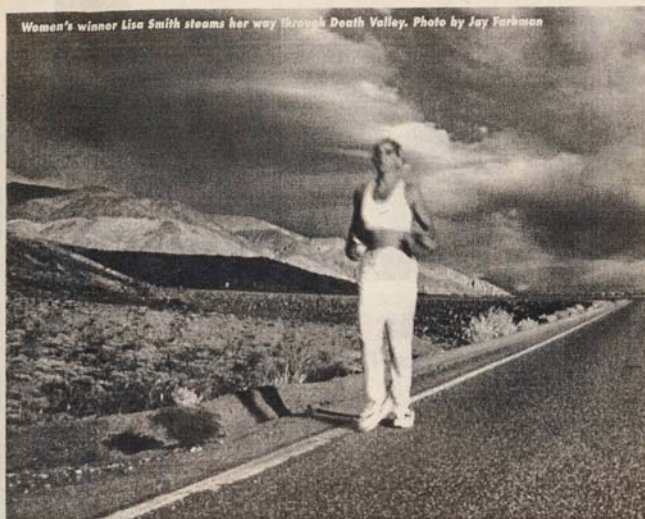


Women's winner Lisa Smith steams her way through Death Valley. Photo by Jay Farbman



**"My eyes
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Paul Braden

MIGHT AS WELL BE WALKIN' ON THE SUN

BY RENNE GARDNER

The air-conditioned cargo van is stocked to the ceiling with six ice-filled coolers, several cases of soda and about 30 gallons of water for drinking, spraying, dousing and sponging. Four or five tubes of sunscreen and chapstick are within arm's reach. You're covered from chin to toe with white UV-protected desert garb, and on your head is a special sun hat with neck protection and a compartment for holding ice.

You're prepared for walkin' on the sun. But are you ready for running in Death Valley in the middle of summer?

27 runners think they are. They gather near Badwater, an inches-deep brackish pool of water recognized as the lowest, hottest and driest spot on the continent. On the volcanic cliffs to the east, 282 feet above them, is a simple white sign with black lettering that reads: SEA LEVEL. They are guzzling water, slathering on sunscreen, preparing themselves for the world's most extreme ultra-marathon, 1997's Tenth Annual Hi-Tec Badwater 135.

They will attempt to run 135 miles from Badwater through the burning heart of Death Valley along State Highway 190 to Whitney Portal, the gateway to highest point in the contiguous United States, 14,494 foot Mt. Whitney. No, it's not the sun, but it might as well be — or that other infernally hot place.

On the course, a mere 17 miles from Badwater, situated somewhere between the jagged salt ridges of the Devil's Golf Course and the sand dunes of the Devil's Corn Field, lies Furnace Creek, a relative oasis with irrigated trees, a general store and a motel. In 1913, the highest temperature in the western hemisphere — 134 degrees — was recorded here. Official temperatures, however, are measured in the shade five feet above the ground. At ground-level in the midday summer sun, the temperature soars many skin-roasting and brain cell-toasting degrees higher.

In fact, according to Richard Benyo, author of *Death Valley 300*, a remarkable account of his effort to run from Badwater to Mt. Whitney and back, the summer sun, coupled with the highway asphalt's radiant heat, can shoot Death Valley temperatures up to 200 degrees!

Fortunately, it's only 6 a.m., and the mercury indicates a relatively comfortable 98 degrees. But it's already windy. Even standing at the start line, the heat and the evaporative wind begin to suck the life out of you. If it's difficult to stay hydrated while simply walking around in the morning, what will it be like while running during the middle of the day?

A shouted "Go!" marks the start and 27 Badwater runners begin their desert odyssey.

It's no wonder that the name Death Valley stuck. Many pioneers seeking a short cut to the gold fields of central and northern California did not survive the trek through the valley.

One of the survivors, upon his rescue,

is reported to have uttered "Goodbye, Death Valley."

Unlike the rescued pioneer who named the valley and left for good, many of the Badwater runners choose to return year after year to subject their bodies, minds and souls to, well, abuse.

Though no one has died during a Badwater event, serious injury is a definite possibility. Among the maladies awaiting Badwater runners are dehydration, heat illness and kidney failure. Still, two-thirds of this year's runners have been here before.

Scott Weber, a sports marketing representative from Littleton, Colorado, will have completed 1,000 miles of racing on the course if he finishes. Bill Menard of Florida won this event in 1994 and 1995.

"In 1994, I was lucky enough to win this because everyone got sick or hurt," he says. "Last year, I got sick and didn't finish, so I've got a personal goal to make it this year."

The other returnees echo Menard's sentiments. They've come back to do better. Even 69-years-young Beacham Toler of Amarillo, Texas, feels he can better his time from two years ago. In 1995, Beacham finished in 50:40, and he wants to finish in under 48 hours this year. He finished the Western States 100 only two weeks ago and is pleased with his heat training.

"I run a lot of hills, and I train in my greenhouse, which gets to about 165 degrees," he says. "I go out there for two hours and sweat."

Although he is physically ready for this

race, he knows that to finish Badwater takes much more.

"I think the mental part of it will be the toughest," Beacham admits.

Unlike the returnees who can temper their anxiety with experience and knowledge, the first-timers can only wonder and hope. Paul Braden, 33, a graphic artist from Mt. Hope, Ontario, Canada is one such first-timer.

"This is my first time — and hopefully my last," he said prior to the run. "The anxiety is building now, the butterflies are coming. If I don't sleep tonight, it's gonna be ugly."

Why subject yourself to the rigors of Badwater?

Braden explains, "When you consider that only .1% of the population would even consider doing such an event... that's the appeal."

Lisa Smith, a personal trainer from Bernardsville, New Jersey, simply loves the desert.

"I love the heat. It's a totally spiritual place," she says.

She finished second woman and fourth overall at Badwater two years ago — her first ultra-marathon.

"Your body can do whatever your mind tells it to do," says Smith, "plus I've always done well in the heat." She is feeling confident. "I'm gonna try and break the women's record."

Immediately after the start, the runners string out quickly: a group of front-runners hunting for records, a group of middle-of-the packers seeking to improve on past efforts and a group just trying to survive.

..... CONTINUED ON PAGE 19

All of the runners make it to Furnace Creek (mile 17). Beyond that, what was a tailwind turns into a 40 mph crosswind and the temperature soars above 120 degrees. Even the scorpions seek the refuge of what little shade they can find among the creosote and smoke tree.

Runners are met by their support vehicles every mile or so for water and ice and sometimes a long rest. Even with such assistance, three runners fail to make it to the desert outpost of Stovepipe Wells (mile 41). Chalk it up to heat-induced nausea. Chalk it up to dehydration. Chalk it up to experience.

Several others don't think they'll get beyond Stovepipe. After severe muscle cramps, Paul Braden is forced to spend eight hours here to rest and re-hydrate. The pain is so intense that his screams draw concerned tourists to his side.

"My eyes sank back into my head," he remembers. "It was like your body getting shrink-wrapped."

On the 18-mile climb from Stovepipe Wells — at a whole five feet in elevation — to 5,000-foot Towne Pass through the Panamint Mountains, the crosswind has become a super-heated headwind blowing from the west. It burns so much that the runners walk, head ducked and body braced against the onrushing inferno. Their visual world is nothing but feet and asphalt. Life boils down to a simple mandate: Survive the wind.

Dale Sutton, 57, an age-group racewalking champion from San Diego, is clad in light cotton pajamas that look as though they were nibbled by Mothra. Golf ball-size holes for ventilation are evenly distributed over his blue striped PJs. His face is covered with an oversized bandanna, revealing only the dark tint of his sunglasses. He looks like a very weird homeless person, but his outfit must be working. He climbs strongly up to Towne Pass in fifth place.

All the runners are coping with heat, wind and dehydration, but the front runners have something else on their minds. One after another asks the same question: "Where is Eric? How far ahead is Eric?"

Eric Clifton of North Carolina, one of the premier trail runners in the country, took up the Badwater challenge with his typical strategy.

"I thought 24 hours was possible on this course," he said later.

A 24-hour finish would smash Marshall Ulrich's 26:18 course record set in 1992. Halfway up to Towne Pass, at about mile 50, Eric is a couple of miles ahead of David Jones of Tennessee and still on record-setting pace.

At 4:30 p.m., Lisa Smith is in third, another mile behind Jones. Her crew admits that she was pretty sick for a while, "but she's getting better."

Looking at her, you wouldn't know that she had been sick. Dressed from head to toe in white, she keeps a quick pace as



At the Badwater, it's okay to eat and run. Men's winner David Jones (#8) grabs a quick snack. Photo by Jay Farbman

her crew members replace her water bottles and feed her.

"This is awesome! We're doing great," she says.

Out of ear-shot, one of her crew members expresses more rational feelings about the day: "Whoever thought of this race? This is nuts!!"

The runners continue into the night, wearing reflective vests. Many of the crew cars follow their runners closely for added safety. A few crew members trot beside their runners to help them get through the night a little easier, give them emotional support, keep their minds off the pain.

The temperature falls only slightly — into the 90s — but the wind doesn't ease up. At 6 a.m. Friday morning, 24 hours into the race, most of the runners have crested Towne Pass (mile 59). The front runners have already passed the town of Panamint Springs (mile 74).

Paul Braden, however, is still 10 miles from Towne Pass. He walks slowly, limping slightly from the debilitating effects of dehydration and cramping. It is light out, just past sunrise, and he still wears his reflective suit.

"I know nothing about the desert," he says rather weakly.

It's ugly and getting uglier. The report from race organizers at 8:23 a.m. Friday: David Jones is in the lead and starting up Whitney Portal Road. No one knows what happened to Clifton. I find him at Whitney Portal waiting for David Jones to finish. He reported that he stayed close to Marshall Ulrich's record pace all the way to Crowley's Viewpoint (mile 80) but fell apart soon after.

"I needed more miles under my belt," he admits. He explains that his training was hampered by a motorcycle accident in May.

"Not only that, but pavement," he says. "I'm pretty much a trail runner. My legs... my quads, hamstrings and calves just feel shot."

Just past 11 a.m. Friday morning, 45-year-old David Jones, a real estate developer from Eagleview, Tennessee breaks the tape as the winner of the 10th Annual Hi-Tec Badwater 135. Jones passed Eric on the long flat just outside of Panamint Springs.

"I wanted to start out conservatively and try to run within myself," says Jones, "and it just paid off."

His crew played an important role in his success.

"My crew was great bringing me food, catering to my needs," he continues. Big scoops of peanut butter seemed to work for him. "I couldn't chew anything, and I couldn't swallow. Peanut butter was something that I could put in my mouth and take with water."

After Jones crosses the finish line, 19 hours remain on the clock for runners to finish before 48 hours. That's what it takes to win a Badwater buckle. There are still over 30 hours for runners to finish before the 60 hour cut-off time.

Lisa Smith does not get the women's record, but she finishes third overall with the second fastest women's time ever. Dale Sutton finishes fourth overall, 15 pounds lighter than when he started. Despite hallucinations of hiking on a trail, Beacham Toler earns a buckle. Paul Braden learned a little about the desert, and learned it the hard way. He is the last official finisher.

Throughout Friday night and all day Saturday, lone runners followed by their dedicated support crews inch along Lone Pine's major thoroughfare.

Major W. C. [Curt] Maples, United States Marine Corps., a battalion executive officer stationed at Camp Pendleton, brought the largest support crew: eight Marines and Navy sailors.

"I had two crews," he says. "I did that intentionally so they wouldn't get worn out. While one crew was with me, one was resting." All eight crew members join

Major Maples in Lone Pine. It is just before midnight, Friday. While one drives the support vehicle, the other seven, wearing reflective vests, march slower than they have ever marched before. Maples' right knee aches with tendinitis and, while favoring it, he hyper-extends his left knee.

"I couldn't step off of my left foot," Maples remembers. "I was almost side-stepping the last 10 or 11 miles."

His crew surrounds their Major as he limps along Whitney Portal Road in the dark. Nine soldiers on a mission.

"For Marines, the world is black and white; there are no gray areas," Maples points out. "You either accomplish your mission or you don't."

You either finish Badwater or it finishes you. Of 27 starters, 20 cross the finish line at Whitney Portal, completing the most extreme ultra-marathon in the world. Many of the runners don't stop there, however. Competitive events are not allowed in the National Forest, so they shed their race numbers after rests that range from one hour to several days and continue on their own. Their goal: Whitney Summit.

At the top, they will have traveled 146 miles from Badwater to Mt. Whitney, from the lowest point on the continent to the highest spot in the Lower 48 states. From 282 feet below sea level to over 14,000 feet.

No, it's not walkin' on the sun. It's Badwater. And that's a whole lot tougher.

Results - July 17, 1997

1. David Jones, 45, Eagleview, TN	29:10*
2. Jim Magill, 50, Saratoga, CA	35:45
3. Lisa Smith, 36, Bernardsville, NJ	37:01
4. Dale Sutton, 57, San Diego, CA	38:50
5. Mick Justin, 49, Nisswa, MN	38:55
6. Steven Silver, 48, El Paso, TX	39:13
7. Bill Menard, 46, Venice, FL	39:55
8. Matthew Toepeck, 28, Austin, TX	40:48
9. Jose Wilkie, 34, Louisville, KY	40:56
10. Beacham Toler, 69, Amarillo, TX	43:53
11. W.C. Maples, 33, Oceanside, CA	45:15
12. Fred Vance, 44, San Jose, CA	47:00
13. Del Scharffenberg, 51, Portland, OR	48:16
14. Eris Zama, 46, Cesena, Italy	49:02
15. P. Lambert, 40, Durham, England	50:54
16. John Radich, 43, Manrovia, CA	51:07
17. Rob Valkenau, 66, Bend, OR	52:45
18. Steve Kerr, 41, Kent, England	56:02
19. Scott Weber, 44, Littleton, CO	57:00
20. Paul Braden, 33, Ontario, Canada	57:11

*Record with a morning start; with an evening start, the record is 26:18

Entry information for Hi-Tec Badwater Race, July 1998

Entrance into the race is by invitation only. Running resumes for the past two years must be submitted by January 31, 1998 to Matt Frederick, Hi-Tec Sports USA, Inc., 4801 Stoddard Road, Modesto, CA 95356, 209/545-1111. Invitations will be sent in early March. Runners must provide their own crew, water, supplies, vehicles and fuel.