



My Most Unforgettable Ultramarathon

(And What I Learned From It)

BY RONNI ROSS



Ronni Ross at mile 25 of the Angeles Crest 100-Mile Endurance Race.

SANGABRIEL MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA, September 28–29, 1996—As I tied my shoelaces on a typically hot Los Angeles afternoon in July of 1996, my stomach somersaulted as I reflected upon the task ahead of me. The angst I was feeling then was far greater than any butterflies I had experienced before a race.

Doubting my abilities and questioning my motives and sanity, I reluctantly prepared for the long night ahead. For reasons I was suddenly questioning, I had

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signed up to run in the Angeles Crest 100-Mile Endurance Race, generally thought to be one of the most difficult 100-milers in the country.

On this day, I was readying myself for a 25-mile night run through the San Gabriel Mountains, the first of several organized training runs that would cover parts of the actual A.C. 100 course. During this particular session, we would cover the last quarter of the course.

Questions cascaded through my mind: What if I get lost? What if I'm the slowest runner and no one waits for me? What if I run into a bear? I don't know any of the other runners—what if they think I'm a wimp?

My worries were so profound that I couldn't keep them to myself. I drove my husband Doug crazy all day long fretting over the long night to come. And yet I knew that if I entertained any notions of seriously participating in the A.C. 100, I had to face my fears and get through this first training session. It is said that every journey begins with a single step, and for me, this was the first of many I would have to take to nurse my dream to reality.

As we pulled into the parking lot—Johnson's Field, a park below the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, which also serves as the race finish line—I searched the crowd for a familiar face or two. No luck.

NIGHT TRAINING

It was 5:00 P.M., and the plan was to carpool to Chantry Flats, a picnic area in the San Gabriel Mountains that would be the 75-mile aid station on raceday. The training run was scheduled to begin at 6:00 P.M. We would run from Chantry back to our cars. Due to a back injury, Doug wasn't running, but he had offered to come along to help out with the carpooling and to encourage me. He volunteered to give up a perfectly good night of sleep in his own bed to facilitate his wife's craziness—sort of the ultimate codependent.

Mingling with part of the fidgeting group, I introduced myself to a few of the runners. It was reassuring to me that some of them seemed as nervous as I was; that realization helped calm me.

Doug indicated his willingness to drive a group to Chantry, and immediately three women hopped into our car. I was thrilled when I realized that one of the women was Evelyn Marshall, then-reigning female A.C. 100 champion for three years running. In the hour-long drive, the five of us chatted and shared our collective racing war stories. I felt my fears melting away.

The women were friendly, and upon arriving at Chantry, I found that the other runners were also helpful and sociable. And no, no one was going to be left in the forest to fend for herself. The race directors would keep track of everyone and make certain we were all accounted for at the end.

By the time the 30 or so of us set off on our journey, I felt much calmer. The trail we followed took us through beautiful wilderness areas, and I comfortably settled into the middle of the pack. I reveled in the sights and smells of the woods and drank in the changing colors of the mountains as the sun began to set.

Halfway into the evening, the group had spread out pretty significantly, but I hooked up with another runner named Jay, who volunteered to stay with me for the rest of the run. He had raced the A.C. several times before and was familiar with the course.

We climbed mountains, crossed streams, and shared running as we made our way back to Johnson's Field. Using a flashlight to find my way, I realized how much I enjoyed night running. The woods are different in the dark, and I was no longer afraid. The glow of the flashlight—and my new running buddy—were all I needed to get through that night.

It was nearly midnight when we finished, and as I climbed into the car to go home, I felt gratified almost to the point of giddiness. I had taken my first step. When we crossed what would be the finish line at the end of the run, I envisioned how it must feel to do so on raceday, and I longed to experience the feeling of actually doing it. At that moment, I mentally committed myself to going the distance.

THE FINAL 10 WEEKS

The 10 weeks of training leading up to the September 28 raceday were long and hard but enjoyable and invigorating. I had a goal. Although I'm not a morning person by nature, I eagerly arose at 4:00 or 5:00 A.M. most Saturdays to train. I attended the remainder of the organized group training runs and made some wonderful new friends.

I became intimately acquainted with blackened toenails, poison oak, minor scrapes, and turned ankles, and I spent a lot of time saying to my nonrunning friends, "Yes, I did say 100 miles." But more importantly, I found myself falling in love with the forest. I developed a deeper respect for nature and the marvelous gift of a healthy body through which I could experience it.

The Day Before the Race

On Friday, the day before the race, my friend Walter, whom I'd recruited as my support person, arrived at the house accompanied by a friend of his named Jack, who had also agreed to help on my crazy quest. We planned to carpool to Wrightwood, the little ski town where the race begins. There was a compulsory meeting that afternoon where I'd be required to go through a medical screening.

attend trail briefings, and gather other information about the race. Doug, Walter, Jack, and I set off on the two-hour drive to Wrightwood, the first leg of what would be a very long weekend for all of us.

When we rolled into the town, the little community was buzzing with activity. The Angeles Crest 100 is one of the biggest events of the year in Wrightwood, and the local folks were warm and welcoming.

Following the mandatory check-in and meetings, we spent the remainder of the day socializing with other racers and their crews, eating, and resting as much as possible. After the pasta feed, we retired to our hotel rooms to watch TV, read, and try to remain as calm as humanly possible.

An Unexpected Turn of Events

After a fitful five hours of sleep, I awoke to the alarm at 3:30 A.M. I had hoped to bounce out of bed feeling in top form, but such was not the case. My back was killing me. I could barely stand up. I didn't know if the ache was a result of the uncomfortable hotel bed or a bad case of nerves gone haywire, but I did know that I was really hurting.

A hot shower and a quick massage from Doug helped, but as I made my way to the starting line, I grumbled to my crew about the unexpected turn of events. I expected to finish the race in a fair amount of pain, but I hadn't planned on starting it that way.



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Ronni, with her support crew, tries to remain positive before the start, despite waking up with a painful backache on race morning.

As with any challenge, however, I tried to make the best of the situation. I'd come too far to let something like a backache throw me.

At 4:15 A.M., nibbling on a dry bagel, I checked in at the race site, and at 4:30 the race director gave an invocation. We stood there nervously—139 runners—flanked by friends and family, for a silent moment of prayer. In the next 20 to 30 hours, we would each climb 21,000 feet and descend 26,700 feet, for a total elevation change of 48,000 feet. We would face fatigue beyond comprehension, fear, elation, depression, nausea, and changes in climate ranging from freezing to frying. For some, including myself, the race would represent the greatest physical and mental challenge of a lifetime.

I kissed Doug good-bye, hugged Walter and Jack, and joined the other runners under the starting line banner in the cold morning air.

THE START—FINALLY

Five o'clock arrived, and in an almost anticlimactic way, our journey began. I actually felt a sense of relief that after so many months of anticipation, the time of reckoning had finally come, and as I began to run, my back began to loosen up, and soon it felt better.

My primary goal was to finish the race. In the course of my training, I had formed a simple strategy. I broke the race into four segments. Four 25-mile stretches sounded more doable to me than one 100-mile stretch. I also tried to think of the race as a faster-paced backpacking excursion, minus the backpack.

My other strategies were to drink water at least every 10 minutes and to eat my three staple distance running foods (pierogies, which are potato- and cheese-filled pasta; Gu; and chicken noodle soup) as often as I could during the race. I knew I'd need to draw strength from whatever sources I could, so I made sure my crew had ample supplies of all three primary food items.

During the first 25 miles, I constantly reminded myself of my goal and strategies and tried not to go out too fast. In this sunrise stretch, we climbed from 6,000 feet out of Wrightwood to about 8,300 feet, descended back down to about 6,600 feet, and then faced another steep ascent up Mt. Baden-Powell, which peaks at about 9,100 feet. I took aspirin to help me deal with the altitude and fared well in the grueling climb up the mountain. But others I encountered weren't so fortunate. One runner I passed had pulled off the trail to vomit, and others seemed to be working themselves up to doing the same.

Coming off Baden-Powell was a real treat. A long downhill gave a much-needed break from climbing, and dropping back down to 6,500 feet made breathing easier. But it was during this stretch that I felt my first pangs of competitiveness. I was passed by another woman. I had no idea where I was in the field, and it didn't bother me when men passed me, but when this woman

came out of nowhere and flew by me, that was tough. We exchanged pleasantries as she sailed past. As I watched her pull away, I reminded myself again that I was not in this race to win, only to finish. Coming into the aid station at mile 25, I encountered my next big surprise.

The Streaker Lives

Egged on by friends who had come to watch the race, Doug jumped out from behind a bush at the 25-mile mark and dropped his shorts—literally. Our friends must have decided I would need a pick-me-up by this point, and it certainly succeeded!

I had quite a time trying to explain to the runner behind me that my husband is actually a reserved sort of guy who would normally never do such a thing. But I doubt I convinced him. His response was, “Boy, I’m never gonna forget this part of the run!” At a subsequent race, we met a couple who was nearby when Doug flashed me, and we heard the woman remark, “Look honey, that’s the guy whose butt’s in our picture.”

I was still laughing as I left the aid station to begin the second 25-mile stretch, and many times during the course of the race I recalled that moment.

MILES 25 TO 50

From miles 25 to 50, we were blessed with a few flat stretches, and I settled into a comfortable pace. This was by far the easiest section of the race, and I took advantage of it.

I felt a little nauseated, but I fought off the sour stomach by eating salty pretzels. I felt optimistic and even managed to catch the woman who had passed me earlier in the day. This time, we introduced ourselves, and I learned that her name was Lisa. I must admit that I felt gleeful as I left her behind during an uphill portion. I looked forward to reaching mile 50. Not only would it mark the halfway point, but it would also mean that I could pick up the first of my three pacers.

Coming into the aid station at mile 50, my eyes welled up with tears when I saw a handful of my closest friends running toward me. They had come to cheer me on, and the outpouring of love and support they gave me in those few minutes helped sustain me for the rest of the race. They washed my feet, changed my filthy shoes and socks, rubbed my shoulders, fed me, and made sure I had what I needed before embarking on the next 25-mile stretch.

As Duffy, my first pacer, and I left the aid station, I felt renewed. I was excited that I now had someone to talk to! Flashlights in hand, Duffy ran with me for 6.5 miles. We watched the sun go down and talked about everything that

came to mind, from opera to our favorite pastas. We also caught up to Lisa again. She had obviously gotten in and out of the mile 50 aid station faster than I had. After a brief chat with her and her pacer, Duffy and I again left her behind. But I knew at this point that she and I would likely meet again.

Some hour and 45 minutes later, Duffy and I arrived at the next aid station, hugged each other good-bye, and

I picked up my second pacer, Joe, who had planned on racing in Angeles Crest but had to withdraw after injuring his ankle during a training run. He would see me through the next 15 miles or so. His ankle had healed enough to run again, and I was delighted to have him with me during this long, dark stretch. In this portion, we faced steep uphill and downhill sections. Despite the difficulty, I again enjoyed running in the dark by flashlight.

Fairies and Fireflies

At one point while I ran with Joe, the course wound from one side of a canyon to another, and as we reached the back side, I could look across and see where we'd come from. There, in the pitch black, I could see the twinkling of flashlights bobbing up and down as runners made their way along the fire road. The flickering lights off in the distance looked like little fairies and served to remind me that I *was* making progress. It was about 10:00 P.M. at that point, and a runner just ahead of us turned around and joked, "Hey, it's past my bedtime."

Halfway through my stretch with Joe, we came into an aid station that seemed as though it was in the middle of nowhere. There were a dozen volunteers serving soup, refilling water bottles, and feeding wood to the glorious campfire they'd built. As I sat briefly sipping soup by the fire, I suddenly



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Support crew member Walter Ries tends to Ronni's every need at an aid station.

appreciated the surreal quality of what was going on around me. What were these wonderful people doing out here on top of a mountain serving soup in the dead of night?

Just then, my weary mind snapped back to reality as I saw Lisa and her pacer roll into the aid station. She quickly refilled her water bottles and left ahead of us. But by now, it didn't matter to me. I just waved at her and let her go without a second thought.

As we departed the cozy aid station and whittled our way to mile 75, that feeling of surrealism stayed with me. The miles were beginning to take a toll on me, though, and this part of the course took us deep into a canyon that was very dark and damp. We could hear a river flowing through the canyon, but it was so dark we couldn't see it. Several times, we felt certain we'd strayed off course, because the blackness of the ravine had made it impossible to see the trail ahead, even with our flashlights. Occasionally, we'd spot a dying glow light hanging from a tree, but by then the little green tubes used to mark the course had faded to nearly nothing. When we finally began our ascent toward Chantry Flats, I felt a strong sense of relief. Those last few miles had spooked me.

As we neared the picnic area, however, we faced yet another hurdle. To reach the picnic area, we had to climb a long, steep set of concrete steps. On a normal day, this would have been no problem, but after 75 miles of mountain running, this felt like some-body's idea of a cruel joke. My legs fought every step.

When we reached the top, the sight of Doug (who would be my third pacer) and a sprinkling of sleepy-eyed friends instantly cheered me up. It was nearly 1:00 A.M., but here were my trusty friends, ready—even eager—to wash my



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Ronni reaches the top of a long flight of concrete steps at mile 75.

feet, replace batteries in my flashlight, and feed me again. How could I be more well-off than this?

THE LAST, LONELY TRAIL

Before leaving Chantry, I was forced to bid temporary farewells to everyone, since the last 25-mile stretch offered no aid stations accessible to crews. With the exception of several small water stations, Doug and I would be on our own for the next 9.5 hours. My friends would all go home and get some sleep, and I would not see them again until we reached the finish line.

In the last marathon-length leg of A.C. 100, I would learn what it means to persevere through suffering. This stretch contains two of the steepest, most difficult climbs of the race, and exhaustion had gotten its grip on me.

During the first painful, 3,100-foot climb up Mt. Wilson, we caught up to Lisa again, and this time, she and I commiserated. I pulled away from her once more, but it was not for the sake of being competitive. I just wanted to keep moving because I knew that each step brought me closer to the finish.

We slowly made our way up to the summit, and shortly after we reached it, I was startled to find a man's body laying off to the side of the trail. I let out a little scream and clearly startled the man, who came awake. "Oh, I was just taking a little nap," he said, as he popped up his head to see what was going on. The climb had obviously taken a toll on him.

We next descended to 2,700 feet, and then embarked on the last ascent of the race. While agonizing over this last climb, I began to hallucinate, and at one point I tried to convince Doug that there was a man in white painter's pants stretching on the side of the trail. As we came closer, I realized there was no man. When the sun began to rise shortly after that incident, I think Doug was just as relieved as I was to be able to turn off the flashlights.

At mile 89, we had reached the top of the last summit, and we came into a tiny aid station—the 17th of 18 in all—manned by two volunteers. After one of them radioed down to the finish line to inform officials of my location—standard procedure at this aid station—he turned to me and said, "Hey, you've got a fan club down there waiting for you." My friends had all come back out to await my arrival.

As I sat on a lawn chair sipping my last cupful of chicken soup and trying to muster the strength to stand up again, I saw Lisa one last time. She and her pacer trudged into the aid station just behind us, and she clearly looked stronger than I did. I smiled at her, and in doing so imparted my blessing that she complete the race in front of me. I had no fight left, and it didn't matter to me that she did. Lisa and her pacer left ahead of us, and I didn't see her again until I crossed the finish line, some 13 minutes behind her.

Even Gravity Didn't Help

Normally I am a strong downhill runner, but on that Sunday morning, it was all I could do to get down that last mountain. They were the longest 11 miles I have ever run, and it took four more excruciating hours to reach my goal. Doug encouraged me to run as much as I could, saying, "The faster you go, the sooner you'll be done."

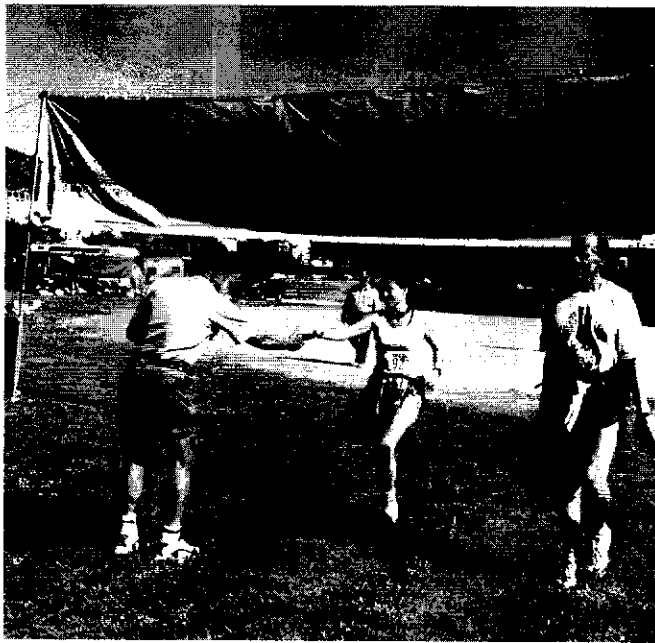
But I was spent, and my legs felt as though they had been beaten with a baseball bat. I walked nearly all of that last stretch and started to cry every time I visualized crossing the finish line. I knew at this point that I was going to finish, but I felt as though the moment would never come.

It was getting hot, and the events of the past 25 hours had caused me to develop a mild case of exercise-induced asthma. I was as miserable as I've ever been and repeatedly told Doug that I must have been crazy to have wanted to do this. "You couldn't pay me to do this again," I lamented.

As we neared Johnson's Field, and my friends' faces came into view, I began to melt with relief and joy. I remembered that night 10 weeks earlier when I had taken that first step, and now here I was, living my dream. Ninety-six runners had summoned the strength and perseverance to complete the 100-mile journey that weekend, and I was one of them.

I crossed the finish line in 29:23 as the sixth female finisher and 48th overall finisher. Prior to the race, I had secretly entertained the notion of finishing in under 26 hours and as one of the top five women, but none of that mattered now.

As I stood there under the finishline banner hugging Doug and sobbing, I



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Ronni is congratulated by co-race director Hal Winton after completing the Angeles Crest in 29 hours and 23 minutes.

knew that this experience would affect me deeply and that I would treasure it for the rest of my life.



What I Learned . . .

Training for a race of this distance was a new experience for me, and I found myself receiving advice from every corner—some valid and some not so valid. Three points I learned along the way I would definitely embrace the next time around:

DON'T OVERTRAIN

Some of the other runners I trained with ran up to 120 miles per week in preparation for the Angeles Crest 100-Mile Endurance Race, but my mileage going into the peak training period averaged about 60 to 65 miles per week. Prior to seriously training for A.C., I was averaging only 30 to 35 miles a week, so I did not have enough of a base to be able to increase my distances so dramatically. Hearing the other runners talk about their long training runs, I stressed myself out worrying that my mileage wasn't high enough. I realized after the race, however, that it is important to increase mileage slowly and safely. What works for one person won't work for another, and I probably would have injured myself if I had tried to increase my mileage more than I did. In fact, some of those runners who told me I should be putting in at least 100 miles a week wound up having to drop out of the race due to exhaustion.

PLAN YOUR PEAK, AND THEN REST

Resting for two to three weeks before a big race is crucial. I planned my peak at two weeks before Angeles Crest, and that strategy served me well. I ran the Bulldog 50K race in Malibu, California, exactly two weeks before the 100-miler, and my intent was to use that race as my last long training run. I went out slowly, maintained a comfortable, consistent pace, and stayed relaxed. I was relieved that this would be my last long run for two weeks, and I simply went out and had a good time.

The result? I had a perfect last training run and wound up winning the race in the process. It's amazing what a relaxed attitude can do! Come A.C. raceday, I was ready and psyched to run long again, and with the exception of a stiff back from an uncomfortable hotel bed, my body felt rested and energized.

RACE FOR A PURPOSE

Though not essential to running a successful race, I like to give my races a purpose. For A.C. 100, I collected per-mile pledges for my financially troubled church. I didn't manage to pull the church out of debt, but I did manage to

raise a little money, and it gave my race added meaning. Every time I thought about quitting, I remembered that I had goals beyond my own desire to finish. I have found that running for charity adds a new dimension to racing and can make an event even more memorable.

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