

How I Got Started in Ultrarunning

Thoughts from Lisa Smith-Batchen



I met Marshall Ulrich in the first ECO Challenge adventure race. My team fell apart as so did his so we ended up forming a new team. This later became "Team Stray Dogs", where I was the first women on the team. This adventure race was very hard for it was so darn hot and through the desert. So many people were lost and ran out of water, we had to walk for miles with no water.

One night during the race we had a blinding wind, sand storm and once we got to the transition area Marshall says to me, "Gee Lisa, you're pretty good in that kind of stuff. You should run Badwater". I said, "What is a Badwater?"

Photo of Team Stray Dogs (me in the pink hat and Marshall to my immediate right. This is at a Raid adventure race in South Africa...we came in tenth place.)

Marshall explained to me that Badwater was a 135 mile foot race through Death Valley, that it was hot and had a few hills but nothing to worry about. I had only run marathons, 26.2 miles. It was inconceivable that someone could run 135 miles, I had never heard of such a thing.

My mind was very intrigued. Here was Super man, Marshall Ulrich telling me I could run 135 miles, I was more than flattered.

The Race Director of Badwater just happened to work for Hi Tec, which was one of the sponsors for the Eco Challenge. Marshall took me over to meet him and told him that he really should consider letting me run this Badwater race. You had to be invited!

Three months later I was lined up at the starting line of the 1995 Badwater 135 mile race through Death Valley. I had called Marshall a few times before the race to ask him what I should be doing in order to prepare for this race. He told me to run with a few extra clothes on for heat training, run for 4-5 hours a few times.

Hmm this seemed simple!

I got to Stovepipe Wells in Death Valley three days before the race started with my crew. We had more supplies than 30 runners would have needed! The heat was something you could not explain to anyone. Put your head in an oven and just know that you are not going to be able to get out for a very long time. What was I getting myself into?

6pm was the start time of the race in 1995. The gun went off and I felt so at peace. I loved this place the minute my foot hit the ground. The smell filled my body and soul and I was sure that I had traveled this course before, but I just did not know when.

This was my first ultra marathon. I had never run more than 26.2 miles. Why did I think I could run 135 miles?????

Well, because Marshall told me I could:)

I remember so much about this race this year. Every turn, every climb seemed to last a lifetime. I had never done any walking before, I was a runner. I was forced to walk up all these MOUNTAINS that consumed this race. I had no idea. They got bigger, longer and harder. I cried so many times, wondering what the heck was up and over the next hill.

You see, I had never driven the course so I did not know. I did not read about the course I just listened to what the other told me about it. Needless to say my crew and I made it to the finish line! I was never so happy to sit down, never so over the top with Joy that I did it. The feeling was something that I just wanted to savor. As we drove back to Las Vegas and back over the race course, I could NOT believe that I had just covered this course on foot. When you do something so unknown to yourself and then you go back to see what you did, the reward in your heart will last a lifetime. I sit here and write and can still feel that feeling and still smell the smell of the desert that draws me back time and time again.

Badwater 135 (1995) was my first ultra. I was hooked.