

Grime and punishment on Catalina

by Don Norcross

CATALINA ISLAND, Calif. - The blood on John Duke's right knee, courtesy of a nasty trail fall, had long ago coagulated. A maroon scab already was forming. The diagonal scrapes along the outside of his shin offered a bright red hue.

As for the muscular condition of his legs, Duke said, "They're thrashed."

Having required 4 hours, 49 minutes and 28 seconds to navigate the Catalina Marathon's roller-coaster course, Duke said, "I am hating life."

But after completing the race for an 18th time, Duke promised to be back.

"This," said the Cardiff resident and publisher of Triathlete magazine, "is a cult event."

Most tourists ferry to this oasis 22 miles off Long Beach for R&R. Or just R (romance).

Since 1978, endurance enthusiasts have ventured to the island once a year not to chase a number on the clock, but to soak up the island's spectacular rugged beauty, plus test their fitness and mental resolve.

CATALINA - As the morning fog creeps in on little cat feet, a string of runners with tired feet plugs along Divide Road, one of the highest sections of the Catalina Marathon route that ends in Avalon. Photo by Charlie Neuman.

CATALINA - Fog approaches as race volunteer Ben Cogar offers runner Danny Westergaard, of Rolling Hills, some refreshment at the Middle Ranch Road Turnoff aid station. This is one of the race's few more level sections after a long, steep uphill climb that most of the race's participants walked. Photo by Charlie Neuman. Twenty-three miles of the marathon unfolds on wide, hard-packed trails. Virtually none of the course is flat. Offering 4,310 feet of climbing and the same in descent, the course's elevation profile looks like a 26-year Dow Jones summary.

Eight miles into this year's St. Patrick's Day race, minutes before the first runners appeared near Little Harbor, a buffalo menacingly stared down two photographers, then tired of the game and rubbed his back against a wooden post.

The course passes horse stables, a defunct stage coach stop and a cattle crossing. At its highest peaks, the marathon offers 360-degree ocean views. This year runners were treated to idyllic conditions, a rolling fog often blocking not just the sun but views of the intimidating climbs as well.

"I like the fog," said Mary Braunwarth of San Diego, who was running the event for the first time. "I couldn't see the hills. Ignorance is bliss."

Befitting the race's 30-year history, there are tales to tell. Bobby Lopez, a 70-year-old retired chemist who could pass for 55, is one of five men to finish all 30 races.

One year it took some creativity for Lopez to keep his streak intact. He partied hard the night before in Avalon, didn't answer the alarm and missed the 5 a.m. ferry to the Two Harbors start.

Lopez phoned the race director and got the OK to run the course backward.

"You're going backwards," runners kept telling Lopez.

"No (bleep)," he replied.

In 1992 the island was deluged with rain for days before the marathon. Members of the Catalina Island Conservancy said dirt paths had been washed out and the course was too dangerous to traverse. Runners were ferried back to Avalon and the race was staged on pavement.

Ever the rogue, Lopez and a couple others stuck behind and completed the traditional course.

"I had to wade through water up to my chest at one point," recalled Lopez. "One guy nearly drowned."

"He (ticked) off the race director pretty bad," said "Buffalo" Bill McDermott, who also has completed all 30 races, winning a record 13 times. "I think he was banned for life. Fortunately, things cooled off by the next year."

Harry Cordellos personifies the Catalina marathoner's grit. Blind since birth, Cordellos, 69, has run 154 marathons, 15 at Catalina. He's an Ironman Hawaii finisher and once bowled a 177.

Cordellos runs and walks the course side-by-side with a guide, Cordellos' left hand gently touching the guide's right.

"Most people have the misconception that (the blind) live in a world of darkness," said Cordellos, who lives near San Rafael. "What I see right now is what you see behind your head without turning around. What color is nothing?"

"When I run up and down the hills I hear the footsteps, the conversations, the heavy breathing. I smell all the trees, hear the birds twittering, hear the water on the shore. And when we run into town, (I hear) the crowd lining the street."

Cordellos finished in 7 hours, 8 minutes and 36 seconds.

The Catalina Marathon is not as primitive as it once was. In its first year there were 39 entrants; this year there were 1,288 finishers.

"One year the race director dropped off five-gallon water bottles along the course with paper cups and that was the aid stations," recalled Duke.

Now runners are treated to manned stations offering water, Gatorade, M&M's, energy bars, pretzels, oranges and bananas.

The Catalina Marathon doesn't offer prize money so it doesn't attract an elite field. (The men's and women's winners received watches.) It does draw an eclectic crowd, where appearances can be deceiving.

"The first time I'm at the starting line and all these people looked like little fireplugs," said Competitor Magazine co-publisher Bob Babbitt of Carlsbad, a 20-time Catalina veteran. "I'm thinking, 'What the hell? There's a lot of cellulite here.' This little guy's looking at me and says, 'I know what you're thinking, son. And a lot of this cellulite's going to kick your ass.'"

"Sure enough, a lot of fat guys were waiting for me at the finish."

This year's winner, Ben Brown of La Mirada, Calif., finished in 2 hours, 57 minutes and 37 seconds. Embarrassment and avarice motivated the 25-year-old. Brown works at a Long Beach running store. One of the owners offered him \$500 to wear lime green spandex shorts that barely covered his buttocks, a maroon and white singlet and a hot pink headband. Brown pocketed another \$100 for breaking three hours.

Was wearing the garish garb worth it?

"Six hundred bucks will buy 200 lattes," said Brown. "I like lattes."

There was a female runner wearing fishnet stockings and a tutu. There was a guy dressed in a viking helmet. Owing to the St. Patrick's theme, there was a green tiara, green hair and green antenna ears.

More than any fashion show, the Catalina Marathon is about runners escaping the traditional marathon's herd mentality, concrete jungle and being at one with nature.

Runner's World voted the race its favorite off-road marathon.

Said a Runner's World chat-room participant, "The views are so spectacular and the hills are so challenging, there were times that tears came to my eyes when I reached the top of a hill to see the amazing blue ocean."

Another Catalina attraction? The sense of accomplishment.

"This pushes you to the edge," said Pasadena's Steve Mackel. "People coming for the first time or the 30th time, they're hardcore."

Or as a sweating, smiling Shannon Delaney of Cardiff put it minutes after finishing the race for the fourth time, "You've got to dig pretty deep."

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