

## Fun in the Sun at the Western States Endurance Run – John Blue's Story

I'd watched the weather forecasts with the discipline of the obsessed for the week leading up to this year's Western States 100. For the last weekend in June heat is always a possibility, but the forecasted high temperatures seemed to rise every day until they were projecting 106 to 110 on race day. The last time I'd run it, in 2003, I lay awake worrying about my training. This year, I knew my training was solid. Instead, I lay awake worrying about the heat. The funny thing about this was just a few weeks earlier everyone was worrying about how much snow we'd have to run through!

The race actually starts the day before where we arrive at Squaw Valley for a pre-race medical check and briefing. This is a fun day because everyone is chatty and nervous and you finally get to hang out with a bunch of other people who can relate to this kind of craziness. We all get weighed (in our race clothes) and our vitals are checked and all our baseline medical information is written down on a hospital type wristband that will stay on until we finish or drop.

Amazingly, I slept pretty well Friday night and woke up to the alarm at 3:00 AM. Already we could here other people stomping around in the hotel and packing up cars in the parking lot. We got to the race starting area where I picked up my number (142) and made small talk with the other runners. Bendan, my wife, helped me round up liquids for my water bottle since I'd failed to fill them at the car. Finally, we were gathered in front of the starting banner and I plugged my ears as Dr. Lind fired a shotgun into the air to start the race.

I jogged a few minutes to loosen up and then started the long march up to the Escarpment aid station. This year, the aid station was around 2.5 miles in due to the remaining snow pack and I was astounded to see it had taken me over 45 minutes. It's a steep climb. Just beyond the aid station, we entered the snowfields and everyone struggled to keep their footing during the climb. I was thankful for the extra traction I got from wearing newer shoes and I couldn't help thinking of that Mt Everest documentary I'd watched with the family a couple of days earlier.

As soon as we popped over the summit (8,700 feet), we found the other side of the mountain to be dry where there were no trees. There is a little downhill stretch there and I used it to make up some time and pass a few people. After a mile or so, the trail runs back into the trees and then we were back to slipping and sliding in up to six feet of snow. For the most part, the snow was runnable, but it was cut with streams of melt-off and punctuated with tree wells. I actually found this to be an enjoyable section but some people were having difficulty keeping on their feet. It was starting to warm up already and it was odd to be feeling warm and yet have wet and frozen feet.

This year, the race was returning to the original ridge trails that had been closed after a massive fire in 2001. As we took to this section, things became more difficult. The rugged terrain is challenging and the trail was littered with rocks and pinecones. It is also totally exposed and often hard to follow. The occasional woods that had sheltered some of this trail in the past were now mostly destroyed. Imagine running through a forest of telephone poles on a hot, hot day. The dust was deep and runners left plumes in their wakes. It was already hot and barely into morning.

We labored along the ridge at around 7,000 feet before descending into Duncan Canyon. The creek at the bottom was cold and deep and I sat in it for a moment to cool off before the long, long climb up to Robinson Flat.

Robinson Flat (30 miles) is the first major medical checkpoint and the first time I'd see Bendan since the start. It was during this long climb that I started to feel I was in trouble. Barely 24 miles

into the race and I was already feeling sick from the heat. The six miles between Duncan Canyon and Robinson Flat took me an hour and a half, although it appeared other people were having even more trouble than I.

I jogged into Robinson and the medics weighed me in. I weighed around 142 pounds. The medic asked me my starting weight and I mumbled "150." She looked at my wristband and obviously confused my weight with my race number because she said, "You're perfect!" and sent me on my way. I was far from perfect. I had drunk more than 140 ounces of liquid and had somehow lost eight pounds. The rules state: *A loss of 3 to 5% of body weight indicates significant depletion of body fluids, with possible loss of gastrointestinal and musculoskeletal function. After evaluation, the runner may be allowed to proceed at a slower rate, drinking more fluids. A loss of 5 to 7% of body weight will require a more extensive evaluation, and the runner will be required to stop and rehydrate back to the 3-5% weight loss range before proceeding.* I was about 5.5% down.

I went over to Bendan and sat in the chair while she draped me with wet towels to help bring my temperature down. I was surprised to see my mother there and I mooched off her ice water she'd brought. Somehow, the aid station didn't have any ice for the runners. It's an aid station you can drive to, it was hot as hell and they didn't have any ice! A profound screw-up if ever there was one. I was going to have to run out of there with warm electrolyte to drink (Cliff Shot Raspberry, I believe.).

When I told Bendan I'd lost eight pounds she didn't fully grasp the significance of that number. She was operating under the instructions I'd given her, and urged me out of the aid station and to keep moving.

I took off from Robinson Flat and ran fairly well through Millers Defeat and Dusty Corners, drinking as much as I could stomach to try and gain some weight back. I started to feel much better and was thinking I might be turning a corner. I ran into Last Chance (43 miles) feeling hot again although I weighed in slightly better at 144 pounds. The medics scolded me and advised me to take in more salt and more fluids. I went to the food table and ate some watermelon and cantaloupe. Then I took a bite of some banana dipped in salt (a standard thing for me) and my stomach clenched. I wandered away from the table and promptly emptied out my guts on the side of the trail. One of the medics grabbed me and parked me in a chair where I sat for an hour trying to get it together. Eventually, I started to feel better and was able to eat and drink a bit. I decided it was time to see if I could make it to Michigan Bluff and see Bendan again.

I ran down the hill to Deadwood creek at the base of Devils Thumb. I was able to run down quickly and drew shouts of encouragement from people who'd seen me parked at the last aid station. I lay in the creek for a few minutes, actually disappointed that it wasn't any cooler than it was and then began the painful slog up the Thumb. The climb up Devils Thumb is only two miles but it rises about 1,400 feet over that distance. It is known as the most difficult hill of the course.

I did fairly well until I was 3/4 of the way up and I started to get hot and sick again. I'd started alone and suddenly there were about eight people trudging along behind me. I couldn't stomach any fluids and even the sight of a woman drinking out of her water bottle made my stomach lurch. I had to stop a few times and collect myself as I could feel waves of nausea coming and I was afraid of getting stuck on the side of the hill. I couldn't stop wondering at the difference a month makes. The last time I'd made that climb (Memorial Day weekend) it was snowing and I was freezing.

Finally, I crested the top and was greeted by some of my teammates who were working the aid station. I was pretty certain I wouldn't leave under my own power. It was 5:00 o'clock, fully two

and a half hours later than the last time I'd run this race. I tried to eat and drink, but my stomach had shut down and would convulse if I tried anything more than iced soy milk. (If I ever do this again, I'll pack more of that stuff!) And apparently, I'd stumbled into some sort of festival of public vomiting! Every couple of minutes it seemed someone would uncork right near me. I tried not to let it get to me, but it was more than 90 degrees and I was wrapped in a space blanket, shivering and trying to get my eyes to uncross. Meanwhile, Bobby Garcia, Eric Ianacone and Monty Schacht doted over me, with Eric gently urging me on. I wouldn't budge. I was a wreck.

What finally convinced me to drop was the clock. I was pushing up against the 30-hour pace and the thought of toughing out another 50 miles bumping against the cut-offs was too much to imagine.

A nice aid station volunteer (Jim) drove me and another guy back to Foresthill. It turns out, he was there because he'd started running a couple of years ago (at 58 years-old) due to the influence of someone he'd been working with: John Nichols. The coincidence was that John's first experience with the Western States was when he'd paced me from Foresthill in 2003.

Eventually, I'd found my wife in Foresthill and together we sat and watched people come through town. Some looking not so good. Some doing fine. Each doing their very best.

We all toed the starting line sure in the knowledge that many of us wouldn't make it to the finish. We hoped our training, our planning and our crews would get us there but we could never be certain. As President Kennedy famously said about America's manned mission to the moon: *"We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too."*

Congratulations to all the finishers and to whoever chose to test their limits and thanks to all who helped us try!

John Blue

## **It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. Western States 2006. A Tale of Two Sunrises – John Nichols’s Story**

John Blue did an excellent job describing the day’s challenges. We knew the re-opening of Duncan Canyon was going to add a substantial new challenge, but we underestimated. The heat was pervasive, but it was just part of the perfect-storm of barriers lined up to thwart my pursuit of a third silver buckle.

I trained harder than ever this year and had a great group of all-weather friends to share the enjoyment of record rainfalls throughout the winter and early Spring. Rain or mud, we had some great training runs, including the Quad-ball assaults up Ball Bearing on the Way Too Cool course. By early April, I was probably at my peak, somehow cranking out a 7 hour 21 minute finish at the American River 50 miler. My confidence was increasing each week, and we began our normal pilgrimages to Michigan Bluff to pay homage to the Thumb, as we prepared our quads for river canyons.

All was proceeding to plan until the Mi-Wok 100k, where very early in the race I got substantially off course, thereby turning the 62 mile race into something over 65. Oh well. I always get lost at Mi-Wok. So, I decided to finish anyway, caught my friend Charlie a little after mile 20, and decided I would devote myself to torturing him for the next 40 miles. Charlie finished strong and I had a good workout.

The next day I was miserable. Not that surprising. Running 65 miles with 10,000 feet elevation change tends to do that to you. However, the next day I was worse, so went into Urgentcare where they determined I’d contracted a staph infection. I’ll spare you more details on this subject. With the help of antibiotics, I seemed to be on the mend. Unfortunately, I was also having trouble with a hip flexor muscle. Not one of those major injuries. Just one of those annoying problems making you run incorrectly, which tend tends to lead to other problems.

In short, my training in May & June was less-than-awe-inspiring. However, despite those setbacks, I was turning the corner, and was optimistic. I was going to be ready to run anyway. Our running group logged massive miles in the winter and Spring, so a bit of an extended taper might not be all that bad.

Since I could not train as much, I spent some weekends working with Mark Falcone, Tim Twietmeyer, and many others to help clear the fallen trees that had taken over the Duncan Canyon trail over the years since the fire. This seemed like a good idea. If I couldn’t train very much, I could at least make the course more runnable and bank some minutes that way. Little did I know that I was clearing the path to the 9<sup>th</sup> rung of Dante’s Inferno, perhaps reserved for the souls of Western States runners who were starting to think breaking 24 hours was not such a big deal. I think I missed the sign at the entrance to Red Star Ridge where it stated “All hope abandon ye who enter here”. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

### **5:00am. Squaw Valley. Race Begins.**

I’d forgotten the difficulty of this first climb, and it was worse this year. With the return to Duncan Canyon, they shortened the first section of the course so that it is now only 3.5 miles to the top of the Emigrant Pass, rather than the 4.5 miles it was the last few years. This wasn’t easier as it still climbed the same 2550 vertical feet.

All things considered, I was running well through the first major aid station Lyon Ridge, 10.5 miles. I loaded up the bottles, grabbed some pretzels, and kept pushing. I was out rather quick, but that was the plan. I hoped to get to Green Gate, mile 80, before it got dark. Despite the heat, I was going to try to maximize daylight this year. For the last two years, I ran a smart race, and got gradually faster through the day, running my fastest splits between miles 60 and 80. Since

this recipe was so successful, I thought I'd change it. Go figure. You're not required to be sensible to run this event.

I cruised on through the Red Star Ridge aid station at mile 16, and kept pushing the pace on toward Duncan Canyon. I was carrying two 26 ounce bottles, but this was an 8 mile stretch to the next aid station, and I started to run low on fluid. Energizer is now a Western States sponsor. I think this might be their favorite section of the course. It kept going and going and going. I did have one advantage over some of the other runners. I had cleared brush, etc. over the last 3 miles of this section, so once I reached something that looked familiar, I at least could predict I was within 30 minutes of being saved by the aid station.

#### **Duncan Canyon aid station. Mile 23.8.**

Gus & Claudette Exarchos, my crew extraordinaire, were there to greet me. I was so happy to see them. They had an ice cold can of Balanced Soy Milk that I quickly guzzled. They also had a bucket of ice water that Gus was dumping on my head. Probably exactly what I needed, but I thought I might need the defibrillators if it was much colder. Claudette provided two full bottles packed with ice, one with Powerade and the other with water. I was off and running. I was still running relatively fast and wanted to keep making good time.

I then began the descent into Duncan Canyon. For a descent, it sure seemed to go up and down a lot, but eventually the trail worked its way down to the stream crossing. I made sure to get soaked on the way across, and then started to work my way up the trail to Robinson Flat. Let's just say it was getting a tad bit toasty by this time. It had to be over 100 degrees. As John noted in his write-up above, the burned up trees weren't providing any shade. It was steeper than I recall. I worked to help clear this section just a week before, and told my running buddies that the canyon was not so bad. Perhaps it was because today we were running across molten lava.

This took a long time, but I remained optimistic. I was running short on fluid again, so I consolidated bottles, and filled one with stream water. I kept dumping this one on my head to keep cool. Later I filled up the bottles again, started drinking it. Oh well. It seemed pretty clear. Weren't too many pre-reptilians floating around in the primordial soup, and dehydration was the more clear and present danger. I'd worry tomorrow about whether I'd encountered some kind of flesh-eating fecal bacteria.

I finally reached the wonderful sign that stated Robinson Flat, ½ mile. My spirits picked up so I started running faster ... for a few minutes. Sure seemed long for ½ mile. And where did this hill come from? I don't remember it from the trail clearing last week.

#### **Robinson Flat aid station. Mile 29.7**

This is the first major aid station where they had scales to check weight. I was down about 3 pounds. Probably not bad compared to what others were experiencing, but I needed to increase the fluid intake.

My friend Pat and my parents were here at this aid station. Pat found me and gave me a bottle of Powerade to drink while he led me to where my parents were located. Then, I drank another can of Balanced Soy Milk, loaded up two bottles of iced Powerade, and got back on the trail up Little Bald Mountain.

I was a little under 24 hour pace at this point, but not by much. This was rather disconcerting. I'd been running hard, and would have thought I'd be closer to an hour ahead of pace. I kept pushing, but backed off a bit. I finally started to realize that this was going to be a survival day, and if I ran too fast during the heat, I'd create a deficit that I'd not be able to close later on.

I thought the Duncan Canyon stretch had no shade, but that was just a warm-up. The new trail from Little Bald Mountain to the Miller's Defeat aid station was baking me to a crackly-crunch. Just pour some cheesy powder on my head and start snacking.

Shortly after cresting Little Bald Mountain, Roger Dellor, age 63, passed me. I attempted to run with him for a couple of miles, but couldn't keep pace. He must have gotten a new timing belt when he did his 60 year or 300,000 mile checkup. As a practical matter, he has had over 20 years more to train for the event, so he had an advantage.

I didn't see another runner before reaching the aid station at Miller's Defeat, mile 34.4. I iced up the bottles and set forth for Dusty Corners. I'm pretty sure I did not see a runner this entire stretch. Things will get rather stretched out during a 100 mile race, but this was getting a bit spooky. I was making good time, but not that good. Where were the other runners? Was anyone still in the race? Was I still on the course? Is that a yellow ribbon up ahead?

### **Dusty Corners aid station. Mile 38**

Gus & Claudette, my guardian angels, were there to ice me up, lube me up, and provide another layer of sunscreen before heading off into the crucible we call the canyons.

The 5.3 mile stretch to Last Chance is relatively flat, somewhat shady, and a good place to start making up time. The last couple of years, I was passing many runners during this part of the course. Not today. I did not see anyone for the entire 5.3 miles. It was a twilight zone kind of a day. I was starting to worry about some of my friends. Most are fast runners and the fact that none of them had caught me yet was not a good sign.

### **Last Chance aid station. Mile 43.3**

This was another checkpoint where the runners are weighed and vital signs are checked. I think perhaps this allows them to call ahead to the Devil's Thumb aid station with a estimated body bag count. My weight was fine. I think a couple pounds over where I started, so I just kept drinking. I figured I'd picked up an extra pound of dirt along the way, but otherwise was intact.

From here on in there should be no surprises. I know the last 60 miles of this course very well. I tried to make good time over the next 4 miles, which were all down hill. I kept a pretty good pace until reaching the swinging bridge at the bottom of Deadwood canyon. Like the last two years, I took a detour here, ran down to the creek, and dove into the cool waters. I wanted to drop my core temperature before starting the ascent up Devil's Thumb, a rather challenging climb that covers about 1400 vertical feet in 1.7 miles.

The climb up Devil's Thumb is never pleasant, but it sure seemed like there was more gravity than normal today. However, I hiked and hiked, and about 50 minutes later, I reached the aid station where many of my Buffalo Chips running club friends were euthanizing runners.

### **Devil's Thumb aid station. Mile 47.8**

My friend Jim Mohler and my wife Kelly were both working the aid station, so I had the advantage of an unofficial crew checkpoint. I guzzled another can of iced soy milk and loaded up the bottles with iced water and Gu2O. Kelly asked me whether I needed anything else, and I said just one more thing. Today was our 17<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Running a 100 mile race the same day as the wedding anniversary might not rank in the top 10 romantic suggestions. However, having diamond earrings in your Devils' Thumb drop bag and surprising your wife with them ... priceless. Jim had retrieved them for me and handed them to me while the bottles were being filled. I then gave them to Kelly, posed for a picture, and ran on down the trail before she knew what happened.



It was getting late in the day, and although I'd been working hard, the combination of the new course and the high temperatures, was taking a toll. I did the mental math and figured I'd reach Michigan Bluff at about 12.5 hours, which was significantly shower than last year, and only 30 minutes faster than the first year I ran Western States. Regarding my chances of a sub-24 hour finish, this was not a good sign. Sure, I was 30 minutes ahead of the year I ran 23:51, but I pulled a major rabbit out of the hat that day. I'm not sure there were any rabbits left in the hat, or if there were, they perhaps had been fricasseed in the heat.



It was a long climb out of El Dorado Canyon, but I made it to Michigan Bluff about when I expected.

Once again, my crew was there to lift me up. Both my pacers, Pat Hessini, and Drew Schooley, were also there to gauge what kind of carcass they would be dragging through the last part of the course. 24 hours was still within the realm of the possible. I knew I'd need to find another gear to get there from here, but decided not to worry about that just yet. In both the previous years, I ran miles 60-80 faster than any other part of the course. Perhaps I could do it again? At any rate, my goal was to keep the ball in play for a while longer, and perhaps Pat could help me find some rabbits at Foresthill.

The descent into Volcano canyon is never pleasant, and today didn't disappoint. I just kept putting one foot in front of the other, and worked my way toward Foresthill.

### **Foresthill aid station. Mile 62**

They say the race begins at Foresthill. That certainly was the case for me the last couple of years. This year, however, it seemed more like I would be taking the final exam at Foresthill, and I may have not studied the right chapters.

The sun was getting low in the sky and I wanted to get down the trail and maximize the remaining precious daylight. However, my right arch was screaming. I'd hoped to wear the same shoes for the entire run, but decided to take a quick break for some blister triage. My only hope of salvaging a good time was if I could find a rhythm and make good time through the first three aid stations of the Cal-Loop. The arch blister was significant enough to make me limp, so I had to deal with it.

It was hard to get the feet back into another pair of shoes. They were sore and swollen, but I squeezed them in, laced them up, and Pat and I ran down toward California Street. After turning left and making our way to the trail, I took a quick pee break and summoned up the gumption to take one more stab at pretending to be a runner.

Pat and I ran relatively fast for the 3.7 miles to the Cal 1 aid station (Dardenelles), and pretty much ran straight through. I was able to keep up the pace for another couple of miles, but began to buckle whenever the course climbed. By this point, the climbs were not that difficult, but were enough to expose my situation. The sun was rapidly setting, and with it my chances of securing a sub-24 hour finish. By mile 70 I was shut down. The internal circuit breakers had been flipped and the shuffle through waist-deep-peanut-butter was underway.

I'm a little fuzzy on how Pat got me through the next 8 miles. It took over 2 hours, but I remained optimistic that although sub-24 was not going to happen, that somewhere during the night I would find a gear and have several miles where I was covering the course at a pretty good clip. This didn't happen. Some days you're the windshield, some days you're the bug.

### **Rucky Chucky River Crossing. Mile 78.**



I made it across the river without drowning. Now, if I could complete the hike to Green Gate without bawling. Our goals change as we approach mile 80 at Western States. Drew was supposed to pick me up at mile 80 and pace me to the finish line, but he ran down to the bottom of Rucky Chucky to pick me up early. My friend Don Freeman was also there at river crossing. Don was unable to run Western States this year due to work and family demands on his time. Lucky bastard. He picked a good year to take a mulligan.

As miserable as I was feeling, it was nice to have three friends out there in the middle of the night encouraging you to keep going. Sure, I was a pathetic, miserable, clump of moldy compost, but my homies still had my back.

I'm not sure how to describe the next 10 miles except that it took forever. All I could do was employ RFM (relentless forward motion). I kept trying to run, but Drew suggested we should power hike. As it turns out, each time I'd run I'd get slower than when we were walking, and it was kind of embarrassing. Where did all the uphill come from between mile 80 and 85? I didn't recall this from training. One positive note, Marty caught me soon after Green Gate and seemed like he had found some new legs. I decided to run with him for a while. 200 meters later, I confirmed that this was a bad idea, wished him well, and went back into my shuffle.

At about mile 88, we began to hear to music of the Brown's Bar aid station. Fortunately, they were playing the Beatles and Bob Dylan, so my pacer Drew decided all was right with the world. This was pretty much my low point in the entire race. I finally had to sit down on the trail for a few minutes and try to pull myself together.

#### **Brown's Bar aid station. Mile 89.9.**

We eventually crawled our way to Brown's Bar and decided to load up on potato soup. This was pretty good stuff. It kind of gave me heart burn, but the heart burn helped wake me up a bit.

It was about 3:30am, and it sure was warm. Drew encouraged me to keep going, noting that if we did not get on down the trail, we'd be running in the heat of the day again.

The climb up Quarry Road was my low point the last couple of years. Not the case this year. Putting aside the fact that I had rather substantially redefined the term low point, it was starting to get light, and I could at least see the trail. The sun rising does seem to brighten one's spirits and ever-so-slightly lift energy levels.

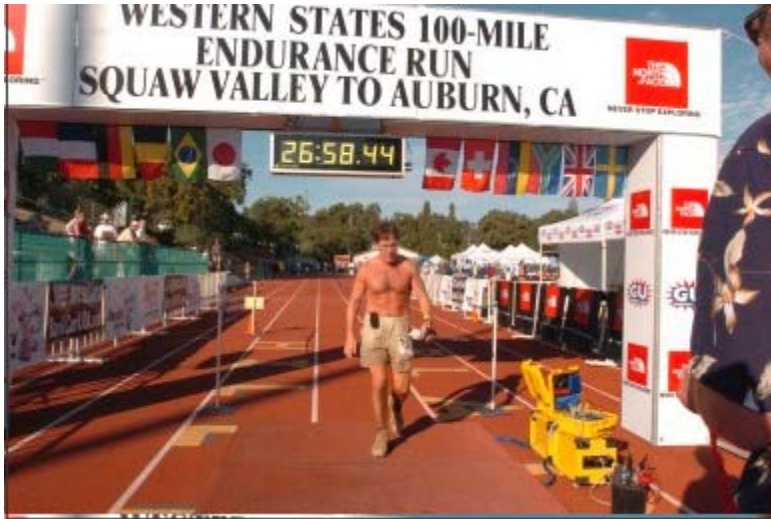
#### **Highway 49 aid station. Mile 93.5.**

They weighed me again at this aid station, and I was up about 5 pounds. Apparently, hydration was no longer an issue. Having to pee every 5 minutes during the last part of the race was an issue, but I was well-hydrated. It was a relief to get here and I didn't stay long. I guzzled one more can of the soy milk, filled the water bottle, and set out for Auburn. Git 'er done!

I kept trying to run as much as I could during this section, but with marginal results. Drew and I had to survive an encounter with several trail sweep horses, but otherwise made it to No Hands Bridge without adding to the night's indignities.

#### **No Hands Bridge aid station. Mile 96.8.**

Shuffle, shuffle, hike, shuffle, hike. This is a really long 5k. I think it took an hour. It's about a 1000 foot climb from the river to Auburn, which is substantial, but never seemed that bad in training when I still had usable legs.



I reached the finish line in just under 27 hours. While I did not reach any of my time goals, did not earn a silver buckle, I was pretty pleased to just finish. I wondered if I'd have the courage to keep going when everything went so badly, and found out my stubborn disposition was enough to get me through. Drew showed the patience of Job helping me through the night. Don't try this race without a pacer.

My friend Pat and my parents traveled a long way to see me compete in this year's race. Part of me wishes they had a chance to see me run one of the previous two years when I'd broken 24 hours; where they could have seen a more triumphant finish. But perhaps this was more appropriate. They got to see me stick it out when things were going badly, and better understand the incredible friendships that are forged by nut-jobs helping each other prepare for and compete in an event like the Western States 100.

Hope springs eternal. Perhaps next year we'll have that overcast sky, moderate temperatures, dry course, stiff tailwind, and full moon we all dreamed of. There is silver buckle out there with our names on it, and we'll toe the line again to do battle with the Western States trail.

John