep miles of the Funerals so aggressively that he dropped Jane.

Sunrise in the Funerals! This range wasn't as long as the Panamints, but the mountains were steeper. I had the RV in low gear, and it barely crawled up the suckers. It was about 10 miles to the plateau, and once Bart reached it, he switched to cruise control. Jane figured she might as well get her long run in, and they rolled for 20 miles.

When I took over pacing duties (this was Friday morning), Bart had already gone another 30 miles for a total of 105, but he was fading. It was cooking (112 degrees) and getting worse. I needed to reach Bart, who was listless and drifting. He didn't want to expend too much energy chatting, but I knew one way to get him stirred up.



Twin towers: Barbara Alvarez and her twin sister, Dr. Angelika Casteneda, pushed on through the heat toward Mount Whitney.

There's this guy who does the Big Apple biathlon series and is one of the world's great cheaters. If there's one thing Bart despises, it's a cheater. Bart does a lot of the Big Apple races, and I knew he knew him. I asked if he knew this pretty good masters biathlete whom I was thinking of doing a story on (total ruse), and he went absolutely nuts! Bart ranted for an hour about how outrageous it was that I would even consider doing a story on this fraud. The more irate Bart got, the faster he moved. It was great that someone he detests could jack him up so much. In the middle of the Badwater 146, hate can be a beautiful thing.

About this time, we caught our first

glimpse of Mount Whitney—still 30 miles away. To get to Lone Pine, Bart had to cross through Owens Lake, which is bone dry. It was so obscenely hot that the heat off the asphalt was scorching his legs and it was a struggle to keep moving. At this point, the twins appeared on the horizon, and it revved Bart to try and pass them. The sisters had kept moving most of the previous night, but by midday Friday, they were a wreck and had camped by the side of the road. When they saw us coming, they tried to move. One of them was so out of it and had blistered so badly she had to walk with cross-country ski poles. The other was crying, and her crew practically dragged her along. Braver, tougher women you will never see. Since we could see how much it meant to them to stay ahead of Bart, we decided to give it a rest.

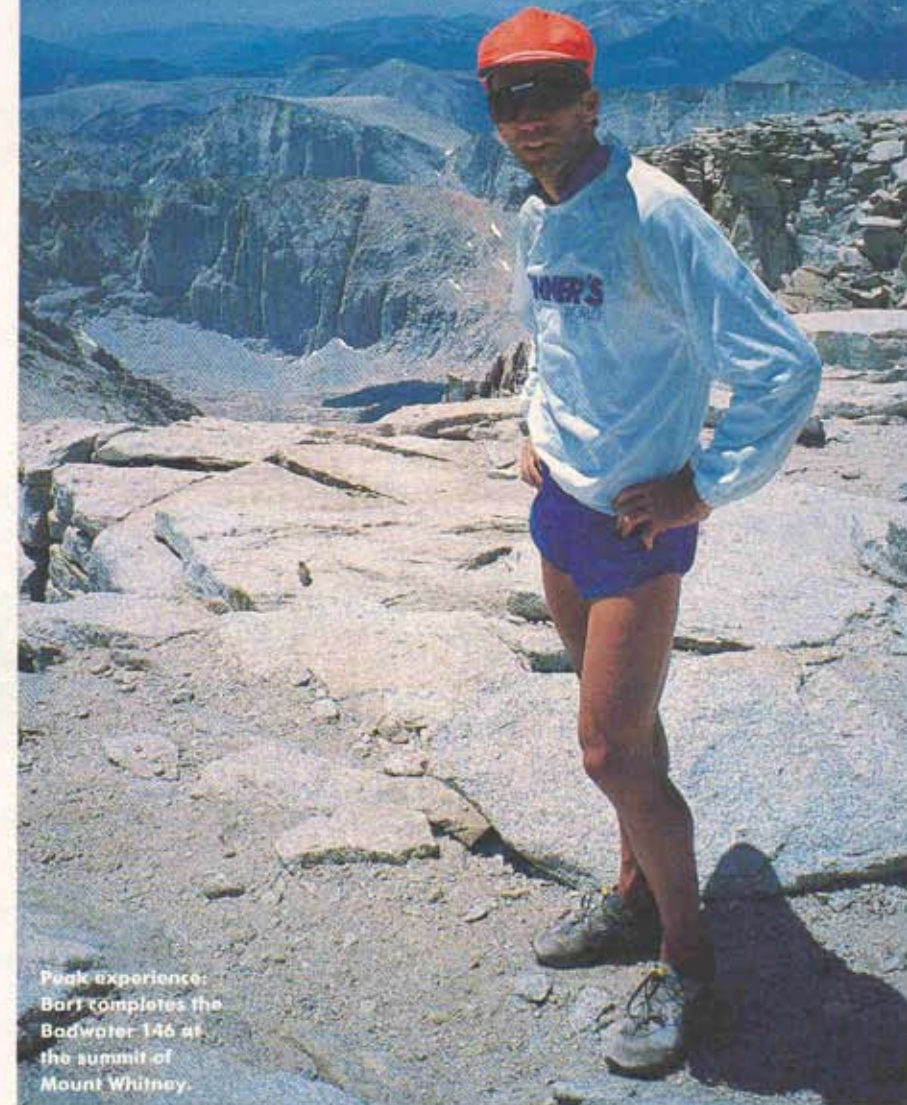
When Bart passed them 10 miles later, they high-fived each other in a genuine show of support. Bart made it into Lone Pine, at the foot of Mount Whitney, about 5 P.M. and, after a massage and more pizza, headed toward the Whitney Portals trailhead another 12 miles (straight up) from Lone Pine.

Climbing up Whitney is a gut-wrenching haul in the best of health. From the trailhead, it's 11 miles to the top. The way we figured it, the race was really all about getting from the lowest point to the highest. That's what it said on the T-shirts. That's what we were going by. But it turned out that Hi-Tec couldn't get permission from the Forest Service to allow the race to continue up Whitney, so it ended officially at the Portals.

Possert made the 135 miles to the Portals first in 36 hours, 10 minutes and 30 seconds, won \$1,000 and stopped there. I thought that was kind of wimpy, but he had proved he's a stud by going that far. Adrian's nap cost him, as that extra hour was the difference between his time and Possert's to the Portals. By the time we got there, he had already gone up and was coming down. He would set the Badwater-to-the-top-of-Whitney record (43:22:20) and receive a \$1,500 bonus. But he didn't do the full course. Bart felt that since Adrian didn't run the official course, didn't run 146 miles, he didn't do the race. (Aside: The guy clearly would have beaten Bart and maybe Possert if he had followed the course.)

My feeling is that Possert didn't finish because he didn't go up Whitney. I think Crane won. Since there aren't any rules and the race is from the lowest to the highest point, Crane found a shorter, better way.

Bart made it. It was brutal, but he made it up Whitney, and even though he



Peak experience: Bart completes the Badwater 146 at the summit of Mount Whitney.

took an eternity getting down, he made it back in good shape. (Two days later, in Emmaus, we went for a 30-mile bike ride.) He started up the mountain at first light, about 5:30 A.M., and made it down around 8:30 that night. Depending on how you score the race, Bart either won or finished second, third, fourth or fifth. I think he finished second to Crane because he was the second person to go from Badwater to the top of Whitney. Possert, Adrian and the twins made it to the Portals before him, but only Crane beat him to the top. But then, who cares?

When we finally arrived home two days later, a couple hundred friends and family turned out to meet us. Rodale Press, as if the company hadn't done enough for us by footing the bill for the entire expedition, arranged for a party at the airport. When we stepped off the plane and into the crowd, even I got a little misty-eyed. Bart's the

most selfless man I know. He's a giving person who has helped so many people so many times without ever asking for a thing. I think that's what made it special . . . Bart has always been there for everyone, and now everyone was there for him.

How did I feel? Wiped, exhilarated, proud. I can honestly say I would never have done this for anyone else, other than you, John. Bart made it fun. So did we. We thought it was going to be an ordeal, but it never was. It was tough, hot, hard, but Bart couldn't have done it without us, and I'm honored I was able to help him through it. Not once did we feel like it was a bum trip. Nothing went catastrophically wrong (music would have been nice) and, in every important way, everything went right.

I'm ready to go back and crew again. Next time, it's your turn to run.

Cheers,

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