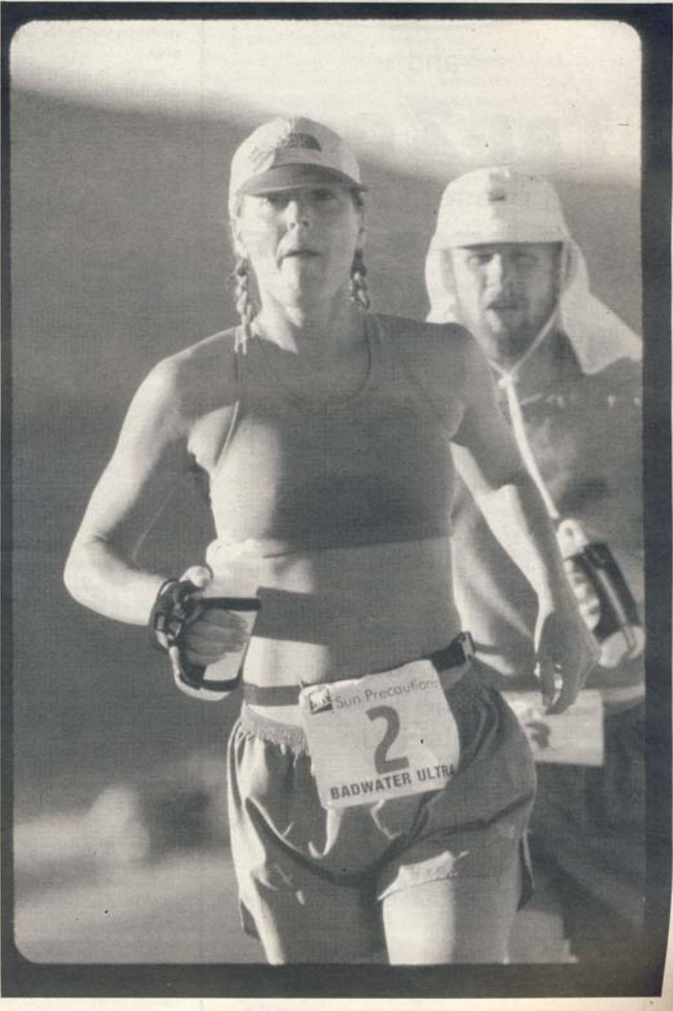


Lisa Smith on running the 2000 Badwater Ultramarathon with her new husband, Jay Batchen: "Our enthusiasm set the pace, but persistence and trust in each other got us to the finish. The treasure isn't only at the end of the journey; the process itself is its own reward." Photo by Tony Di Zinno



Through Sickness and In Health:

Running Mates Lisa Smith
and Jay Batchen at the
Badwater 135

by Buddy Levy

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Heat haze curls off the newly paved highway like a vaporous serpent as Lisa Smith and partner Jay Batchen limp along the roadside just outside Keeler, CA. Smith coughs violently as cars pass just inches away, the miasmatic swirl of their exhaust fumes merging with the cacophony of graders and rollers. The temperature looms around 125 degrees, the black-top so hot it paves the waffle tread of the runner's shoes. Smith and Batchen stumble along what will be the worst three-mile section of the absurd 135-mile footrace, moving in slow-motion, looking eerily like lunar explorers in their all-white Sun Precautions protective suits. Two of the runner's crew members scuffle along, circling them, spraying them with ice-cold water and filling their hats with ice cubes that will melt within minutes. Passengers in passing cars stare with morbid curiosity, their air conditioning systems whining at a max. At the end of the paving section, Smith and Batchen slump against the support van, Smith weeping convulsively, Batchen gone deathly silent.

The two have come a long way to reach this potential breaking point; not just the 110 miles they've run in the convection oven that is Death Valley, but the miles training, the emotional miles of their relatively new relationship. Thousands of hill miles in sweltering New Jersey humidity. Countless summer hours riding in their car, the heater blasting, wearing down parkas to prepare for heat that now threatens to end their race.

Their relationship is predicated on running, and they are deeply connected to this place. Just last year, on September 18th, they had exchanged vows on top of Mount Whitney at 14,494 feet. In April they traveled to Morocco and competed in the famed Marathon des Sables, a 150-mile stage race which Lisa Smith had won before. Smith had now become not only Batchen's life partner but also his running mentor and coach. Long a ranked U.S. ultra-marathoner, Smith has 89 marathons to her credit. Batchen is a relative "newbie," with only a handful of marathons and the Marathon des Sables to his credit. Though he's inexperienced, Smith is overtly confident about Batchen's future: "Jay has talent beyond talent...next year you are going to see Jay shine like the brightest star."

Their goals for the 2000 Sun Precautions Badwater UltraMarathon were lofty: to run together as a couple (it had never been achieved), and along the way, to break the women's record of 36 hours 58 minutes set last year. If all went as planned, they would then rest, wake in the wee hours of the next morning, and summit Whitney—the epiphany for most Badwater survivors. For Badwater, they called themselves Team Happy Feet. Finishing together would be a way of cementing their relationship by doing something they both love—running together.

Informed ultra-runners consider Badwater the most difficult footrace on earth for a number of reasons. The first is obvious: heat. Set in late July in a stark, hellish place, The Badwater UltraMarathon begins at 282 feet below sea level, the lowest spot in the United States. Temperatures soar above 130 during the day, and the route runs past aptly-named places: Furnace Creek, Stovepipe Wells, The Devil's Cornfield. Heat exhaustion and dehydration are very real possibilities, with sunburn, sunstroke, and scorching-hot pavement other problems. The course itself presents epic challenge: 135 continuous miles of pavement, with the finish line at Whitney Portals, elevation 8360. Three extremely tough climbs punctuate the course—Stovepipe Wells to Towne's Pass (18 miles, 5000 feet); Panamint Grade (15 miles, 3,400 feet); and finally, coming at the end, Lone Pine to Whitney Portals (13 miles, 4,600 feet). Perhaps this explains why the 2000 edition, with its field of only 69 runners from a dozen countries, is the largest field yet in the decade-long history of the race.

The hardest footrace on earth becomes even more difficult when trying to run as a couple. Said Batchen, "the obvious difficulties are different paces, different needs for sleep and different ups and downs throughout the race. However, after countless hours of training for this event, we thought that our paces and needs were so closely matched that it would be worth trying."

Though the pair ran well from the start, running the first scorching 42 miles from Badwater to Stovepipe Wells in around 8 hours, Smith began to suffer early on. She came down with diarrhea, which slowed them by forcing her to make frequent roadside stops. Still, while other runners took the plunge in the Stovepipe Well's pool, Smith and Batchen changed clothes quickly, game faces still on, then attended to inevitable blisters and foot maladies, and began their 5000 foot assault on Towne's Pass, the first major test. Said Batchen, whose longest previous run was 47 miles: "My feet were in so much pain by Stovepipe, I was concerned about whether or not they would carry me the next 94 miles, especially up the daunting hills that stood in the way...The most difficult part was watching the person I love suffer and not being able to help her get better. I wanted so badly to see the pain go away but I knew if she gave up she'd only feel temporary physical relief—but the pain of quitting would live on forever."

They struggled on, using trekking poles, and finally reached Towne's Pass right at sunset, with deep skeins of salmon-colored light striating the mountain backdrop. The desert

transforms at night; temperatures ease, the road cools, and oncoming traffic, a dangerous race fact, subsides. Rattlesnakes coil on the road seeking residual warmth, and support crews must shine headlamps down the lonely highway.

By around midnight, just outside Panamint Springs and some three marathons into the race, Smith and Batchen had refocused their goals. Now it was about finishing, not PR's or records. For one thing, a Russian woman named Irina Reutovich, running in her first Badwater, was already many hours ahead (she would eventually shatter the woman's record by over 7 hours). And Smith's early gastro-intestinal problems had slowed their pace.

Smith put these trials in perspective: "The race was harder than I expected. Jay and I set aside our personal desires when needed and raced together, representing a spiritual act of self-sacrifice. We watched each other suffer, we shared compassion and support, but we didn't carry each other...this would have robbed us both of our strength and self-respect."

Of that first night climb, Batchen added, "There was a mystical force that took over during the long night stretches: the forest fires, red, glowing sky, the glistening shooting stars, the reach-out-and-touch-it big dipper. I felt our connection grow during those seemingly endless hours."

The two slept for a brief half-hour that first night, hunkered in the van among coolers and gear, and by noon the next day were walking zombies on the steaming tarmac outside Keeler. Adding to the exhaust fumes and the oppressive heat was falling soot from nearby forest fires. Smith suffers asthma, and more than once she was clutched by attacks, clinging desperately to her inhaler. Said Smith, "all the ash from the sky decided to collect in my lungs...but I remembered that every journey begins with a single step—then you also have to take a second step and a third, as many as needed to reach your destination. Together we focused on the same journey."

At Lone Pine, 13 miles from the finish, they chowed pizza and stared up the winding road that heads to Whitney Portals. "Just a half-marathon to go" they said in unison. However, with brutally cruel irony, the last half-marathon of Badwater presents the greatest altitude, and a series of steep switchbacks that literally reduce some runners to a crawl. Last year, just five miles from the finish and in the lead, Smith had been whisked from the course and taken to a nearby hospital to receive treatment and intravenous fluids. Attempting to erase that memory, they braced for the last ascent, striding off into the dying light, headlamps bobbing up the grade.

The climb would take its toll, and more than once Smith broke down, leaning in a quivering heap on her trekking poles. More than once she staggered backwards like a punch-drunk prize fighter. But each time Jay Batchen, lover, partner, best friend, and running companion, was there to brace her fall. Soot from the fires, illuminated by the headlamps, fell like snow around the spent runners as they plodded onward. Finally, at 1:23:56 am July 29, the pair crossed the finish line at Whitney Portals, holding hands. It had taken them 43 hours, 23 minutes, and 56 seconds, and during that entire time they had never been more than five feet apart. They fell into the arms of their support crew and wept—tears of joy, elation, and relief, and compassion.

Later, a rested Smith would say, "Our enthusiasm set the pace, but persistence and trust in each other got us to the finish. The treasure isn't only in the end of the journey, but the process itself is its own reward. The positives of running together were endless—Our connection was so deep that only one being was there, not two. This is how I felt when I

met Jay...our connection was magical."

For Batchen, the ordeal was about personal growth as much as running: "I learned that I can let my mind go to places where it has never been in order to overcome obstacles that lie in my path, and this I owe to Lisa. I can apply these lessons to the roads that stand in front of us and use them to become a better partner. I know that every journey we undertake from this day forward will always have roots in this race because it was such a team effort."

Team Happy Feet, the running couple of Lisa Smith and Jay Batchen, are now forever linked by the searing road that is the Badwater Ultramarathon.