

The trials of running one hundred miles, an amazing adventure.

Trial by Fire and Ice

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Trial by Fire and Ice
by
Fred H. Holmes



A Running Experience of a Lifetime

TRIAL BY FIRE AND ICE

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First Edition E-Book

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Lone Star Publications
Texas, USA

E-Book Edition

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INTRODUCTION

I guess the most frequently asked question is “Why on earth would you want to run 100 miles?”

At first I gave a sarcastic answer like, “Because it’s there,” “The trail is too narrow for my car,” or “To see if I could do it.” After a while I started to take the question more seriously. Why would a reasonably normal (notice I qualified that) person attempt to run farther than most people like to drive?

Before my attempt at Western States the question only nagged me occasionally, but after the race I became consumed with finding the answer.

That was the reason I wrote this book. I thought that if I recounted my experience I might be able to find a definitive answer to why I wanted to run 100 miles.

Well, I found out the answer, to my satisfaction, and it is at the same time very simple and complex, and it is right here in this book.

If you come up with something I missed, please let me know.

Fred Holmes

SECTION I



TRIAL BY FEAR

TRIAL BY FIRE AND ICE

Section I-Trial by Fear

"There are two kinds of fears. One is the fear of falling off a mountain; the second is the fear of jumping off a mountain. I have experienced both and the second is infinitely worse than the first."

Chapter 1

4:40 am Saturday

A soft blue sky rising over Squaw Valley subtly brightened the early morning as the five o'clock start edged closer. I shifted nervously from foot to foot, preparing to join the nearly four hundred runners that would soon start the twenty-third annual Western States 100 Mile Endurance Run.

You could easily pick me out of the pack crowding the starting line, but you wouldn't look for a small, lean, lithe runner. I loom over most crowds of runners at nearly six foot three and 193 pounds. I have dark hair, a moustache, and a small pot belly all mounted on a pair of scrawny but serviceable legs. My daughter calls them chicken legs and like a chicken the best part of my legs are my quads, which would be the drumsticks.

I was surrounded by runners near the end of the pack, where the normal odors of sweat and liniment were tainted by a more subtle odor. It was faint and had a slightly sour smell. It took me a few seconds to recognize that it was the smell of fear and it was coming from me.

Most of us stood quietly listening to the last minute instructions barking over the loudspeaker or retreated into our thoughts, rehearsing strategies and activating the reservoir of strength that would have to last between seventeen and thirty-two hours. It was a mistake, I was sure, to think about the one hundred miles to come and I knew that my fear came from the unknown twenty-two miles of snow, 21,000 feet of total climb, and the 100 degree temperatures awaiting me on the other side of the starting line.

The race started at the foot of the Squaw Valley ski slope. You may remember we had the 1960 winter Olympics at this site. In fact we were

staying in the Olympic Village, the hotel built especially for the Olympic athletes. It was a very tiny room for four of us; I guess the Olympians were a lot smaller thirty-five years ago.

We arrived on Thursday and after checking in Mary blew our budget on race t-shirts and other mementos she planned to take back as gifts. I kept thinking, what if I don't make it? The gifts will lose some of their meaning. I quickly shook off those negative thoughts and tried not to think of the race, but to have a good time meeting other runners, staying off my feet, and resting. I had trained hard and most of all I believed I could complete the race. Even this fear of the unknown and the fact that my first attempt was one of the most difficult 100 mile races, even in a year with good conditions, was not shaking this belief, at least not yet.

Adding to my novice status was months of reports I had received of the record breaking snow that would cause this year's race to be touted as one of the toughest Western States in its history. Nearly four hundred and sixty runners had entered and in addition to the normal attrition due to injuries, lack of training and just plain old cold feet, rumor said many had elected to drop out with the consideration that they would be entered next year without going through the lottery. I hadn't received such an offer and wouldn't have accepted it if it were offered. It had taken me four years to get to this starting line. Even though I was scared shitless, I was here to run.

TRIAL BY FEAR

“One of the challenges of running 100 miles is that you can bet on one of the least expected things to happen. The problem is you don’t know which one.”

Chapter 4

The Start 5:00 am June 24

I kissed my wife, received my last encouraging words, and the gun went off. Three hundred and ninety eight runners surged forward and headed up the dirt road from Squaw Valley towards Emigrant Pass.

We climbed 2500 feet in two and one half miles. The first half was on a nice wide dirt and gravel road that was used to drive equipment up to service the ski lifts. We passed under the ski ropes and went by the building that housed the motors that towed the skiers to the various levels of the mountain. I was surprised as we neared the last few tows to see them still operating and early bird snowboarders zipping down the upper sections of the mountain. It was nearly the end of June and in any other year the mountain would have been clear of snow a month ago.

A little over halfway we left the road and started up a single track trail. This was a trail designed for hiking, about three feet wide and worn into shape by millions of footprints over the past 150 years. It’s called single track because most of the time the trail was only wide enough for single file.

For a successful race many things have to be functioning properly. One is your bowels. Unfortunately for me, that morning my best efforts had only produced wind. A half mile after we started my nerve-ridden colon began to speak unkindly to me. Bob Patrick and I had planned to stay together through the snow, but I hated to hold him up, so I told him to go on as I looked for a friendly bush.

That was my first surprise; there were no bushes, only a few scraggly trees. And mountain roads have no shoulders either. So there I was, hanging off a mountain by a tree limb, trying to pull down my tights and shorts as my

colon grew more short tempered by the second. I thought that I was going to fall off the mountain or into my own doo-doo before the race had hardly begun. Somehow I managed to get rid of an enormous amount of pasta, (so much for carbo-loading), and got back on the road. Of course, I had to carry my used toilet paper with me, thanks to the race director's, "absolutely no littering" rule. Fortunately, I had started near the back of the pack so there were few runners to witness my sorry plight.

I did see a runner coming back down the trail and as he passed me he shrugged embarrassedly and said, "Forgot my sunglasses." We had been warned that the sun reflecting off the snow could cause temporary blindness and possibly permanent eye damage. Although he would probably lose an hour's time, it was probably a smart move

The combination of climbing and altitude made breathing difficult and elevated my heart rate quickly, but after the forced pit stop I felt better and was breathing easier. By the time I got restarted I was dead last, so I picked up the pace, embarrassed but much more comfortable, stuffing the used toilet paper into a baggie and then into my pack.

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