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Local runners endure intense heat for suffering children

By Anne Weisgerber

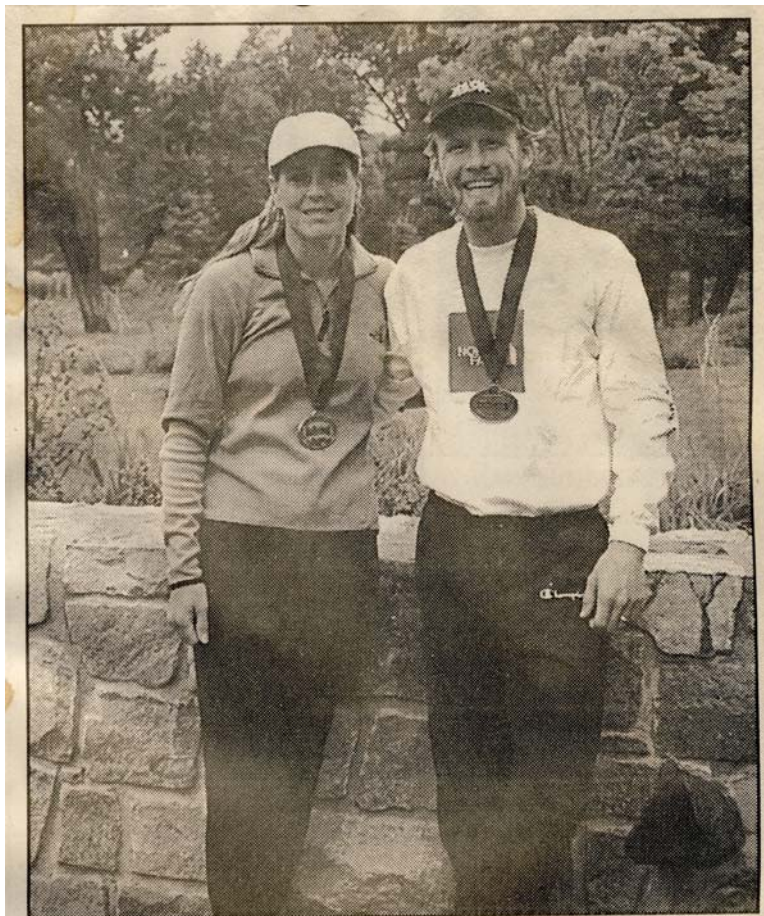


Photo by: Anne Weisgerber

Ultramarathon Runners

Bernardsville residents Lisa Smith, and her fiancé Jay Batchen both know what 135 miles of bad road is like—they ran on it. But the couple prefers that road to the one of poverty and starvation, the one that so many Ethiopian widows and children are forced to follow. Elite ultramarathonrunners, Smith and Batchen recently completed the world's most extreme footrace through Death Valley, Calif.

By ANNE WEISGERBER

Contributing Writer

Did you hear the one about the dashing couple who ran from the pool of poisonous water to save the starving kids while a nun in Rome cheered them on?

It has a lot to do with Lisa Smith and Jay Batchen, both of Bernardsville. The two recently passed an inhuman endurance test, and they did it to draw attention to thousands of starving children in Eritrea and Ethiopia. It's hard to decide what adjective best describes the race they undertook and completed together (without a doubt the toughest footrace on earth); it's either beastly or magnificent. But there are easy adjectives to describe starvation: needless, heinous, and cruel as Hell.

The Poison Pool

If there was ever a footrace that caused people to chicken out at the starting line, it would have to be the Badwater Ultramarathon, in Death Valley, Calif. An ultramarathon is any race over 26.2 miles, and this year's Badwater race was run from July 27-29. Of 69 starters, only 47 made it to the finish line.

The race begins in Death Valley (282 feet below sea level,) next to the poisonous pool of alkaline water in the town of Badwater. It ends at the portals of Mount Whitney. That's 135 miles later and 8,600 feet higher. Runners have 60 hours to complete it.

Applicants for this race who are not highly conditioned long distance runners would be risking their lives, and are strongly discouraged from signing on. Other than the use of intravenous fluids being grounds for disqualification, this race has few rules. Smith speaks from experience when she says, "when you come down to it, this race is all about nutrition and what you put in your body."

Badwater is one of the few ultras requiring the runners to complete it ALL as soon as possible. Batchen said, "What makes Badwater the worst is the asphalt. We've run the Marathon des Sables in Morocco, which is on sand. Your footing is unsure, but you run over the course of six days, maybe 70 miles per day. That's three hours of running and 21

hours of resting. But at Badwater it's a straight 30 to 40 hours of running."

Conditions in the Badwater race are merciless. Air temperature is in the 125-140 degree range. Road surface temperatures are in the unfriendly neighborhood of 200 degrees. How could one possibly prepare for these conditions? Batchen said, "There is simply no way to get ready for it, unless you actually put your feet in a fire."

Smith, who has completed Badwater five times, and was 1997's women's champion, describes the heat this way: "What's 140 degrees like? Go into a hot diner kitchen, and put yourself in the oven. Then make your mind up that you're in there for 45 hours and there's no getting out of it. Once you make up your mind that that's the way it is, and it's not going to change, you get on with the race."

Each runner must have their own emergency vehicle accompanying them, and a crew of at least two people. Smith and Batchen had a crew of seven people accompanying them, for encouragement and to make sure they survived.

Beside the burning heat, runners might anticipate sand and wind storms, getting lost, and this year all the wildfires out west brought a special treat: a steady fall of ashes.

"Ashes falling from the fires looked like snow," Batchen said. "When you ran, your feet made little puffs of smoke. Our clothes are covered with the stuff." And, for an extra laugh from Satan's joke book, during this year's race the road department was actually laying down hot, fresh asphalt on a three-mile stretch of road. "My shoes from that day have soles as thick as hiking boots, with all the tar and asphalt that stuck to them," Batchen added.

They say the heat can make you nuts, to the point you're grateful for aches and pains because they occupy your mind. Batchen recalls how "on day two we were still running, and it was in the low 90's early in the morning. Our crew told us we had perfect running conditions. But we were crazy with the heat. We wanted bandannas with ice in them, we wanted ice in our hats. Our fatigue amplified the heat."

"We probably used about 80-90 bags of ice for the race," Smith noted.

"It melts really quickly with the coolers opening and shutting all the time."

Badwater lets runners from all over the world push their bodies and minds to the limit, and some runners have actually run while asleep — awakening when they fall into some brush on the roadside. Smith admitted she was running in her sleep for the last five miles of the race. "My crew chief, Dave Mattiace (also of Bernardsville) kept hollering encouragement, and kept me staggering along. He'd be telling jokes and people were laughing, but I have no idea what anyone said."

The extreme challenge and punishing conditions attract these athletes. Many who have completed the Badwater race say it's a religious experience that changes your life.

The Happy Couple

After last year's race, Jay asked for Lisa's hand in marriage at the top of Mount Whitney. They make a beautiful couple, blonde and tan and so comfortable with each other. They love each other more for making it through Badwater as a team, and plan on marrying in Rome.

When asked if it was a good idea to take on this race as a couple, Batchen replied, "Definitely. Being out there, you never feel the same at any one point. To see each other keep going, and not give up, is amazing. I know we can survive anything."

"There came a point," said Smith, "when we had to ask ourselves do we want to die, or should we take a break. So we stopped and had some pizza with the crew and changed clothes."

"Everyone knew we were running the race together," Batchen recalled, "and when we finally made it to the finish, we joined hands and crossed, breaking the ribbon together."

This year Smith and Batchen both finished the race in 45 hours (with only 20 minutes of sleep, and about 300 calories taken in.) But their work is not yet over. They hope to call attention to the terrible plight of Ethiopian refugees, and make people notice the ungodly conditions that generations of children will be forced to endure if the cycle of starvation, war, and lack of schooling is not broken.

The happy couple was inspired to run this race by Sister Mary Beth Lloyd of the Religious Teachers Filippini (RTF). Sister Mary Beth is known to many as "the running nun," because she'd often been spotted jogging in her full length habit when she lived in New Jersey.

A life-long runner, Sister Mary Beth was a teacher at the Villa Walsh Academy in Morristown for many years. It was here that she met Smith, when Smith took over the coaching position for the track team.

Sister Mary Beth currently serves the RTF community as the Mission Office Director in Rome, Italy. All the nuns of this order are teachers, and they have missions in 10 countries throughout the world. "I try to provide for the needs of the sisters and children of poorer nations," Sr. Mary Beth explained. "The refugee situation is perilous, and that's why Lisa and Jay are trying to help out by dedicating their Badwater footrace to our mission in Eritrea."

For The Love Of Kids

There's a great similarity between Badwater and the situation at the RTF mission in Eritrea. The urgency to complete the race echoes the urgency to get food and medical services to these children. The physical endurance required to reach Mount Whitney is akin to the refugee mother's journey of many days to find bread for her children. The runners, the sisters, and the widows and children of Ethiopia and Eritrea seek a merciful blessing through God and through their mutual suffering.

Like the heat in Death Valley, starvation is a trap your mind cannot escape.

The sisters at the mission say the scene is indescribable. Starving people are everywhere, and they stay to care for them, and feed them as best they can. No matter how sick a child is, according to Sister Mary Beth "the doctors put their thumb and first finger around the upper arm of the child. If the child does not fit in the ring, that is, if the thumb and finger don't meet, the doctor sends the child away." The cruel reality is that only the most severely malnourished children are granted medical care.

The RTF is a teaching order, but cannot teach if the children are hungry. And the civil wars will never end if the children cannot get an education. But in the meantime, there is war, and there is hunger. More than 800,000 Ethiopian refugees, mostly war widows and children, live in the fields surrounding the Sisters' Mission in Eritrea. It's estimated that 480,000 of them are children.

According to Sister Mary Beth, "the Religious Teachers Filippini are the ONLY religious community not to leave during the previous war. When the American soldiers went in this time to evacuate the sisters, they

refused to leave saying 'this is when the people need us most.' These women are very brave!"

Smith said, "Sister Mary Beth told me 'you are suffering for these children' and I am. Jay and I appreciate the life we live. These starving women have to walk six hours a day, just to get bread to feed their children. And they do it with no water, and no crew to support them."

Sister Mary Beth added, "As Catholics, we believe that any suffering can be offered up for the well-being of someone in need. It is a type of prayer. Often people suffering from pain offer their pain or sickness up, for the intentions of someone else. God hears this prayer perhaps more quickly than a mere recitation of a 'canned' prayer because the person is really giving of themselves. I feel that God will bless and reward Lisa and Jay, and bless the needy children for all that was involved in finishing the Badwater Ultramarathon."

When asked why someone should consider supporting Jay and Lisa's effort through a charitable contribution to the RTF, Sister Mary Beth gave this heartfelt response.

"Often people want to do good, but they must work for a living to raise their own families. They have

money but are not sure how to do good with it, and if they give it to a charity they want to feel sure it will be put to good use. Giving to the Religious Teachers Filippini, we can promise you that 100 percent of the money goes to the poor children. Very famous charities give as little as three cents on the dollar to the cause intended. We have ways of covering our overhead, and never take money given for the children to use it for other purposes. If you give me \$100 for food, I will buy the children \$100 worth of food."

The RTF wants to buy more milk, water, food, and blankets for these children, and this is their plea for help. They are overwhelmed with the needs of so many refugees, and no one else is helping these mothers and children. Smith and Batchen request that contributions be mailed even after the race is completed. Checks should be made payable to the Religious Teachers Filippini, and sent to the RTF care of Lisa Smith and Jay Batchen, P.O. Box 398, Bernardville, NJ 07924. Just as they ran out of 'the valley of death,' Batchen, Smith, and the good Sister hope to help this generation of Ethiopian children get away from the demon of starvation, and the wartime atrocities that brought it forth.