

One of the most incredible tests of human endurance is the Badwater Ultramarathon, a running race that begins in Death Valley, California, and ends high up on Mount Whitney, 135 miles away. Read about people who run the race and answer the questions that follow.

Badwater Ultramarathon: 135 miles in 130-degree heat

- Badwater Ultramarathon is 135 miles through one of the hottest deserts in the world.
- It's essential that runners bring crews who check their vitals through the three-day race.
- Prize for finishing the course that traverses three mountain ranges? A belt buckle.

by Ashley Fantz

- 1 **DEATH VALLEY, California (CNN)**—Today, you get a call from a friend. They need a favor.
- 2 Would you mind spending your vacation time this summer in Death Valley, a desert where temperatures hover around 130 degrees?
- 3 Would you be OK with sleeping in a van, if you get to sleep at all, for three days, because you'll be working your tail off spraying runners down with water, dunking them in ice and keeping track of everything that goes in (and—yes—out) of their body every 15 minutes so they don't die running 135 miles in the hardest footrace on the planet?
- 4 “Yeah, man, it's Badwater. You don't turn down a chance to be at Badwater,” Mark Paterson said, adjusting his visor as sweat soaked his face.
- 5 He pulls at his shirt, trying to create some air, pointlessly. It was 4 p.m. and 126 degrees in a Death Valley village called Furnace Creek, what whoever coined the phrase, ‘Hell on earth’ had in mind.
- 6 “You get that call and you do what's right,” Paterson said. “You make sure your runner gets the ultimate bragging right, maybe the biggest big deal of all, the event that makes everyone else go, ‘Badwater? Oh, no, man, you did *not* just do that!’”
- 7 Paterson was right. The Adventurecorps Badwater Ultramarathon is infamous in endurance sports circles. It is the running equivalent of summiting Everest, the ultimate test of mental fortitude, a hippy communion with the desert of epic highs and lows (literally—the race starts at 280 feet below sea level, the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere, covers

three mountain ranges for descents and ascents totaling 9,000 feet and ends halfway up Mount Whitney, the highest point in the contiguous United States).

- 8 For all the nonsweaters out there—consider how long it takes to drive from Baltimore to New York. Now imagine running that distance . . . without sleep . . . with 10,000 blow dryers pointed at you the entire time.

All that for a belt buckle?

- 9 You apply to Badwater the way you apply to Harvard. Runners from across the world try to wow a finicky race jury by submitting awesome scores (provable race finishing times from at least two 100-mile events) and an essay conveying they have the stamina to tackle such a gnarly challenge. Gnarly meaning blisters that turn feet into pizza; dehydration that can lead to organ and brain damage, heat stroke and hyponatremia; a salt imbalance that makes extremities swell like sausages. For good measure, let's throw in heat and sleep-deprivation induced hallucinations.
- 10 The entry fee is \$795 (steep, sure, but an eight-person medical team, insurance, supplies and logistics to stage a monster event in the middle of nowhere ain't cheap). Crews aren't paid.
- 11 The prize at the race often called Satan's Fun Run, should one finish in less than 48 hours, is a thick silver belt buckle.
- 12 "To talk about the buckle is to miss the point," said Marshall Ulrich, a 58-year-old endurance sensei¹ who has done Badwater more than a dozen times and has summited Everest. Notorious for having his toenails surgically removed—toenails fall off anyway when you're an endurance runner—Marshall is, contrary to what most people assume, not a machine.
- 13 He started running when he was 28, after his doctor told him to get off his butt and lower his blood pressure or expect an early grave.
- 14 "You run Badwater because there's something in you that wants to get out there, in the middle of nowhere, and think about something. It's a way of freeing yourself, getting back to what I really believe people are supposed to be doing instead of relying so much on a bunch of material crap that only makes us weaker. We are built to run, to cover great distance, for survival sake."
- 15 Slightly less extreme, the women's winner of Badwater, two years in a row, is Jamie Donaldson, a middle school math teacher from Colorado. A lawyer, politician, small business owner, real estate agent and a college student ran Badwater this year, and its

¹ *sensei* — teacher or master

overall winner, coming in at 23:39:18, was Marcos Farinazzo, a 40-year-old hospital worker from Brazil.

- 16 The oldest runner this year was 67-year-old Arthur Webb, who has finished 10 consecutive Badwaters. Race officials using walkie-talkies (there's no cell service in Death Valley) counted him out at mile 17 where he cramped and jumped in a pool to cool down.
- 17 Time, ice and a few massages later, Webb was on the course again, not stopping until he crossed the finish line more than 40 hours later.

Good crew, good race—probably

- 18 “First, you gotta have your hydration log. How much has your runner had to drink, how much do they need,” Paterson said.
- 19 “Endurolytes,² quarters of peanut butter sandwiches, something fizzy for when they start having digestion issues—’cause they’re gonna have ’em—your various tapes and bandages for the feet, Neosporin, Preparation H, animal cookies,” he said. “We jump out of that van every quarter mile with two buckets. I got my bucket of water and ice with a straight block of ice and a bucket of ice and sports drink. The runner gets every other one, you rotate.”
- 20 The grossest but most necessary job?
- 21 “You have to check if their urine is clear, so you better be looking at that, and they better be going often,” Paterson said.
- 22 As the race wore on, its 60-hour course limit blurring the days, plastic cups labeled with runners’ names who’d suffered serious dehydration began dotting a hotel room that served as Badwater’s medical center. They looked filled with varying concentrations of apple juice, one redder than the next.
- 23 Paterson’s runner, Tim Kjenstad, a 51-year-old California firefighter, has run Badwater before, but this year, sacked by severe dehydration and bodily functions that don’t need to be mentioned, he had to DNF (the dreaded initials for Did Not Finish) at mile 44.
- 24 “Nobody can say that running 135 miles in the desert is healthy,” said Dr. Lisa Stranc Bliss, the head of the medical staff, who herself has run Badwater. “But I’m not going to say it isn’t one of the most incredible experiences of your life.”
- 25 Beyond the physical, there’s an emotional bond forged between crew members and runners that military types call “embracing the suck.”

² *endurolytes* — mineral capsules used in endurance events

- 26 The wife of a Brazilian runner, Cas Camara, who came in dead last far past the 60-hour mark, screamed and cried and begged her husband, who had fallen to the ground, his body seemingly wasted, to get up, get up and finish.
- 27 Members of a Navajo tribe and an entire family, tiny kids included, packed into a van to follow one runner. When Arnold Begay reached his breaking point, two of the men lifted him to his feet and a woman cupped his face and sang to him. He went on.
- 28 Some crewers ran 80 kilometers, completely anonymously, just to keep their runner on a specific pace. Many were exhausted from running their own ultramarathons only weeks before. Badwater's past champ, Hungarian Akos Konya, crewed for 19-year-old Arizona college student Nick Hollon, who made history as the event's youngest ever competitor.
- 29 "Nick emailed me and said how would you like to help me," explained Konya, hovering over his runner Nick Hollon at mile 72. Hollon was in pain. The teen's feet were chewed and he was about to take a needle to his blisters.
- 30 Konya, skinny and fast as a Greyhound, put his hand on Hollon's shoulder. He seemed shocked by the question—Why would you go through Badwater to help out a kid you barely know?
- 31 "Why would I not help him do this? He asked me. I don't understand why you would say no."