

Western States 2007  
by Rod Bien

Well, as I've had a couple of glasses of wine tonight, I figured I would finally do my race write-up for Western States 100, 2007. This way, maybe I can make the hills a bit longer and the river crossings a bit deeper!

The Western States 100 Mile Endurance run begins at the ski resort at Squaw Valley and climbs 18,000 feet and descends 22,000 feet on trails before arriving at Auburn, California. While not the most difficult 100-mile race in the country, it by far, has the most prestige of any 100-mile race in the world. This year, there were top runners from U.S., Korea, Japan, France, and Tanzania. The field was absolutely stacked. As one of the top runners commented, there were about 35 people capable of being in the top 10 and there was no clear-cut favorite for the win. In all, 450 people would be toeing the starting line and all of them had to qualify and be selected in a lottery (minus the top 10 from last year)

As for myself, I was really excited. I had trained and raced hard all spring long. I had raced some of the most competitive races in the country and had been in the top 10 in all that I had entered, including one win. I figured it would take a time of about 18:30 to crack the top 10. That seemed to be on the threshold of my ability but I thought it was worth going for.

I arrived at the race on Thursday, feeling alright but definitely battling a little bit of a cold which was really bumming me out as I knew what was waiting for me on Saturday morning. The next few days are pretty crazy as there are meetings, medical checks, and catching up with old friends.

By Friday, my crew had all arrived... and I had a good team. Sean Meissner, one of the best runners in the Northwest, Rob Edde, who has completed the toughest ultra marathons in the country, and David Easa, a stellar triathlete (think sub 10 hours at Ironman Hawaii) and marathoner.

At Western States, you are allowed a pacer (someone to run with you) from mile 60 to the finish. David would take me from mile 60-80 and Sean would crack the whip on me from 80-100.25. Rob would drive hours and hours (literally) to meet me at certain aid stations, keep my morale in check, and keep me informed on place, pace, etc.

We had about 233 alarm clocks, cell phones, and watches blaring at 3:15 a.m. on Saturday morning. I got dressed, said a prayer, and got ready to go. People always are burning tons of nervous energy near the start. As for me, I always feel really relaxed at 100 milers. They are so friggin' long, there is nothing to be nervous about, and you'll get over it fast!!!

At 5:00 a.m., the gun was shot and we headed out into the barely dawn light and the first climb of 2,000 feet out of the ski area. I'm a descent climber and just decided to go with it. I quickly found myself within the top 10. I ran the majority of the hill, power walked some, and just made sure I was not hurting at mile 2! At the top of the climb, I began running with the 2<sup>nd</sup> place runner from last year, Erik Skaden. This is one tough hombre. No mercy, no frills, just a real tough ass. I liked running with him as I was a bit quicker on the climbs but he was definitely stronger on the descents. In hindsight, I think I definitely pushed this section a bit too hard. We were running the down hills very hard,



more like a 50K pace for me but I had pushing hard all spring so I thought I would just go for it.

### **Climbing out of Squaw Valley (photo by Luis Escobar)**

The next 15 miles or so follow a ridgeline that climbs, descends, and is a bit tough to get in a rhythm for. It is pretty technical as well with lots of rocks, roots, and small stream crossings. NBC sports were taping the event and helicopters were flying above us, making tons of noise, and really bumming me out. At the first major aid station, I was 40 minutes ahead of my splits (for a 18:30 race). I wasn't sure if I should be scared or excited about this. Could I hold this type of pace? I was probably in 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> place at this point in the race.

As we dropped into the first significant canyon during the race (there are 3 major ones), Erik Skaden informed me that we were running 16:40 finishing pace, which he was happy about. At this point, I knew I couldn't run a 16:40 but hoped that I could hang on for as long as I could. This canyon, Duncan Canyon, took it out of me a bit. The temperatures were rising into the mid 80's and I was feeling the mileage a bit more than I would have liked at this point. Skaden dusted me at this point and I just concentrated on hydrating, eating, and staying focused. On the climb out of Duncan Canyon, three people including last years' winner, Graham Cooper, passed me. Bummer.

I finally hit my crew for the first time at Robinson Flats (mile 30). Well, I felt like crap. My legs felt WAY to spent for mile 30 and I knew I was slowing down some. Had I gone too hard too early? It was starting to seem like it. My crew was excited though because I was on sub 18 hour pace. However, at this point in the race, that means nothing. 70 miles to go.



Like my GU mustache? A little too “dazed and confused” for mile 30 (photo by Luis Escobar)

Leaving Robinson Flat, I was definitely concerned but have learned enough to not get too concerned or too comfortable at any time in a 100 miler. It’ll always change again!

After a short climb, there are miles and miles of downhill running from Little Bald Mountain all the way to the base of the climb at Devils Thumb (mile 47). I think this is where it came a bit unraveled for me. Instead of taking my time here, I was a bit panicked that I was falling behind and ran the down hills too hard. But, they just never stop. The more I ran down, the more thrashed my legs felt. I was always thrilled to have an uphill or flat running. Not what you want to feel on a course that drops 22,000 feet.

I was also getting a bit depressed as I kept getting passed. First by Jon Olsen, then by Nikki Kimball (I hadn’t been “chicked” in a year and a half), Jeff Riley, and Andy Jones-Wilkins. Morale was not high here. But, if I possess anything, it is tenacity, and I just kept telling myself to battle through and let the miles pile up on others as well. However, as I finally was getting to the bottom of the biggest climb (Devil’s Thumb), I knew I was in trouble. My quads were getting really hammered. I could feel shooting pain through my legs on every step down. I was relieved to finally get to the bottom of the descent and start the 1,800 foot climb up Devil’s Thumb. I got my mojo back a bit on the climb. It wasn’t too hot (90’s—not bad for this race), and my hiking legs felt good. I got into a good rhythm and got to the top of Devil’s Thumb about 5 minutes behind my splits. I had a few gnarly blisters but I was in good spirits and ready to run again. I switched socks, ate some soup, and was determined to catch some people who had passed me.



**My feet at mile 50. Notice big blister on big toe! Photo: Luis Escobar**

After leaving Devils Thumb, there is a 2,000 + foot descent to Eldorado Canyon. Yep, this is where my legs went to die. I could tell they were hammered beyond repair and from this point on it was just going to be time to pull on the big boy pants and tough it out. The descent felt like hours and I reached the bottom very excited to climb back out. Once again, the climb was good. I felt strong and ran/hiked the 1,600 foot climb up to Michigan Bluff, which is one of the biggest aid stations on the course. At this point, you have the worst of the climbs and descents over with but you have to be able to run—and hard if you want to crack the top 10. My guess is that I was in about 14<sup>th</sup> -16<sup>th</sup> at this time and was probably about 15 minutes behind my splits. I felt pretty good mentally but my legs were just plain done. Hmmm. Tough spot to be in.

It was great to see my crew and I really looked forward to being able to run with my pacer in a few miles.

I spent a little extra time in the Michigan Bluff aid station. My weight was up a bit so the aid station crew made me eat a few extra salt tabs and some soup. I really should have been eating more but I just didn't have the stomach for it. As I headed into the last canyon, volcano canyon, I realized what a serious problem my legs had become. I could not run downhill without great pain. I had been popping advils (another VERY poor choice) but they were not even helping anymore. My guess is that I was not drinking as much anymore as all I could do was to concentrate on not letting the pain in my legs overwhelm me. I was passed by Hiroki Ishikawa from Japan here and my guess is that this was about the lowest my place would get, maybe 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup>? However, I now knew I would not hit my goals and needed to re-adjust my thinking on what I could accomplish during this race.



Finally, I hit the Bath Road aid station (mile 60), and picked up my pacer David Easa as we ran towards the biggest aid station of the race, Foresthill, at mile 62. At this point, the course becomes much more benign as the big climbs are done and now it is pretty much just rolling trails.

I felt a little pepped up to be running with David and we cruised the next two miles into Foresthill, grabbed some new bottles and headed back on the trail. The next 16 miles is where most will agree that the race is won or lost. It is easy trail and slowly descends to the river. Most of the top runners do this section in about 2:30-2:40. My goal before the race had been 2:40. My new goal was to run it in 3 hours.

David was a solid pacer and seemed to enjoy himself, out of his element, on the trails. My pace seemed pathetically slow to me but like I told him, "this is all I have". So, I just battled the best I could.

As a side note, I wasn't the only one having problems. Traditionally, about 40% of the well-conditioned athletes in this race drop out and it was no different up front. The top guys had beat each other up and the carnage was starting to happen. Two of the favorites, Greg Crowther (2:20 marathoner and national 50K, 100K U.S. champ) dropped, though he was never ahead of me. His quads were destroyed. Lon Freeman, course record holder at Miwok 100K, dropped because of quads. So, even though I hadn't passed anyone in what felt like an eternity, I was moving up the standings.

I was passed two more times heading down to the river, which no longer even bummed me out since all I could do was hang on.

Ironically, David and I hit the river crossing in exactly 3 hours, which was better than I thought I would do due to my legs. About 95% of the field crosses the river in the dark, so it was cool to hit the river when it was still hot and we could see! Rob Edde met David and me at the bottom of the river, and we quickly started the climb out of the river canyon. It was great to see my friend Rob. He told me that I was doing great—I knew better. I was getting a little emotional at this point and with tears just holding back asked, "I'm going to break 20 hours, right?" "Yes, you are", he said. Whether he was lying or not, I needed that new motivation to get me moving. I was not doing well and was not accustomed to not hitting my goals this year. I needed to be re-focused and back on a plan. I was shocked at the top of the climb to find out I was in 12<sup>th</sup> place, as others had dropped. Could I actually crack the top 10? There was still 20 miles to go and a lot could happen, though I was told the last runner came through almost an hour before. Bummer.

At this point, I had some food and drink and was about to start running with my new pacer, Sean Meissner. As soon as we walked about 15 steps I turned and said, "Hold on, I need to puke". It all came out. It was a good one! It felt good not to have a sloshy stomach and off we went. Sean knew how much I wanted to do well and pushed me hard. Encouraging me to run the hills. I was trying SO hard but my legs were just not responding. However, thanks to him, we were not passed again in the race. He had his game face on and gave me tough love. No rest stops at aid stations, just grab some soup or food and off we went. His carrot for me was to break Bend running legend, Roger Daniels' time of



### **Almost across the river! Photo by Luis Escobar**

19:25 at the race. That is the fastest time of anyone from Bend and he is a runner that I really look up to. He still runs Ironman Hawaii every year and he is over 70!! That's inspirational!

I can't say I remember a ton from this point on. Sean and I flipped on the lights at mile 85. My first year at Western States, when I ran with my dad, we had to put the headlamps on at 62! So, it was cool to run so much of the course in the daylight.

My legs just could not rebound and it was just a plain struggle. I thought I would have some joy hitting the major checkpoints like I did when I last ran the race and broke the 24-hour barrier for the first time. But, it was all work for me this time. Putting the nose to the grindstone, accepting the pain, and putting one foot in front of the other. I sure make this sound fun don't I???

As Sean and I hit Highway 49 crossing (mile 93), I was pretty sure I would break 20 hours. Sean and I did one of the last big climbs and headed down the last big descent to "No Hands Bridge". At this point, I had the most pain I have ever had in a race. I could barely run downhill and was probably running 10 minute miles on a downhill that I would have liked to be running in the 7 minute mile pace.

But, I knew it would end eventually and we finally got to the bottom and we didn't even stop at the last aid station. I was still in 12<sup>th</sup> place (11<sup>th</sup> male). If you are top ten (men&women), you get automatic entry and a lot more glory than #11. But, whatever, I just kept pushing. We worked and worked to finish the final 1,000 foot climb and finally hit the streets of Auburn. Unfortunately, the last 1.2 miles on the streets are STILL uphill and I ended up power hiking a lot of them. I felt defeated. Where was the end???. Finally I saw the magical little white bridge and entered the stadium. Even the victory lap around the track felt hard and I finished in 19:20 minutes, 11<sup>th</sup> male. I was as physically and mentally beat as I

have ever been. I could not have made it without my crew pushing and supporting me along the way. They were amazing. After that, many of you know the story. I starting peeing a very dark color urine and by morning, it hadn't subsided. I got results that my CPK levels (muscle breakdown in blood), were the highest of anyone in the race, and one of the highest anyone has ever had in the race. I spent the majority of the next two days in the hospital, making sure I had not done serious damage to my kidneys. It was a definite wake up call. The pain I had experienced was not normal, even for running 100 miles. I should have hung it up in hindsight. But, deep in my



Success! 100 Miles 11<sup>th</sup> in most competitive trail ultra in U.S.

heart, I'm glad that I made it. I would have had such regrets if I hadn't had made it after all the hard work and sacrifices.

So, where did I go wrong? I definitely went out too fast. I should have hung back more earlier and turned it on later in the race.

I should have trained more for the sustained down hills.

But, all in all, now that it has settled in, I'm very satisfied with my effort out on the course. I realize that I can run with the best ultra runners in the world and hold my own. This last quote below is from Steve Smucker, who in his prime was one of the best ultra runners in the Northwest. This quote really struck a chord in me.

"When Rod came in he was spent. Not smiling. I recognized the state of total exhaustion, for even though he had run a tremendous race, it hadn't sunk in yet. His hopes didn't quite get met, and finishing 11th male was not quite the same as finishing 10th male. I have a word of advice for Mr. Bien. Give yourself time and when you look back years from now, you may see you ran the greatest race of your life this past weekend. I mean, come on, man, you took 3.5 hours off your time and finished 11th in a time of 19:20 at the western states endurance run. Is that so bad?"

Thanks so much again for my pacers that gave me so much care, support, and hope! And, as ALWAYS, thanks to my wife who, for this time, had the right to stress about my post-race hospital stint. I'll be smarter in the future!

Big Aloha,  
Rod Bien