

Defending Western States 100 champ has an 'addiction' for long races

by Don Norcross - CNS

The key to Graham Cooper's ultramarathoning success?

God-given talent, discipline, a unique training program and a cast-iron gut.

About 55 miles into last year's Western States 100-mile Endurance Run, in 103-degree Sierra heat, Suzie Lister recalls watching Cooper chug a can of Campbell's condensed chicken-noodle soup.

"He downed it like it was a can of soda," says Lister, who helped pace Cooper for part of the race. "I looked at him in amazement. Are you kidding me? I don't know too many people who could do that and not throw up."

The 34th Western States 100 begins Saturday morning in Squaw Valley near Lake Tahoe. Cooper, 37, whose primary residence is Oakland but who lives in Solana Beach four days a week because of work, is the race's defending champion, winning in 18 hours, 17 minutes.

Cooper's fascination with Western States dates to his childhood. Raised in Oakland, Cooper began running with his father at 9. By 13, he finished his first marathon.

"Against the advice of coaches and others," Cooper recalls.

His pace for that first 26.2-miler was hardly dawdling. His time: 3 hours, 24 minutes.

He hung with runners and heard tales about people who ran Western States in its infancy.

"I had kind of a magnetism to the race," he says.

Not surprisingly, Cooper burned out in his late teens and didn't rejoin the endurance world until five years ago, following the birth of his first child.

"I kind of went on a sympathy diet with my wife," says the 5-foot-10, 155-pound Cooper. "I got up to 185 pounds, reached my maximum density. I got disgusted with myself."

A 2002 marathon led to a 50-kilometer race a year later to a 50-miler in 2004 to Western States in '05.

As for his fascination with the long stuff, Cooper does not tap dance around the obvious.

Sitting in his San Diego office where he's the chief financial officer for Orexigen, an obesity-focused biotech company, Cooper says, "It's clearly an addiction."

As to the why ultra runners do what they do, Cooper adds, "The answer to the question why is no different to the answer why does anybody do a marathon. It's just an extension of that same logical notion of achievement and the reward you get from doing something pretty extreme. It's just more extreme."

The material reward for winning Western States is a silver belt buckle. Cooper wears his proudly.

"Oh, I wear it all the time," he jokes. "I just throw on my jeans and my T-shirt. I wear it around naked in the bedroom."

A 25-pound hand-carved cougar statue completes the Western States winner's booty.

"It's prominently displayed in my living room," Cooper admits. "It's my prize possession."

He named the cougar Suzie in honor of Lister.

Among ultramarathoners, Western States is the sport's most prestigious event.

"It's like for marathoners, they're immediately asked, 'Have you done Boston?' " says Dixie Madsen, a seven-time Western finisher. "Ultramarathoners ask, 'Have you done Western?'"

The 135-mile Badwater Ultramarathon, from Death Valley to Mount Whitney, may receive more publicity because of its extreme conditions, including temperatures routinely climbing into the the 120s, but the race is confined to pavement.

Ultramarathoners crave nature's surroundings and at Western States all but the final near quarter-mile lap at Placer High is set on trails. The course starts at 6,200 feet of elevation and on a layout designed for a Sherpa, includes 18,000 feet of ascent and 23,000 feet of descent.

Cooper won last year's race in unusual fashion. He was second across the finish line, Seattle's Brian Morrison beating him by about 12 minutes. Morrison, however, kept collapsing during his lap around the high school track and his support crew helped lift him off the ground. Morrison subsequently was disqualified for receiving assistance.

"A lot of guys go out and crash and burn before the finish," says Cooper. "In this case, he came tantalizingly close."

Most ultramarathoners routinely run 100 miles a week or more in base training. Cooper logs about 60 miles. He augments his training with swimming, cycling, stair climbing and spin classes.

He doesn't keep a training log, usually doesn't wear a watch when he runs and says he doesn't plan workouts.

"I pretty much wake up in the morning and see what I feel like doing," he says.

Cindy Hook crews for Cooper. Besides innate talent, Hook says Cooper benefits from mental resolve.

Regarding the pain an ultra runner must feel 60 miles into a race, she says, "I'd be like, 'Oh man, this sucks and it's only going to suck worse.' He's like, 'This sucks now, but soon the sun's going down and it'll get better.'"

As for Cooper and the others who embrace ultras, Hook does not question their sanity.

"It's like testing your limits," says Hook. "If you get off on that, you're going to get off on ultra running."

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