

# Once Upon A Time In America

*100 miles – Two Feet – One Day - by Andy Mouncey*

2005 Western States 100 mile race  
([www.ws100.com](http://www.ws100.com))



## And So It Begins

4.59am June 25th Squaw Valley, California, USA

'One minute to go!' the PA blares. My wife Charly and I have been wrapped in a hug standing at the edge of the assembled throng as runners disengage from loved ones and move to the start line. 380 runners from all over the world for arguably the most prestigious 100 of the all.80's rock music blast out and floodlights illuminate the first few hundred yards up the ski track. Straight up a 2500' climb to a ski station at the high point of the race 8700.' Part of me smiles wryly at the lack of haste to get to the start: I will walk this climb and I don't care if I'm at the back!

It's one of those husband-wife moments. The magnitude of what we are about to do is starting to hit. The hug tightens and bottom lips begin to wobble. Some last kisses and searching glances, 'I love you.' Charly is as misty eyed as me, but I'm also a practical bloke: 'look after yourself, babe.' Rest and food will be as important for her as for me, and though we've planned this as best we can she will have two things to contend with that I will not: waiting and worrying.

A last squeeze for my favourite lady and a smiling 'I love you!' and then it's into the throng. Seconds to go and the countdown starts. '10,

9, 8...'

The front line sprints away into the pre-dawn light.

## Watching the Dawn.

Climbing, climbing. Climbing. The track has wound it's way through rock and snow steadily up switchbacks for the first few miles. After the mad rush of the start – I was pretty much at the back – the field settles and I'm walking strongly and passing people. Charly and I have been here for 3 days and we've noticed the altitude: Squaw Valley is at 6200' and I'm more breathless than normal. (Just how breathless I found out during a local bikram yoga class two days ago: very hot and a little bit bothered, I had a keeling over moment!)

I'm trying to watch the dawn breaking over the mountains behind me. I've got a small camera with me to capture those Kodak moments while on the move and I'm still sane – and this is definitely one of those. Oranges brighten to yellows as the sun emerges. 'Gonna be a warm one, then...

As the first 25 miles unravel I'm accused of being from Texas and Wales and converse with varying degrees of accuracy and humour about English Royalty, the Boston Tea Party, and S & M to name but a few topics!

The running comes easily. Snow is still thick on the ground in many places as we are still around 7000' but while many are slipping, my trusty aggressive soles are doing their stuff and allowing me to skip daintily past. I figure enjoy it while you can!

## Flowing Through Forests

Descending through these early pine forest is a foretaste of the key characteristic of this course: there is more down hill than uphill. I focus on smooth and easy descending but this still means I'm moving faster than most people around me. Is this still too fast? Will I pay for this later ? But it feels soooo easy!

The forests are so quiet that I feel I am obliged

to tip-toe through them. I focus on doing just this and enjoy the fact that we are all starting to spread out now. I chat easily with people I catch and run with for a while. I'm steadily making up ground but know that it is still all very early days – but it feels so easy...

Relax. Flow. Walk the uphill. Smile. Chat with the aid station volunteers and remember your 'please' and 'thankyous.' Keep your head up and look around you – enjoy!

Down, down and down through the snowfields and the forests. The climbs are small but the descents are huge by comparison demanding discipline and concentration. Jamie the Kiwi and I find each other around the 20 mile point, and once we'd established an overseas connection it all just starts to flow between us. He's tall, lean and angular with the look of an outdoorsman: we quickly establish that we can both do dry humour very well – which is fine except much of it requires translating to our transient American audience!

### **Robinson Flat**

The first big aid station at about 25 m and the previous 3 have warmed me up to the way our US hosts do 'hosting!' this race has a great reputation for looking after the runners – 1400 volunteers for 380 runners makes for a great ratio!

It all starts a few hundred yards out from the aid station proper: a volunteer in radio contact with base giving a 'heads-up'. Quite often kids have come out to take our drinks bottles for a refill – and they run on ahead to do that for us.

Hand-written signs appear along the trail announcing the imminent oasis. Many stations are themed with volunteers in fancy dress, so everything is personalised accordingly. There's usually music and always someone to greet incoming runners. Their job is to welcome, establish initial needs and hand us off to our personal gofer for the duration of our stay. I will forever remember the 50-something lady who greeted me at the Devils Thumb station at around halfway with the words, 'Hi – I'm your personal slave!' I just had to ask her to repeat it slower so I could savour it!

Nothing is too much trouble and they appear to be able to provide everything! I thought I'd

finally got one crew during the night at around 70 m when they gave me some Coca-Cola – so I asked for Pepsi just for the hell of it. No such luck: a bottle of the rival brand was triumphantly produced – they were most put out when I had to admit I was just kidding!

Fruit, cold potatoes, turkey and jelly sandwiches, peanut butter sandwiches, crisps and pretzels, energy gels, water, coke, electrolyte replacement drink, sweets, cake and soup and noodles during the night. I'd have killed for a cup of tea, but when in the US...

It was hospitality with a big 'H' – and sometimes even too much. In the heat of the day, drinks would all be filled with ice including our bottle replenishment. I was leaving the aid stations shivering and it took me a while to figure out why and even my bottle was too cold to hold. After that it was definitely 'hold the ice, please!'

I just wasn't over-heating: the day temperature was in the 80s – cool for the time of year.

Robinson Flat was the first chance for support crews to meet their runners and Charly and I had arranged our first rendezvous here. The race was operating a 'park-and-ride' bus system as access to this remote station for cars was limited and the heavy snows had made this even more of an issue. We figured it'd be a bit of a bun-fight for crews. With this in mind, Charly had shot off from the start in our shiny rental SUV to get as close as she could – knowing that over 300 other crews would have the same idea! We'd tried to pack and label everything as smartly as possible, but she'd still have to carry kit for us both along trails to the aid station proper. (And you thought it was just me doing the endurance gig, huh?)

Insight: you can plan and pre-pack all you want re the food and drink needs. The only certainty is that at some point your runner will not want anything you've prepared, will not be able to offer any ideas as to what they do want – but hey, that sandwich you're eating looks nice..!

So RF is a biggie: Jamie is also meeting Eileen his wife, and as we approach the crowds and noise become obvious. People are everywhere – shouting instructions, cheering: lots of 'Great job!' and waving. After the peace of the forest it's quite a change!

Someone takes my bum bag and I'm on the scales for the first time. The race organisation will do this four times today to keep an eye on the condition of the runners. '165 – what's your start weight?' I'm asked. I check the detail on my wristband where this and other vital stats are recorded. '163.' So I've gained 2 lbs over this first section. Hmm...then I remember that last year's winning lady gained 9lbs over the first 50 miles: I figure I can live with 2 – it's the reduction in bodyweight the medical staff are watching for: 3% means significant dehydration, 5% is getting very silly, and 7%...you're probably going home in a van!

At the food table I'm momentarily at a loss as to what to choose: the choices! The volunteers are asking questions but I'm just doing 'overwhelmed' right now! I belatedly realise that this is one of the downsides of not having a fixed plan – Charly and I have sketched in the basics but that's all. 'Er...' I grab some electrolyte replacement and then remember I've got a small plastic 'doggy-bag' for just this purpose – so I proceed to fill it with goodies: I can eat on the trail – but I need another pair of hands, though! Then out and through the lines of cheering people scanning for my wife – who is waving frantically to get my attention.

Smile, kiss, hug: 'Hi Babe!' We walk a few yards to where she has stashed our kit swapping news. I'm fine, feel easy, no worries. She's had a bit more of a fight to get here and has traded sleep time for a big breakfast. I'm pleased. 'Sock change?' Yeah. We proceed to do a really good impression of playing 'Twister' before I remember that'd we'd said we should do this with me on my back so we can wipe, dry and massage my feet easily. Too late – and there's no space for it anyway. Charly pulls a face. 'Yeah, I know – we'll sort it out for next time, OK?' OK.

I grab some replacement food of cold pizza, pretzels, fig rolls and a kiwi fruit to go with my existing picnic. It all feels a bit more chaotic than I would like, but I've only got myself to blame for this. There's 'roll with it' and 'plan for it': y'all can't have both!

Still, I'm in and out pretty sharpish as the next checkpoint is only 3 miles away and Charly will drive ahead and meet me again – a real treat! Despite a less than polished routine all is in the

green, and I'm off walking and eating. Jamie and I find each other again before I'm forced to make my first pit-stop: so peanut butter and fig rolls don't agree with me then...

### Downs & Ups

The 30-56m section is the one which really stood out on the race profile chart. We are now entering the canyons, and the switchback descents range from 2,500 - 2000' and we climb straight back out for 1500-1800'. 3 canyons. 3 times. This is the real Quad Killer. Little did I know that this would also be the Toe Killer...

The 56m aid station at Michigan Bluff is the next biggie and where I'll next see Charly. I know that it is imperative I get to this in good shape.

### The First Cracks Appear

Jamie is struggling. Though much of the course is now shaded we are in the heat of the day. Walk the climbs, run the descents and as much of the flats as you can. It's hot and we've two canyons to go. Running easily through beautiful forest I'm enjoying the sights and sounds when, 'You go on, Andy.' Jamie is labouring and has dropped to a walk. I hesitate briefly then turn round. 'Bollocks to that! I'm OK – let's just gear it down for the next bit: we're doing good – still catching people – just keep it steady, OK?'

This is the pattern for the next few miles: short sections of walking and jogging and talking to Jamie almost constantly: 'Walk a bit, Jamie, run from this next tree, keep it steady, every step gets us closer, we're doing great – just keep doing it, man!'

And we do it. Down the endless switchbacks which go on and on and on: stay smooth, don't hammer it, walk if it gets too steep, across the river bridge at the bottom then walk – hands on knees up and up and up. I vary my climbing style: sometimes short upright steps, sometimes long bent forward strides in order to vary the load on the legs. I smile to myself that possibly a few repetitions up and down Croft Hill and Bradgate Park might just not be enough for this! I put my faith in my weight training but know that only time will tell...

I get the first signs on the last descent: sore-

ness in both big toes. It feels like I'm losing both toenails from the unrelenting pressure on the front of the feet. The pain quickly escalates over the next few miles till any trip or stubbed toe brings a sharp intake of breath – or a yelp of pain. I grimace but say nothing as the damage was probably done right at the start with the choice of a thicker set of socks – and with hindsight I needed toe-box room more. I guess we'll find out at Mitchigan...

On the final climb in this section the tables turn and it's now me who is following. It's murderously steep and for the first time I'm struggling to stay with Jamie. He opens a gap of 10 yards and I'm gritting my teeth to keep it at 10 as my breathing rate spirals higher for the first time: guess this is where the fun starts. His watch bleeps: 'That's 12 hours, Andy!' Bloody hell! Where did the day go? I'm genuinely shocked at the time as I've been oblivious to the passing of the hours: I've not been watching the position of the sun – I'm not wearing a watch as usual. But neither do I attach any significance to this as I do not have any time-dependent goals. Jamie has, however. 'I'd hoped to be at MB by now, 'he says over his shoulder. I do a quick calculation: we've passed the checkpoint prior to MB which I recall is only a few miles away from MB itself. 'Yeah, but we'll be close, ' I reply, 'We're not a million miles away, and I'm just damn pleased to get here!'

Jamie grins back: 'Me too, sport – your plans here?'

'A shoe change, eat, drink, feet up and chill abit with Charly.' I also want to have a look at the toe damage but figure a change to older, roomier trainers will help anyway. 'Maybe 10-15 minutes. You fancy staying together for the next bit?'

'Sounds good,' comes the reply. 'I've got my shoe change at Foresthill, (62m) and I'm also picking up my Pacer...'

### **A Few Words On Pacers**

The race offered those who wanted it a chance to 'pair up' for the final 40 miles or so – the Pacers are usually local runners who know the trails. I've never contemplated one before and didn't give this much thought pre-race. Now, after 56 miles or so I can see the value of experienced company going into the night section.

Still...

### **Mitchigan Bluff**

The aid station explodes at us in a deluge of sight and sound we have been without for the last 5 hours or so – there's hundreds of people here!

I'm delighted to be here, albeit with sore feet but otherwise in good spirits: 56m to the good and still in control of my faculties.

Onto the scales and this time I've lost weight. Okayyyy. I reassure the volunteers that I'm about to pig out and they let me go without too much fuss.

This time Charly has found a spot where we can spread out.

I gain huge points with the watching crowd by presenting my favourite lady with a flower I swiped on the way in. She grins happily and puts it behind her ear. I'm delighted to see her and while we try to out-grin eachother Jamie introduces us to his wife Eileen – so some company for Charly for the next section as well!

I lie down and start to do the foot thing while Charly digs out the goodies. She's even brought my special request hamburger – then surpasses that by producing a handful of strawberries and carrot sticks! Fruit and fresh stuff is a real treat! We swap news as she starts on the foot care and I start to eat...but then stop. After a few mouthfuls I suddenly don't want anything and cast around for something which I fancy eating. Nothing. You gotta eat, man. I know, but...

'Charly, any pasta?' We'd planned a cold pasta meal around now, but Charly looks momentarily crestfallen. 'No, I haven't. I'm sorry...' Oh.' But I can get you some for Foresthill?' I perk up, 'Great! – no worries. Can I have your sandwich, then?' You gotta eat, man...

With shoes off I inspect my soggy feet. Three toenails are black including both big ones, which also are very sore and swollen. It looks like the nails have been pushed back into the bed by all the descending. OK. We clean and re-vaseline them, and I switch to thinner socks and my older bigger trainers. I hope it will be enough. Other than that – no blisters.



You need to eat, man...

I know.

I shovel some food down and the rest into my picnic bag to eat en route. Charly is still clearly concerned and moreso when she hears that I'm now losing weight – but promises macaroni cheese in 7 miles.

Hey, but it's nice just to lie here for a bit...

'Andy, c'mon man – we've been here too long!'

A now familiar Kiwi twang rouses me.

7 miles. About 1.5 hours on the terrain we'll be on.

### The Trail to Forresthill

So now the fun begins. Yesterday Charly and I sketched out a best-case scenario which would bring me home in about 20 hours – and we'd looked really hard at this to be sure. OK, I'd have to be going well, but 4 hours for 20 miles? That's possible, isn't it?

Sure. Just not over this course in the shape you are in today, my friend!

My dear wife knew that after the first quarter we were way too optimistic and has been adjusting since. I am not focused on time at all, so until Jamie's watch went off I'd no idea about pace. Time notwithstanding, the goal was to get to MB in good shape, and feet aside – I figure I can pad 'em and strap 'em if I need to – I've achieved that.

While the course description told the story it has taken actually doing it to appreciate the magnitude of the climbs and descents. I know I can walk 4 mph even on busted quads – as that was exactly what I did during my London to Paris jaunt – but that's on good terrain. On this stuff? Not even close!

The trail is well marked but it's all rocky single-track: add a downhill in and it gets real interesting if one is trying to protect ones toes. Doing all this at night will be an experience to say the least!

Jamie is focused on a 24 hour finish. This is the 4 minute-mile equivalent on this course and we're on schedule – just. A '24 would be really cool as well, but I want to finish first and

this time I don't want to have to put myself in a box to do it. WS is the benchmark test for me: finish, take the experience and the learns and come back smarter. But a '24 would be nice... and I could do it.

Just hold up for this next section and see...

### New Zealand In The Lead!

Jamie is definitely much stronger now and forges ahead on the climbs. I focus on holding the gap steady and running smooth with good form. As time goes on the tendency to lean forwards gets greater – we've already seen runners almost bent double – and I'm starting to get back ache from my own efforts. I keep the dark side at bay: much is in the green and we're moving well.

The Foresthill aid station is reached after a brute of a climb. It's not too long but I'm having to work harder than I want to to stay with the flying Kiwi. We're still chatting away and morale is good, but my damn legs just wont go as fast as I want 'em to! I have to focus really hard to over-ride the slow cruise pace they seem to have acquired for themselves.

Charly has come out about half a mile from the aid station to meet us and while Jamie surges ahead for his own shoe change, I run with my fave lady. She says later that she knew something wasn't right: we catch up on news but I'm not exactly Mr Chatty.

Once we arrive my attention is all on not losing Jamie. Deep down I know that the next 20 m is crucial and going solo into the night with deteriorating legs and will be tough. If I can just hang onto Jamie and his pacer it will be so much easier. So I'm like a hound with a scent... Don't lose him, man!

Time to be weighed again and I'm still down by a few pounds – but this time I hide my wristband, lie about my starting weight so the loss appears less than it is, and reassure the folks that my wife has a big feed lined up for me – no way are you pulling me from this, sunshine!

'Pasta, Andy.' Charly shoves a bowlful at me and I dig into it hungrily – only to nearly retch. Cold and congealed I can't swallow it down and hand it back. 'Sorry, I'm sorry. I tried but...' I can see Charly fighting back tears – god

knows how she's made time to cook this while on the move – but I just cannot stomach it. 'It's OK, babe, it's OK: not a problem. What else have we got?'

I chuck down anything I can get my hands on but my attention is elsewhere...

'Where's Jamie? Did you see where he went?'

Charly points opposite us. 'He's over there – look.'

OK. Don't let him go. You have to stay with this.

'Andy. You need your night stuff.' Charly pulls me back to Our Plan.

'You think I need it now?' It's still blazing sunshine and my time reckoning is all over the place, but Charly is right – it'll be dark before I reach the next big aid station and our next rendezvous.

Headtorch, spare batteries, spare long sleeved top, hat and waterproof are added to my load.

Charly wants to get my full attention but I'm completely focused on where Jamie is changing and am doing my own routine on automatic. She settles for helping with the practicals – but will say later that she regrets not confronting me at this point. She has learned that though I may be saying all the right things, if the eye contact isn't there then something is amiss. At mile 62 I am not focussed on me for the first time: this is not good and I will pay for it later.

### **Are You Gonna Do This, Or What?**

I'm up and ready before Jamie. Charly tries one last time: 'See you at Green Gates (80m).' A hug and a kiss but it's too late. Jamie shoots off down the road with his pacer, a fresh pair of shoes and a whole sackful of re-charge! Within seconds I'm 20 yards adrift and dropping fast: Crunch time!

So Mounce, you can stick with 'em or let 'em go, but whatever you do you have to decide NOW. Make the choice!

No contest. I grimace, dig deep and eventually close up after 200 yards to say 'Hi' to Matt the Pacer. I'm committed.

Matt wants to know Goals. 'Finish in 24 hours,' replies Jamie.

'What's more important?' asks Matt.

'Well...' Jamie gathers his thoughts. 'I'd like to finish first – and I want to finish with Andy.'

I can see where this is going so jump in quick.

'Jamie, that's cool and it means a lot, but I don't want you to jepordise a 24 hour finish by waiting for me!'

'It's not about that.' Jamie is doing adamant. 'You pulled me through the early bit and it doesn't feel right to finish any other way – I want us to finish together.'

We argue respectfully back and forth: each juggling personal aspirations with obligations forged over spending the last 50 miles or so together.

I kill it: 'Look. Let's get to the river crossing at 80 miles then we'll see.'

That seems to do it – then Matt turns to me.

'What about you, Andy?' I toy briefly with sharing my own 24 hour aspirations but know my toes have been getting steadily worse and that descending is increasingly slow and painful. And this wont be improving.

'Hey – I'll be happy to finish, y'know?' And while that's true it's only part of the story. We're still on for a 24 and that I'd be VERY happy with that, thank you...I just don't think my feet will let me.

'OK.' Matt looks round. 'I can keep us on schedule, but we need to run the downhill and as much of the flats as we can. Everyone ready? Let's go!'

### **Starting To Hurt**

They say the race only really starts in the last third. A few hundred yards on we pass a lady walking gingerly downhill with her pacer. As I pass her I can hear her sobbing quietly with the pain of descending on quadracep muscles which are completely shot. Her pacer is silent and so are we – what is there to say? There are still nearly 40 miles to go. I want to reach out to her or something, but the moment passes and I'm not strong enough. We all share a look: 'hope she makes it...'

But Jamie has a new lease of life and is surging

ahead down the narrow trail. Every now and then he catches himself and slows up. Matt runs between us acting as the link in the chain. Jamie is chatting away and I strive to stay animated and keep appreciating the views – but I am going through periods where I simply shut up and get on with the business of putting one foot in front of the other and keeping the boys in sight as they weave along the trail ahead of me. Darkness is falling and I'm having to be increasingly careful where I put my feet: every trip or stubbed toe sends pain shooting up through my legs. The boys remark on my restraint – which is either a wince or a sharp intake of breath followed by a big exhale: no full-on swearing just yet and I mutter something about the English stiff upper lip...

Night-time. The trail takes a whole new identity through the light of a head-torch, and is marked periodically by glow-sticks hung from trees. It's still warm. I'd been looking forward to this all day – not quite knowing what to expect as the last time I'd played in the woods at night was in my scout days, (!) – and I knew this would be a different, special experience.

The harsh reality is that under torch light it becomes increasingly difficult to read the dips in the trail. This means more stumbles and THAT means more stubbed toes. My already bruised and swollen digits are taking a real hammering, and while we all stumble every now and then, I'm the one who's doing it most.

But I work hard to keep my spirits up and keep talking to the boys. We're still moving pretty well, and the forest is beautiful with stars starting to emerge above the trees. Inside, my pain and frustration mounts with every stumble...

10 miles on and I've discovered the re-vitalising qualities of soup and noodles now being served at the aid stations. If only they'd do tea as well! Every aid station is even more of an oasis now as the line of bobbing lights thread their way onward.

Matt consults his watch and takes stock.

'We need to make some time up if we're going to do this. We walked too much over that last 10 miles. These next few miles are pretty runnable and we need to run. How you doin', Andy?'

I take a deep breath and prepare a cover story.

'I'm OK. The feet are abit painful, but everything else is pretty good.'

'OK.' Matt is all business. 'Let's just crack on then and get to the river crossing.'

I take point so it feels like I'm being pushed. I realise that on a clear and flat trail I can make pretty good time – it's just that we don't really have one of those, but this section is good enough! I call the changes back to the boys so they can anticipate in the darkness: 'Walk!' when I slow for an uphill. 'Dip!' when the trail descends. 'Run!' when I'm about to run on again.

But my toes are getting more painful with every stumble – and stumbles are getting more and more frequent. My language is deteriorating and I'm really having to fight the mounting frustration. I simply can't run rocky descents at all now as I'm simply too frightened to trip – so getting my muscles to relax is increasingly difficult. Doing this on top of fatigue from 70 miles of running already just makes it all even more fun! Just give me some easier terrain please!

Despite this, we are making good progress and are not lingering at the interim aid stations. A couple of miles out from the river crossing Matt asks about my weight as we have another check coming up.

'I'm down a little.' I reply.

'Well, we don't want to get held at this check,' observes Matt, 'Are you drinking all your water?'

I hurridly down a few slurps, 'Pretty much...'

'OK. You need to finish that bottle and some more. I've got some spare. And don't pee before the next check. What have you been doing for salts and electrolytes?'

'Er, crisps, fruit, pretzels...'

'Oh, bloody hell!' Matt stops. 'No wonder you're struggling! Here, get this down you.' He passes over a salt sachet, 'That'll do wonders...'

Funnily enough I did seem to perk up...

### Going Solo

78 miles. 'Great job!' Matt is all smiles. 'That's 15 minutes faster than the last section: we're

back on schedule! Let's not stop at the aid here – let's get across to the check at the far side.'

The river is too swollen for us to wade across as is normal in the race. This year we move with the grace of an arthritic gazelle into a dingy and are paddled across what is actually a raging torrent in places. Time to part ways, then.

I turn to Jamie. 'You go on, mate. I want to grab some food here and I'll follow. If you're still at Green Gate (79m) when I get there, great – if not I'll crack on on my own.'

He hesitates. 'No, I'll...'

'Bollocks. We said to the river and here we are. It's upto me now, but you need to go if you want to be sire of a 24 hour finish. I'll fucking get there. If you're still there, great – if not, no worries.'

He still temporizes, bless him.

'Well, we'll go ahead and tell Charlotte what's happening so she can be ready and you can be fast through Green Gates...' I smile knowing there's no way I'll be fast through Green Gates: I need to do some serious foot repair work or I'm in real trouble.

I wave him away. 'Great – now fuck off – GO!'

It's about a mile and a half and a few hundred feet of climbing from the river bank to the next check. Thankfully, after a murderously steep rocky first section, the trail widens, eases and smooths out. I can make good time and arrive around midnight in good spirits not long after Jamie and Matt have left. I can move fast on slight grades and a good surface – anything else...Charly has been here for hours but is delighted to see me as the boys have told her to expect me much later.

### Patching Up

We're going to have to do some running repairs here, babe – scalpel please!' I grin at her and gingerly ease myself down onto the ground trying to multi-task foot duties with slurping noodle soup. We must be making a pretty bad job of it as we're soon interrupted.

'You guys grab this chair – can I help you with anything there?'

Rob is waiting for his wife who is running – we

later find out she has sprained both ankles but is still moving! – and has been watching us struggle: we are the only crew without a chair so he has taken pity on us. I ease myself up into a much more comfortable position as Rob ferries food and generally looks after us.

My inspection reveals both big toes are various shades of pink and black and very swollen. It looks like I'll lose both nails as well as a smaller third one on my right foot. There's a hotspot forming at the base of my second toe and first signs of blistering on the outside edge of my right foot. Hmmm...

We clean, pad and strap both feet, re-apply Vaseline and change to new socks. In between I'm chugging down noodle soup by the cupful. It must be quite a scene as a reporter from the LA Times also gets in on the act: all in all it's quite a party! I'm losing time but there's nothing I can do – I need this stop.

Ahead of me is a 15 mile section which I will face on my own with toes that now feel as though they belong to someone else, and quad muscles which are on another planet. This will be the longest and coldest part of the night. However long I think it will take me – and my reckoning is all over the place – add some more and then some.

We're finally done. Big thanks to Rob, a hug and a kiss with Charly – see you at the next big aid station at Highway 49 – and I walk gingerly out. it takes a few attempts to break into a trot but I'm back to my routine of walk-jog-run-trip-swear! The forest folds around me but I'm warmed by the soup and my the fat that I'm moving again. The stars are brilliant above the treetops and despite my halting progress I'm at peace with the world.

6 miles on and I'm still OK and through the 85m aid station fortified by chocolate brownies – but then the slide really happens. I'm finding it increasingly difficult to run with any smoothness at all and am stumbling more and more. This just makes it even more painful and however much I try to relax everything just seems to be tightening up. I can make good speed with a fast walk if the terrain permits – it's just that the terrain is not permitting. Another change: I've stopped passing people and am starting to get passed at will.



Going downhill is a real problem now – and there are still lots of downhills.

### Coming Apart

Browns Bar aid station at 90m is one of the most flamboyant on the route. It's Hawaiian themed and decorated with the world's supply of Christmas lights. I can hear rock music blasting out down the valley from miles away! I arrive with a couple of other folks and we can't help but smile at the sensory overload which greet us. The spirit of the volunteers would cheer the dead – and that's pretty close to what they're doing!

I go for the chocolate brownies and noodle soup again.

'How far to the next check?'

'3 miles.'

3 miles. I can do that.

But a few yards beyond the aid station it looks like it could all end. Facing another steep rocky descent through the torchlight I find my legs simply won't work and I come to a juddering halt. For a while I simply stand there baffled. OK. Maybe if I'm warmer I'll be able to do it. So I put every piece of clothing on I'm carrying and try again.

It's pathetic: I can't make my legs go where I want them at all. This is fucking unbelievable – COME ON!

I stumble haltingly down but the breaking point comes at a rocky stream crossing. Stepping across using the various rocks seems beyond me, and it simply doesn't occur to me to get my feet wet. I'm reduced to tears of frustration as a number of tentative steps get me absolutely nowhere. Eventually summoning the motor skill reserves to place my feet where I want them is a massive effort – and I'm emotionally and physically wrung out when I reach the other side.

JESUS FUCKING CHRIST!

I'm doing pathetic lurching now, and it seems that people are streaming past. Even short climbs reduce me to moving in slow motion because I can't seem to get my left hip to work now either to lift my knee. I've heard of Keeping It Simple – just keep moving forward! – but

this is ridiculous and it's all taking too long: far too long.

My thoughts are turning increasingly to Charly. I remember our wedding and a whole montage of shared highlights. I remember how tough this waiting is for her – and what a long day she has had already. I remember that out here I'm representing us both – and you're doing a pretty poor fucking job of it right now, sunshine!

Yeah, if it matters it hurts to fall short...

I desperately want to do this in a way we can both be proud of – and that never included stumbling about like a directionless idiot in the small hours. Everything else feels fine – it just my bloody legs!!!

It's taking way too long. She's waiting and wondering...IT'S JUST NOT FUCKING FAIR!

I spend the next few miles trying control the emotional rollercoaster of love for my lady and the pain and frustration of what I'm reduced to. The final climb to the aid station nearly finishes me: I'm moving SO slowly and literally dragging my left leg up and there's seems absolutely nothing I can do about it. I just want to burst into tears but manage to bite it down every time.

Part of me is dreading seeing her at Highway 49.

Dead right. I walk miserably into the aid station, on and off the weighing scales with out seeing or caring, and promptly burst into tears on my wife's shoulder.

I'm absolutely distraught and cry my eyes out telling her that I love her, that I'm sorry she's had to wait so long, that I just can't go any faster, that everything else is fine, that she's the best thing that's ever happened to me...it just pours out. Charly sits there holding me going all misty-eyed while dawn breaks around us and our American audience has some preconceptions busted about stiff upper-lip Brits...

And then it all stops. I dry my eyes, drink some soup, shed my night gear, smile, kiss her, and get up and walk unsteadily on.

7 miles to go. Well, it would be rude not to, wouldn't it?

### Mending & Ending

I'm joined in this last section by Hawaii-Matt. Matt had been pacing someone earlier who had dropped out at 75m. Feeling redundant and seeing an obvious need, (!) he offered to keep me company. I was glad of it, and though the first few miles I was very quiet, conversation picked up as we made our way very slowly to the finish.

Charly came out and joined us for the final mile as we walked in slow motion through the outskirts of Auburn. Locals in their gardens cheering and 'hi-fiving' us as we passed. They've painted Tour De France style on the roads. Wow. Smile, man – you're nearly there now.

An honorary 3/4 lap of the high school track – no, I'm still not running, thanks – and finally, eventually, 27 hours and 15 minutes later, it's over.



100 miles

21,970' of descent

18,040' of ascent

One day – and a little bit extra

A few tears

Lots of smiles

Some sore feet and lifelong friends

And a little bit of heart and soul.

It's really nice to be here...