

**Badwater Turns 25:
Inside the World's Longest, Hottest,
Toughest, Baddest Endurance Race**

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EXCERPT:

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Inside the World's Longest, Hottest, Toughest, Baddest Endurance Race

by Roy Wallack



To understand the history and culture of the Badwater Ultramarathon, a 135-mile foot race from the depths of Death Valley to the flanks of Mount Whitney, you must be clear about one thing: This is not the Ironman of ultrarunning. This is not merely an extraordinarily long, extra-hard run. This is not the annual focus of all of the world's greatest ultrarunners. In fact, most top ultrarunners don't even compete in this race—or even regard it as running at all.

"It's more of a hike, a 130-degree-in-a-sandstorm hike, a torture-fest that I don't want to repeat," says the great Ann Trason, a 12-time winner of the Western States 100 Mile who participated in Badwater once—as a crew member. "I like adventure, but this is an out-of-this-world experience. I drank more *crewing* Badwater than I did *running* Western States. I felt like I was in *Star Trek*—and I wanted to be beamed out."

In a nutshell, Badwater is a different planet. In this unique world, rubber soles melt, air-sole heel cushions explode, gel oozes out of shoes. Sweat dries before it wets your skin. Cans of soup are already warm when you open them. Hotel air conditioning lowers the temperature to 90. Outside, it feels like you've got a hair dryer in your face, or you're in an oven. To put it mildly, Badwater is not for everybody. In fact, it's safe to say that it's only for people who, like Badwater itself, are *out there*.

The Pioneer

Consider Al Arnold, the man who started it all. "I've always been the type who thought, 'If the world's going one way, then I'm going the other,'" says Arnold, now 75 and living in Walnut Creek, California. Arnold was always trying something just to prove it could be done. At age 21, he was a muscle-bound 6-foot-5 brute who, just for fun, would lift up the rear ends of small cars. He tried out for the 1948 U.S. Olympic boxing team as a light-heavyweight. During a University of California at Berkeley science project, he and a friend rode a teeter-totter for 72 hours straight, setting a world record of 45,159 up-and-downs. After taking 12 years to graduate with a business degree,

he worked as a technician, building ocean wave force-measuring devices. He married twice, enjoyed the good life, and morphed "from jock to fat slob" (his words), ballooning to 275 pounds.

Then, at age 39, Arnold got some life-changing news: he had glaucoma. He could no longer see well enough to hit a tennis ball. He was told by a doctor that "I'd soon have a tag on my toe." But he didn't really get motivated to change his life until he got word of the upcoming 1968 U.S. vs. World Masters Invitational Track and Field Championships. Just to prove it could be done, Arnold was running stadium steps with 100 pounds of weights strapped to his body. In 18 months, he'd dropped to a solid 225 pounds. At the masters championships, he won the half-mile. Before long, Arnold was working as an athletic director at a health club, and before most people had heard of the term, he was an ultrarunner.

In 1973, Arnold heard about Paxton Beale and Ken Crutchlow, who completed a 150-mile relay run from Badwater, the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere at 280 feet below sea level, all the way to the top of 14,496-foot Mount Whitney, the highest point in the contiguous United States. Crutchlow, an Englishman from Santa Rosa, California who imported London cabs for a living, did a lot of crazy stuff in his time—including riding a bike from San Francisco to Alaska on a bet. Scanning a map of California, he'd noticed how close the "lowest" and "highest" points were. According to one report, he considered it "outrageous" to think that any man could complete that trek alone.

Arnold was electrified when he heard about the tag-team's achievement. Death Valley fascinated him. Growing up in the 1940s, his favorite radio show was *Death Valley Days*. He'd imagined old prospectors, battles with Indians, noble pioneers struggling for existence. "Immediately, I knew that I had to do that run, too," says Arnold. "But I wasn't about to leap-frog." He did plan to run with a partner—his dentist David Gabor, a former Hungarian

freedom fighter—but both would complete the entire route.

In 1974, the pair pushed off at Badwater. Several hours later, the mercury topped out at more than 130 degrees. They lasted 18 miles—until Gabor went into shock. "My buddy almost died," said Arnold. "His whole body shut down. Blood flow to the arms and legs stopped. We had put him into an ice-filled bathtub at the Furnace Creek Ranch. Took him months to recover." From that point on, Arnold knew he had to go it alone. "When you do something like this, as far-out as Badwater, your mind has to be focused. You can't feel responsible for someone." So a year later, the 47-year-old Arnold was back. Unfortunately, his knee was not cooperative. Its grotesque swelling stopped his second attempt at mile 36, just before beginning the ascent of 4,956-foot high Townes Pass.

But 1977 would be different. For two years, Arnold trained like a man possessed. He pedaled a bike in a 200-degree sauna for two hours a day. Carrying no water and living off the land, he ran 200 to 250 miles a week up and down 4,000-foot Mount Diablo, a Bay Area landmark near his home. He once jogged for 36 hours straight. "I became so much a part of the land that I could walk through a pack of deer without them moving," he says. "Once, I shared a water hole and its surrounding shade with the 'resident mountain lion.' I never saw it again. It was one of those moments that you never forget."

On August 3, 1977, Death Valley recorded its highest known temperature that year: 124 degrees F. While the nearly 50-year-old Al Arnold jogged and power-walked, the super-heated road surface radiated nearly 200 degrees. He left Badwater before dawn, along with a two-man support crew, photographer Erik Rakonen and friend Glenn Phillips, and 30 gallons of a self-concocted electrolyte solution of fructose and water. He drank it all.

Arnold covered the first 40 miles in 10 hours, developed knee trouble on the 15-mile climb over the Panamints, stopped to stretch for a

couple hours, then kept going, very slowly. "At least I'd learned one thing over the years: go fast and you die," he says. Amazingly, Arnold ran an extra 45 miles over the second half of the route. Concerned over the disappearance of his support vehicle, he actually ran back 22 miles to find Rakonen, now crewing alone, asleep and "dead to the world" in the car. A purist, he refused a ride 22 miles back up the course and instead just resumed running towards Whitney.

Searing winds blasted Arnold with sand and silt on the climb over the Inyo Mountains, but it didn't matter. In his mind he had become Olympic decathlon champion Bruce Jenner, immortalized on a box of Wheaties. As he descended into the Owens Valley, he gazed at Mount Whitney for the first time. The sight so moved him that he stopped and spoke directly to the mountain. "You probably thought you'd never see me, but soon I'm going to be on top of you," Arnold warned the peak, according to a profile in the 1978 issue of *Marathoner* magazine. "She's a very powerful lady," he explained, "and I didn't want to conquer her, just be part of a relationship."

Approaching the little town of Lone Pine, the last stop before the final climb, people started coming out onto Highway 136 to take pictures of the "crazy man who had just run from Death Valley." A Highway Patrolman handed him a hamburger and chips. He ate only the bun and headed uphill into the Sierra Foothills, dodging two wild donkeys on the way to the Mount Whitney Portal at 8,400 feet.

The pavement ended and the 11-mile climb up the Mount Whitney trail began. "As I got closer and closer to the top, the hikers, forewarned of my arrival, all cheered for me," says Arnold. "It was like a ticker-tape parade." About 192 miles after he'd begun his quest, Arnold reached 14,496 feet—the Mount Whitney summit. He burst into tears and couldn't stop. He'd lost 17 pounds, eight percent of his body weight. He'd been on the road for 84 hours.

Yet there was no time to spare. As dusk fell, Arnold staggered down to the Trail Camp campsite at 12,000 feet. A tent, sleeping bag and warm clothing were to have been stored for him there. Instead, there was nothing left but a plastic tarp. Everything else had been stolen. After nearly roasting alive in 130 to 120-degree temperatures for more than three days, Arnold spent the fourth night in his running shorts, rolled up in plastic, shivering in 20-degree temperatures.

A couple of days later, Arnold's wife suggested a way to warm her man up: a trip to Maui. It would lead to a test more challenging than his amazing run. On his tenth day of bodysurfing, a 25-foot wave

torpedoed Arnold into the sand, dislocating the cervical area of his neck, separating both shoulders and leaving a severe contusion on his spinal cord. Paralyzed below the neck, gulping for air, Arnold went under seven times before washing up on the shore. Doctors told him he'd never be able to walk again without a walker, but Arnold left it on the sidewalk when the cab drove him to the airport for the flight home. A mere four months later he ran the five-loop Paul Masson Winery Marathon, stopping every five miles to run into the fire station to clean his running shorts. The accident had left him without bladder or bowel control, a condition that wouldn't clear up for nearly 15 years. Nonetheless, he finished in 4:59:59, much to the amusement of those who trailed him. "I'll never live it down," my friend Stan Pletz told me," said Arnold, "I was beaten by a paralyzed man." A year later, he ran 99 miles around Lake Tahoe in 19 hours.

Despite his continued running, Arnold never fully recovered from his paralysis. "My body feels like my foot's been asleep for 25 years," he says. As for Badwater, Arnold's never considered trying it again. "I did it to prove it could be done—like Roger Bannister breaking the four-minute mile," he said. "Now, I just sit back amazed at the world-class names who do it now. I'm not in their league." True. Al Arnold is in a league all his own.

The Race Is On

In 1980, 34-year-old Jay Birmingham, a running-store owner from Jacksonville, Florida, ran from Los Angeles to New York wearing a small backpack in 71 days, 22 hours, and 59 minutes, the fastest non-supported transcontinental crossing in history. That run, mainly along old U.S. 60, taught him a lot, but especially one thing: "I was a good hot-weather runner," he said. He'd easily cruised through a heat wave that stretched from Texas to Indiana.

Birmingham had read the article in *Marathoner* magazine about Al Arnold's Badwater trek and felt 84 hours would be an easy record to break. He'd also gotten advice from Badwater wannabe Gary Morris, who only got as far as Townes Pass in 1980. So in August of 1981, Birmingham embarked on a family road trip through North Carolina, Colorado, Las Vegas, and other places, getting in his training miles along the way. They eventually arrived in Death Valley and he started running from Badwater at 6:00 a.m. on August 15. He summited Mount Whitney 75 hours and 34 minutes later.

Other than "terrible pain in my heel" from Townes Pass to Lone Pine due to a heat-bloated lump in his shoe, the run went

smoothly. Birmingham never ran past 10:00 p.m., slept at least six hours a night, and climbed Whitney with his entire family without experiencing any altitude problems. He found the dry heat of Death Valley to be much easier to handle than the draining humidity of his Florida training ground; a week spent in the Rockies just before the run acclimatized him to high elevations.

Birmingham's feat didn't gain him national fame, but he did become the first person to publish a book about Badwater, *The Longest Hill*, released in 1983. He also put his name in the *Guinness Book of World Records* and set off a slow-building land rush that saw 30 people complete the lowest-to-highest course during the next decade. In 1982, Max Telford of New Zealand blitzed the blistering course in just 56:33. American Gill Cornell, starting at night, ran it in 45:15 in 1987. The very next day, Badwater godfather Ken Crutchlow returned with two Americans and a Brit to stage the first actual head-to-head race on the course, the U.S. versus the U.K.

As the buzz about Badwater began to grow, the course got the attention of the Hi-Tec shoe company. Seeing the race as a good promotional vehicle for its new running shoe, appropriately named the "Badwater 146," it began sponsoring and producing the event in 1988. It stuck to the long-established "gentlemen's rule" that Badwater must be held in the two-month July-August window, when the temperature is hottest. "Nothing else I've done since compares to Badwater," says David Pompel, who directed the race for three years while working at Hi-Tec and is now a manager at Timberland. "To go from lowest to highest ...to be at 119 degrees at 6:00 p.m....to see the gel melting out of a (running) shoe...to have an elevation gain of 24,000 feet...it looked like something out of *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*," he said. "Remember, there was no Eco-Challenge then. Most people looked at us like we'd lost our minds."

One of Pompel's most memorable moments came that first year, when he watched



Adrian Crane—later to gain fame for bagging all 50 of the highest points in each U.S. state in one year—set off across the Death Valley salt flats with modified cross-country skis. “He made the rest of the runners seem normal.”

In 1988, eight racers completed in the first Hi-Tec-sponsored race; four finished. American Tom Possert won in 45:10, a figure in dispute because he was photographed being dragged uphill by his support crew. In 1989, seven finished and the race scored its biggest media coup: Five minutes on *The Today Show* with Bryant Gumbel.

One big change in 1989 was moving to a 6:00 p.m. start time, to avoid the hottest part of the day in Death Valley. This rankled the purists, who wanted maximum heat exposure in Death Valley, so the race was eventually switched back to an a.m. start for the 1996 race and those held since. In 1990, the Forest Service forced the race to conclude at the Whitney Portal, creating the 135-mile distance that has been the official route to this day. Over the years, many runners continued onto the mountain unofficially after securing permits. That year, Possert set a new record to the Portal of 27:56. That time shrank quickly over the following decade: to Marshall Ulrich's still current p.m. start record of 26:18 in 1992, then a slew of a.m. start records, such as

Gabriel Flores' 28:09 in 1998, Eric Clifton's 27:09 in 1999, and the current a.m. and overall record of 25:09:05, set in 2000 by Russian superhero Anatoli Kruglikov.

Angelika Castaneda and her twin sister Barbara Alvarez were the only women to finish Badwater in 1989 and 1990, but by 1991 were being challenged by the likes of Bonnie Boyer, who set the women's p.m. start record that year, 36:19. The field grew to seven women by 1999, when all female participants proudly finished. A record 17 women are registered to compete in 2002. The current course record was set in 2000 by Irina Reutovich, 51, of Russia, in a time of 29:48:27. That was seven hours faster than Castaneda's 1999 record of 36:58, which was, in turn, three minutes faster than Lisa Smith's 1997 record of 37:01.

Smith, a massage therapist and running/triathlon coach from Victor, Idaho who will be competing for her sixth time this summer, exhibits the typical ultra career path; tiring of triathlon after seven Ironmans, she heard about Badwater from Ulrich at the 1995 Eco-Challenge. When she lined up in 1995, the longest run she'd ever done was four hours. Luckily, she loves the heat. She finished in 41:24. After winning three times, she married cameraman Jay Batchen in 2000, and naturally persuaded her husband to run with her. They set a couple's record of 43:23:56 in 2000.



The Supermen

One night in early 1989, Richard Benyo, a marathoner, author, San Francisco Chronicle columnist, and former *Runner's World* managing editor, was getting drunk with Tom Crawford, the fifth person to complete Badwater and a two-time finisher. “Listen, man,” Benyo slurred, “since you already had to come 12 miles down from the peak, why the heck didn't you just run back all the way (back) to Badwater and finish it?” Badwater was suddenly taken to a new level: the double. Round-trip. Back-to-back.

For three months beforehand, Benyo and Crawford ran in a dry sauna for up to an hour a day. They doubled their bodies' water processing ability from two quarts to one gallon per hour. They camped for a week in Panamint Springs before the event, running

in the heat for four or five hours a day to teach their bodies to conserve water and salt. "Untrained people lose more salt than trained people," he explained. "So we developed a ritual—licking each others' arms. After the third day, they wouldn't taste so salty anymore."

During the run, everything went smoothly until the descent from the Mount Whitney summit, when hail and lightning storms reigned terror on the duo. Benyo, slowed by destroyed toes and quads, hobbled back to Badwater in 170 hours and 58 minutes, two days after Crawford, who doubled in 126:34. Every inch of the agonizing way is detailed in Benyo's acclaimed book, *The Death Valley 300*.

Two months after the double, Benyo and Crawford began planning another attempt. Benyo completed the double again in 1992 in 157:58. Over the next four years, six others doubled, including Benyo's wife, Rhonda Provost, who became the first woman to do a double in 1995, in a time of 143:45. In 1996, Milan Milanovich of Switzerland set the double record of 110:26. In 1994, American Scott Weber did a triple: Whitney to Badwater to Whitney to Badwater, in 257:32.

Marshall Ulrich felt the need to push the boundaries of human endurance even further. A long-time marathoner and ultrarunner from Fort Morgan, Colorado, Ulrich wholesales boneless frozen beef to dog food manufacturers. In 1990, he was looking for a new challenge. Naturally, that led to Badwater. Having never driven the course, Ulrich figured it would cool off once he left the Death Valley floor. "I had no idea," he said. After leading the race for 117 miles, Ulrich was passed by 1988 winner Possert. Vowing to return and win, Ulrich set a new p.m. start record of 26:32 in 1991 and lowered that to 26:18 in '92. At this writing, Ulrich has done the Badwater race nine times, won it four times, never stopped at the Portal, and still holds the unofficial record of 33 hours to the Whitney summit.

But all that was just a warm-up for a feat that astounded the ultrarunning world. On July 3, 1999, just ten days before the race, Ulrich became the first person to complete the Badwater course *unassisted*. Pulling a specially designed, two-wheeled, solar panel-equipped cart that initially weighed 212 pounds and held 21.5 gallons, he reached the Portal, and then continued with a backpack to the top of Mount Whitney. The total time: 77 hours and 48 minutes. "It's the hardest thing I've ever done," he told the Fort Morgan Times. "I don't know how many times I thought of quitting. I was reduced to a desert animal, crawling under mesquite bushes to get away from the heat."

As if that wasn't enough, in 2001 Ulrich commemorated his 50th birthday with something else that had never been done before, a quad: a double up-and-back; 584 miles with 48,000 feet of elevation gain. Starting on July 20, 2001 at 6:10 a.m., Ulrich ran continuously for the first four days, stopping only for short naps totaling 1.5 hours per day. He broke the old double record by almost nine hours, finishing in 96:07, attended the pre-race meeting, went to sleep, then woke up in time to start the official Badwater Ultramarathon with 70 other contestants the next morning.

Wracked by severe tendinitis on his shins, Ulrich's crew had to ice and wrap his legs every 20 to 30 minutes during the third and fourth crossings. He summited Whitney for a second time with the clock ticking at 185 hours, setting a new triple-crossing record. Nearly wearing through his second pair of shoes, which had to be cut on the sides to relieve several huge, painful, blisters, Ulrich hobbled into Badwater at 253 hours (10 days and 13 hours).

The effort paid off. Ulrich, growing increasingly spiritual over the years, managed to raise \$65,000 for Teachers Fillipinni, a Rome-based order of nuns dedicated to helping starving children. On April 17, 2002 he and Lisa Smith, his Quad crew chief, had an audience with the Pope at the Vatican.

But Ulrich is not finished. In 2002, both he and 67-year-old Englishman Jack Denness, a retired Lloyd's of London driver, hope to become the first people to complete 10 Badwater races. This milestone would also be Ulrich's 100th ultra, with an average distance per outing of 110 miles. From there, he plans to make what he calls "a logical progression: combining hot weather ultrarunning with snowbound mountain climbing. This June 1, if everything went as planned, he will have successfully scaled Mount McKinley. Then in 2003, he'll take it to the extreme: The Everest Summit to Sea—the longest, fastest descent ever from the world's highest place, Mount Everest, to Calcutta and the Indian Ocean, 600 miles away. Through it all, though, he won't forget his roots. "When I'm 100, I'll still be doing Badwater," he says.

The Organizers

When Hi-Tec employee Matt Frederick took over as Badwater 135 race director in 1996, the participation limit was gradually raised from 25 to 40. The time to "buckle"—to earn the prized Badwater belt buckle that signifies you finished well under the overall time limit of 60 hours—was raised from 45 hours to 48. He was also at the helm when Hollywood immortalized the race in the award-winning feature-length documentary *Running on the*



Sun, directed by Mel Stuart of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* fame.

Frederick enjoyed the quirkiness of the event. In a statistical irony that rankles purists, he discovered that walkers have a higher finishing percentage than runners. He found that older runners finish more frequently than younger ones. He laughs when he tells of driving all the way to Beatty, Nevada, cleaning out a little store and driving back with 200 pounds of ice. Most of all, he remembers the characters: California dentist Dale Sutton, who raced in pajamas from head to toe, and kept cool by sewing extra pockets on his pants and filling them with ice; Major Maples, a U.S. Marine who DNF'd every other year, but finally finished with a whole crew of Corpsemen as his support crew in 1997 and 2000; and Charlie Liskey, who crawled across the finish line in 1996. His favorites are the three-time finishers he calls his "virtual grandparents," Ben and Denise Jones, known to most as the "mayor" and "first lady" of Badwater.

The couple officially received their titles in a special ceremony at Badwater on July 4, 1992, in recognition of their generous support of the event. Ben, the sole doctor in Lone Pine, has provided medical assistance, served as the race's historian (see his many race reports on the web site), and, with Denise, hosts annual race-course training clinics on Memorial Day and Fourth of July weekends. They also are enthusiastic participants. In 1991, then-58-year-old Ben became the only runner to conduct an autopsy in the middle of the race. He arrived at the Portal that year in 49:00, and at the Whitney Summit in 72:58. He completed Badwater again in 1992 and 1993, with a support truck carrying plastic palm trees and an ice-filled casket in which to cool off. Denise, known as the "blister queen" because

of her expertise in dealing with Badwater runners' feet, is also a three-time finisher (1994, 1996, and 1999). By late 1999, having long since dropped their "Badwater 146" running and hiking shoe lines, Hi-Tec decided to abandon all support of the race.

Into the void stepped Chris Kostman's AdventureCORPS, producers of the annual Furnace Creek 508 bicycle race through Death Valley, and creator of the Los Angeles Marathon Bike Tour, Earth Journey Triathlon Stage Race, and the relay division of the Race Across America bicycle race. No desk jockey, Kostman is a record-setting ultramarathon cyclist who's done the Race Across America, Triple Ironman, Iditasport, and other endurance events. In 1995, in recognition of the kindred spirit between the Badwater 135 and his own Furnace Creek 508, he created the "Death Valley Cup," to be awarded to the first or fastest athlete to complete both events in the same calendar year. Not surprisingly, Marshall Ulrich completed both in 1996 and became the first recipient. Angelika Castaneda took the first women's cup in 1999.

"When Ben Jones suggested that I should step in to fill the void left by Hi-Tec's pullout, I saw an opportunity to give a fantastic, yet under-publicized event the energy and organization it deserves," says

Kostman. "It wasn't hard to do; Death Valley is one of the world's great ultra athlete meeting grounds and is an incomparable natural sports arena."

The last two years have seen noticeable additions to what is now called the Badwater Ultramarathon: the first official race website, www.badwaterultra.com; an annual web cast during the race (which received 95,000 page views during the 2000 race and 350,000 page views in 2001); and a new title sponsor in the form of Sun Precautions, the Everett, Washington based makers of Solumbra 30+ SPF sun protective clothing, medically accepted sun protection for sun sensitive and sun sensible people. Also, with a history of successful events in Death Valley, Kostman lobbied the Park Service to double the maximum field size.

The result? For the first time, there is instant worldwide access to Badwater information and applications. In the last two years, more than a dozen countries have been represented, including Russia, Italy, France, Japan, Brazil, and Hong Kong. Despite raising runner qualification and selection standards each year, the field has grown from a previous high of 42 runners to 69 in 2000 and more than 80 in 2002. Finally, with the establishment of the Badwater Hall of Fame, Kostman has brought a sense of

history to the event. Fittingly, the first person inducted into the Hall this July, moments before the 2002 race begins, will be the man who started it all 25 years ago, Al Arnold. When told of his upcoming induction, the George Washington of running in 130-degree temperatures, now 75 and unable to run due to a bum knee, was moved to tell a story. "I just always liked doing things that others might have thought were crazy, and they weren't always grand things like Badwater," says Arnold. "I once ran around a 10-by-10 wrestling mat for 10 hours. Even now, I hike a lot in a small area in the hills that most people just pass through quickly, all except for one 14-year-old kid. 'He'd seen me there a few times, and finally stopped to ask me, 'Why do you come here?' 'I answered, 'Because it's my cave.' 'The boy then asked me, 'How big is your cave?' I looked at him and said, 'How big is your mind?' 'The boy was silent for a few seconds. Then he said, 'Can I hike with you again?'"

Irvine, California based freelancer Roy M. Wallack writes for many national magazines and has completed the Eco-Challenge, the 1200 km Paris-Brest-Paris bike ride, the 400-mile TransAlp Challenge mountain bike race and other endurance events. He vows to do Badwater someday; his wife is pushing stamp collecting.