

John Nichols Rio Del Lago 2019

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way”

■ *Charles Dickens*

The start for Rio Del Lago really began with my DNF at Western States 2019.

Charley and I began our Western States preparations in January 2019. We’d both been watching the Avengers movies, and thought we’d adopt the Captain America mindset for our training.

“I can do this all day”

■ *Steve Rogers/Captain America – Avengers End Game*

Including t-shirts!



I’d been injured throughout 2018. And Charley had fallen into his usual pattern of atrophying during the fall months. To jump start our training and to get into the right

frame of mind, we adopted another page from the Avengers Infinity Wars/End Game. We invented what we call the “Soul Stone” diet. The Soul Stone was one of the six Infinity Stones, the remnant of a singularity that predates the universe.

"To ensure that whoever possesses it understands its power, the stone demands a sacrifice."

"Of what?"

"In order to take the stone, you must lose that which you love. A soul for a soul."

■ *The Red Skull*

We knew what we had to do. I gave up M&Ms. Charley gave up burritos. I guess we were serious!

The soul stone diet seemed to work. Charley started shrinking each day and we trained with extreme consistency (every single day!). Our miles were lower perhaps than some years, respecting our aging legs, but the consistency began yielding results. In a series of events from 50k-100k, Charley and I were consistently faster than recent years. Charley had a string of personal bests. We reached the starting line at Western States with high confidence.

And that's why they play the games!

■ *Chris Berman*

It was a perfect day weather-wise for the hundred. The snow in the high country was treacherous, but I've seen worse. Much worse a few times.



Picture → ~Mile 12. John and Charley at base of Cougar Rock.



Picture → ~Mile 12. John and Charley. Cougar Rock.

I was mysteriously cramping at about mile 13. It got more severe later when I took a tuck-n-roll tumble and both legs went into full metal jacket cramp mode. Charley probably thought he was going to have to euthanize me right there and then.

This was unexpected as I almost never have this problem. Particularly on a day with cooler temperatures than normal. Charley and I were together until the Dusty Corners aid station at mile 38. Shortly thereafter I told him to take off. I was going to need to dial it back, regroup, and go into survival mode.

I battled it through about mile 40, hoping for a rebound. By the time I climbed Devils Thumb and then went a bit further to the Deadwood pump, it was obvious there was no way I could crawl to Auburn in under 30 hours.



Picture → ~Mile 46. Swinging Bridge. The base of Devil's Thumb.

It is an up-at-dawn, pride-swallowing siege that I will never fully tell you about, ok?
■ Jerry Maguire

That stretch between Last Chance and Devil's Thumb was my worst span of running in 40 years. Disappointing, as I'd rehabbed from injuries and was really prepared for the race.

It was perplexing, as over the last few months, I've been winning my age division and running faster times in 5ks, 10ks, and 10 miles, etc. So you'd think I was ready to run ...

Success is going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm.

■ *Winston Churchill*

What to do? Get back on the horse. I signed up for the Rio Del Lago 100 Mile in November. Charley earned his "off season" with his 12 finish at Western States. I had unfinished business.

To prepare for the race, I mostly did a series of 20-30 mile runs on the bike paths and around Lake Natomas. This was kind of maintenance mode, hoping that the training I did in the Spring for the Western States 100 would suffice. I ran the Overlook Endurance Runs 50 miler on September 28, figuring that would remind my legs of what was going to be required. And then the week before the race I did another 5k at Land Park, managing a 19:21 time. A reasonable clip for a senior citizen. I doubt the 5k is a sensible way to prepare for the hundred miler, but it at last confirmed the legs were functioning and there was a basis for optimism.

The 2019 Rio Del Lago 100 Mile.

5:00am. Beals Point. Race Begins.

Although this was my first attempt at the Rio Del Lago 100 mile, I was familiar with all parts of the course. The first 18 miles is a loop around Lake Natomas, mostly on bike trail and the Hazel Bluff cliffs. Then you take the trail section of the American River 50 miles course to the Auburn Overlook, followed by a 30 mile loop covering major sections of the Way Too Cool 50k course, the latter parts of the Western States 100 course, and then repeating the trail section of the American River 50 miles course to the finish at Beals Point.

The course is 2-3 hours less difficult than the Western State 100 mile. However, there are a couple of technical sections that are downright gnarly. Also, with the early November race date, there is about 14 hours of darkness. The darkness challenge would prove more difficult than I'd anticipated.

I was fortunate to make it to the race in time, as I encountered a 3:45am brain cramp on the way to the starting line. For whatever reason, I went into autopilot and took Watt to 80 and began driving to the Auburn Overlook. Seems that's where I always drive for early morning trail runs. As I got closer to Auburn, I started thinking about the \$12 dollar parking fee required. I thought it odd that the Overlook was requiring a parking fee.

Then I remembered. Race starts at Beals Point! I detoured down Auburn-Folsom road and made it to the start with 10 minutes to spare. Oh well. One unforced error averted.

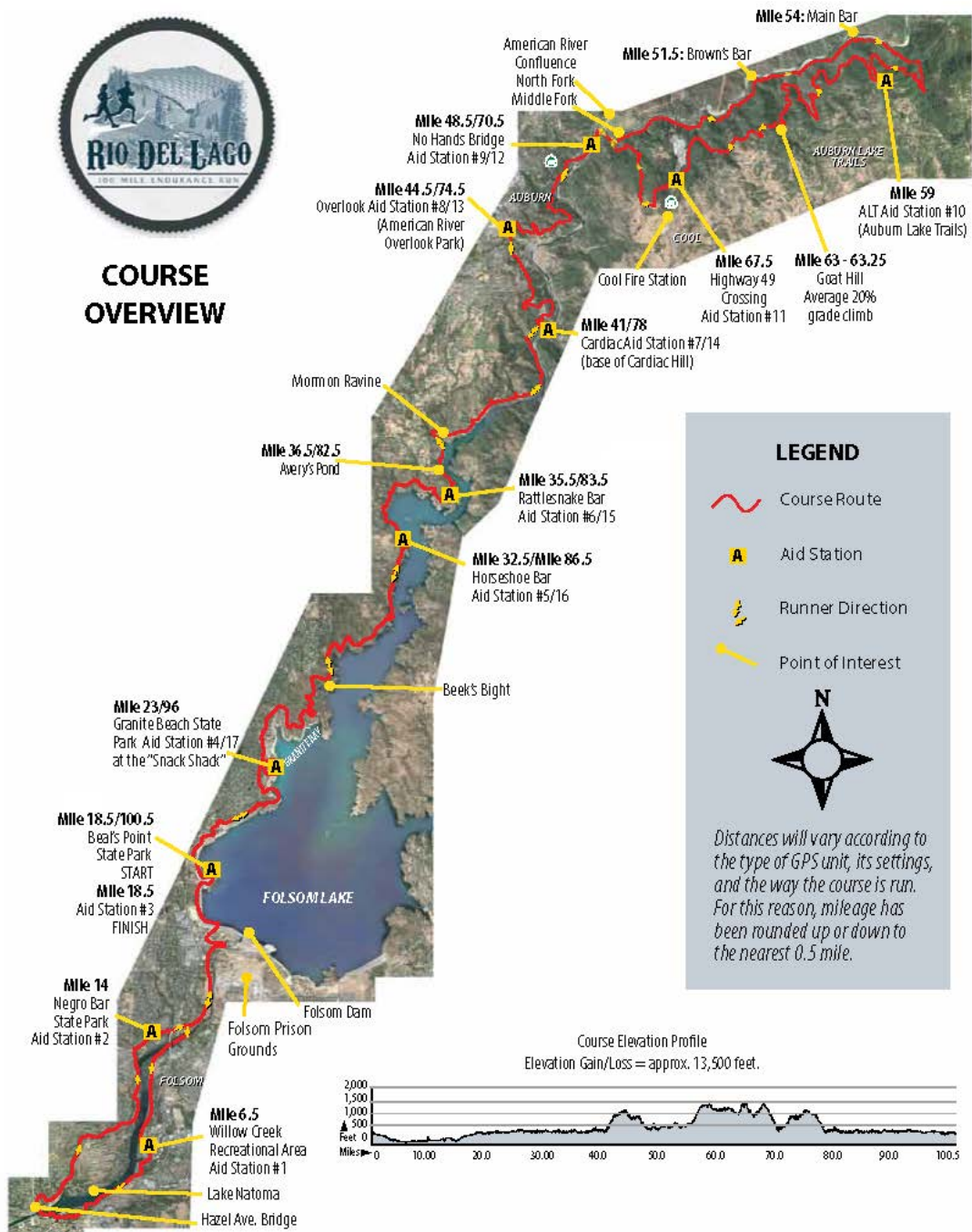
I'm 2 months from turning 55. That's almost 8 in dog years! Part of the reason I was doing this 100-miler was to ascertain whether my problems at Western State in June was an anomaly, or whether I am just older than dirt now.

Toby Keith asked Clint Eastwood 'What keeps you going?' and he said, 'I get up every day and don't let the old man in.'

Following is a map of the race course.



COURSE OVERVIEW



Picture → Rio Delo Lago 100 Mile Race Course



Picture → Hoka One One Road slippers

I usually try to avoid changing shoes on a 100 miler. However, today, with the first 18.5 miles relatively flat and mostly on the bike path, I slipped on my favorite road running shoes. I have a few pairs of these worn. Seems like these earlier versions of the Hoka One One take about 500 miles to break in, and then after 2000 miles, when the sole has worn clean off, they get super soft and comfortable. I thought I'd wear these to Beals Point and then put on the Brooks Cascadia to navigate the more difficult trail portions of the next 82 miles.

8:22am. Beals Point aid station. Mile 18.5. 137th place. Time 3:21:55.

I arrived in good spirits. Changed shoes. Consulted the contents of my drop bag, took care of some biological necessities, and then started the journey to Auburn.

I was roughly in the top third of the runners. 137th place out of 343 entrants.



Picture → ~Mile 30, on the 2.25-mile Granite Bay Multi User Trail preceding Beek's Bight.



Picture → Maybe I was already getting sleepy at mile 30!

I can definitely do this all day. It's the all-night part that would crush my spirit like a vise on a peach!

It's a 10.5 mile stretch to the aid station at Horseshoe Bar. And this includes the difficult 10K stretch commonly known as the "meat grinder". Major climbs? No. Major downhill. No. However, it is jagged, rocky, narrow, it goes up/down/sideways relentlessly. At this early stage of the race, during the daylight, I cruised through it fine. When I return to this section about 12 hours later, this "meat grinder" transforms into a medieval torture chamber.

11:03am Horseshoe Bar aid station. Mile 32.5. 114th place. Time 6:03:35.

At this point, I'm making good time and glad to have "meat grinder" round 1 in the rearview mirror. Next aid station is only 3-mile stretch to Rattlesnake Bar.

I'd moved up 23 places to 114th overall, which was a good sign. I imagine about half the runners I passed on the course, and perhaps the others I passed by getting in and out of the Beals Point aid station a little more efficiently than they did.

11:42am Rattlesnake Bar aid station. Mile 35.5. 108th place. Time 6:42:21.

The sun was now high in the sky and getting warm. A rather pleasant 70 degrees, but warm enough to toss my shirt into the drop bag at the Rattlesnake Bar aid station.



Picture → ~Mile 40, about to begin the 1500-foot climb to the Auburn Overlook.



Picture → ~Mile 40, Eric Millard will be later pacing me on this section, opposite direction.

I'd moved up another 9 places to 99th overall. The course takes the fire road on the climb to Auburn Overlook, rather than the steep switchback climb up Cardiac Hill. On the way up, this is a minor advantage. On the way down, after it's dark, taking the descent on the road rather than the narrow steep switchback trail, would be kindness.

1:56pm Overlook aid station. Mile 44.5. 99th place. Time 8:56:08.

My boys William & Spenser were waiting for me at the top of the hill. Crew chief Yvette Grabis had everything organized, so I was able to get what I needed and get on down the trail. My first pacer Charley Jones was ready for duty. Although it was daylight, we had to confirm we had headlamps and other items in tow, as it would go dark on us within about 3.5 hours.

2:52pm No Hands Bridge aid station. Mile 48.5. 86th place. Time 9:52:41.

I picked up another 13 places to 86th overall. Again, I think perhaps half of these I passed on the trail, and the others spent a little more time at the Overlook aid station.



Picture → ~Mile 50, Quarry Road. Nice flat fire road before things get challenging again.



Picture → ~Mile 53, Closing in on Main Bar and Dead Truck Trail.

Charley and I usually have a rule that with an hour of day light left, work as hard as you can to make as much progress as possible before the sun goes down. On this day we decided that the rule of three would be invoked and with three hours of day light left we used all available day light to make as much progress before darkness set in and things get decidedly more difficult.



Picture → ~Mile 53, scrounging for some root barrels and jolly ranchers. It's not just for breakfast anymore.

Charley and I really went to work on this section. It had some difficult climbs and other challenges, at least on the way to Third Gate. However, this was like our home turf. We train on this section of the course more than anywhere else. I was executing well. We had a couple hours of daylight left and wanted to get as far as we could without headlamps. Everything gets harder and slower once it goes dark.

Auburn Lake Trails aid station. Mile 59.

Charley and I got out of the aid station quickly and picked up the pace. We had an hour of daylight left and 5 miles to go to the footbridge at Brown's Bar. This is where we detour from the Western State Trail onto the Wendell Robie Trail. Our goal was to complete this within the hour. No head lamps until the ascent up Goat Hill!

It was dark and jagged. In the future, might considering running a little less “smart” and have chance to get to highway 49 in the daylight.

As part of entering the Rio Del Lago 100, runners are required to do 8 hours of volunteer work. So in late July, I decided to invent my own “trail party” and took my boys William & Spenser out to the top of Goat Hill to clear that overgrown section of the Wendell Robie Trail. We only cleared about 1/2 mile, but it took a few hours. Boys and I loppered that back to where you can cruise through it.



Picture → July volunteer work. ~Mile 64.5. Just past the climb up Goat Hill.



Picture → July volunteer work. ~Mile 64.5. An hour later ... we'd recovered the trail.



Picture → July volunteer work. Blackberry bushes gone wild. ~Mile 65. This took 90 minutes to clear 20 meters. Yes ... that's actually a "trail".

It took a big rake and a bunch of lopping, but we made that creek crossing passable. Unfortunately, the overgrown star-thistle patch for the next couple of miles would be waiting for us in November.

On race day, Charley and I slowed things down through this mess. Between the darkness, the roots, the rocks, the ruts, the star thistle and other indignities, we just wanted to make it through to highway 49 without major errors. We could hear a group of 6-8 runners behind us. Seemed like they were gaining on us and we would soon need to step off the trail and let them pass. However, after another mile of navigating an overgrown technically damaged trail, it got quiet again. Although we were moving slow, I suspect the cruelties of the Wendell Robie trail dampened the other runners' enthusiasm for maintaining the pace. Charley and I had the advantage of knowing this trail all too well.

We finally made it to the Highway 49 crossing and grabbed a few things at the aid station. When we make this same crossing during the Western States 100, we are a 10k from the finish. For this race, I had to remind my increasingly spongy brain that after a 7 mile stretch back to the Overlook, we had the most difficult part of the night ahead. Roughly a trail marathon back to Beals Point in Folsom.

8:41pm No Hands Bridge aid station. Mile 74.5. 77th place. Time 15:41:24.

*Don't let the old man in, I wanna leave this alone
Can't leave it up to him, he's knocking on my door
And I knew all of my life, that someday it would end
Get up and go outside, don't let the old man in*
■ *Toby Keith (Don't Let The Old Man In)*

The entire day, I'd remained upright. A few close calls tripping on roots and rocks, but no major tuck and rolls. This next section of the course was mostly downhill to No Hands Bridge (aka "the Luge"). We cruised along at a decent pace until Charley decided to face plant and roll in the dirt. I stopped to help him check for protruding bones. Charley was fine, albeit covered from head-to-toe with "dirt". For those familiar with the trail, given the many horses who use that trail, that stuff all over Charley is likely something more organic than "dirt"



10:03pm Overlook aid station. Mile 74.5. 77th place. Time 17:02:55.

*Wyatt Earp → How are you?
Doc Holliday → I'm dying, how are you?*

Arriving at the Overlook aid station I dropped off my first pacer and picked up my second pacer, Eric Millard who ran with me for nine miles to the Rattlesnake aid station. Eric is

one of my business partners with OnCore Consulting. He'd been working 16 hour days on a big proposal, so he was well-prepared for the upcoming sleep deprivation.



Picture → ~Mile 74.5. Auburn Overlook Aid Station. Checking through drop bag for items back previous day when brain was functioning.

I have not yet begun to defile myself.

■ *Doc Holliday in Tombstone*

The first three miles out of Auburn were a mostly downhill stretch on a partly paved fire road. This was a nice way to recover a little before getting back on the single track trail. Eric kept mentioning how beautiful the course was under the night sky.

I was able to maintain a good rhythm over the next 2 hours. Eric likely thought I was doing well, but in reality I was circling the drain. I was able to continue momentum through this stretch, as the course, although narrow, was relatively runnable.

12:19am Rattlesnake Bar aid station. Mile 83.5. 71st place. Time 19:18:34.

Eric and I made good time over this stretch. Made up 6 places, the last of this trend.



Picture → ~Mile 73.5. Rattlesnake Aid Station. Crew chief Yvette and my next pacer Shavi (Charles Barkley impersonator) wait for me to arrive.



Picture → ~Mile 73.5. Rattlesnake Aid Station. Guzzling an Odwalla.

I've been up, down, tryin' to get the feelin' again
■ *Barry Manilow*

The death march begins. This first three miles before the “meat grinder” is relatively runnable. I went from tired to comatose in this stretch. It took an hour to cover 3 miles.

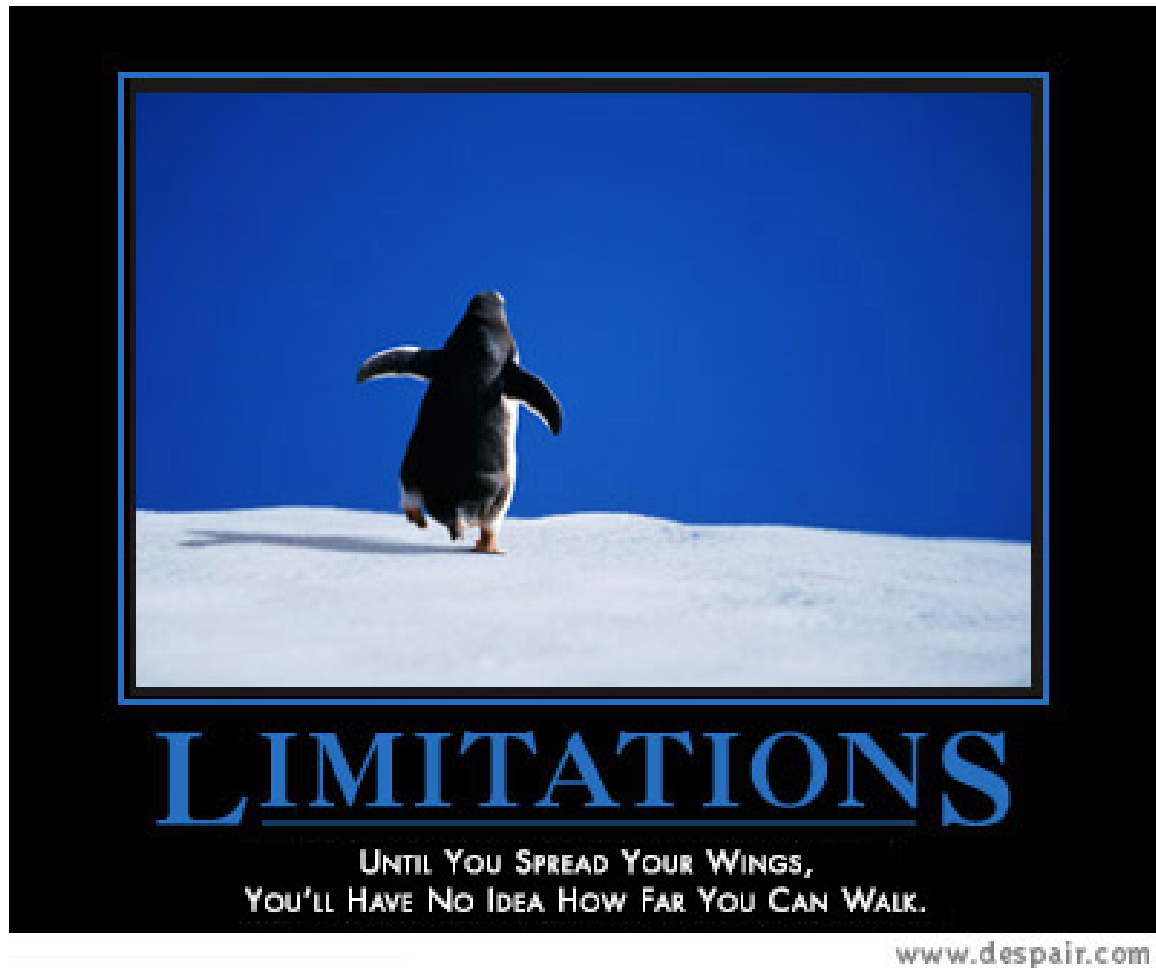
The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
■ *Robert Frost*

1:20am Horseshoe Bar aid station. Mile 86.5. Unknown place. Time 20:19.



Picture → ~Mile 86.5. Horeshoe Bar Aid Station. Everything Hurts. Slugging another coke. Shavi's massage therapist was working the aid station. I wonder if she can do a spinal tap as well.

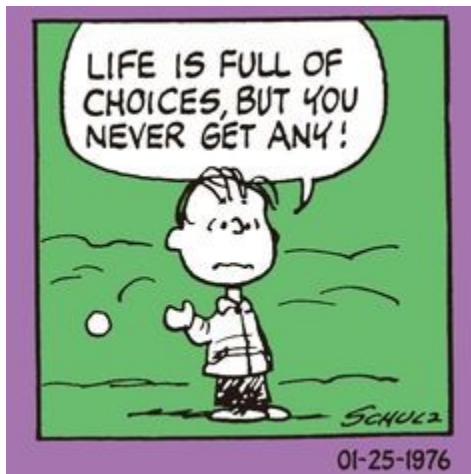
Tipping point. I was cratering. Bonking. I've plenty of time. I can walk it in from here. While that sounds easy, it's way up there on the misery index. I spent a little more time in this aid station trying to pull it together. I know it's a solid 3 hours to the next aid station. 4 hours if it goes to a bad place.



We left Horeshoe Bar and spent an hour trying to invent some kind of forward motion. I got slower and sleepier. The slower I got the sleepier I got. The sleepier I got, the slower I got. Oh joy. I think I need to find a new activity! When you have a bad day on a 5k or 10k, that last mile or two takes an extra minute or two. When you have a bad stretch on a hundred miler, you get to wallow in your decline for hour after hour after hour.

Shavi forced me to ingest another Gu gel. I think it may have been Mountain Berry. But at that point, it might as well have been lizard pancreas or sautéed boneless panda liver. He said I needed some calories and caffeine, and I'd be required to take one every two miles. I suggested that every 2 miles seemed excessive. Shavi noted at my current pace, every 2 miles may be equivalent to 1 per hour! I had to concede the point, and I choked down what perhaps was the new cicada larva flavored hammer gel, perhaps infused with caffeine and perhaps some ground cricket thorax for a bit of protein.

A Hobson's choice is a free choice in which only one thing is offered. Because a person may refuse to accept what is offered, the two options are taking it or taking nothing. In other words, one may "take it or leave it."



At one point I was so sleepy that I was going off the trails on both sides like a drunk person (Shavi's words). Shavi came up with a theory that I am too sleepy because my heart beat is too low and we need to force the issue. I needed to run faster so we could run faster. It was a recursive logic, but he was right. I tried some short sections picking up the pace, letting the quad pain jolt me out of sleepiness. It worked to a degree, but then the "meat grinder" took over again.

The RDL Meat Grinder → "Who's your daddy?!"
John Nichols, previously viable runner → "You are."

My toes were severely blistered, but had yet to break open (I will spare you this particular picture). Recalling previous hundred milers where I was able to stave off the sleepiness, there usually were a few good wipe-outs on the trail or a number of blisters breaking open on a downhill. Both unpleasant events were highly effective at jolting me wide awake.

Shavi was a great pacer. He knew what to do when I was getting flaky. And he had an extra light jacket in his pack for when I was getting hypothermic. Shavi knows there is no way to make the runner feel better, no way to reduce the pain. The only solution is to end the pain sooner by making forward progress. Relentless forward progress.

A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough without ever having felt sorry for itself.

■ *D. H. Lawrence*

I was definitely feeling sorry for myself. At my low point in the race, Shavi and I stepped aside to let another runner pass. I then curled up on the trail. I just had to shut my eyes for a couple minutes. But I knew it could only be a couple of minutes. If I stopped for long I might be unable to get going again. And the middle of the "meat grinder" is no place to relax.

As I was curled up, I recalled the movie Castaway. The boys and I were watching this a few days before the race. I sure felt like Chuck Noland, the Tom Hanks character who despaired that he would never get off that island.

To paraphrase from Chuck Noland ... *"Cause I was never going to get through that 10.5 stretch we call the meat grinder. I was going to collapse there, completely bonked. I mean I was going to get sick, or get injured or something. The only choice I had, the only thing I could control was when, and how, and where that was going to happen. I had power over nothing. That's when this feeling came over me like a warm blanket (maybe it was Shavi's jacket!). I knew, somehow, that I had to stay alive. Somehow. I had to keep breathing. Even though there was no reason to hope. And all my logic said that I would never see the finish line. So that's what I did. I stayed alive. I kept breathing. And now, here I am. And I know what I have to do now. I got to keep breathing, because tomorrow the sun will rise. Who knows what the tide could bring?"*

So I got up and started moving forward. One foot in front of the other. Following instructions every time my pacer Charles Barkley made me choke down a Gu. I just had to keep breathing. Keep moving. I'd seen the sun rise once already during this race. That was enough. I could no longer break 24 hours, but I could beat the sun rising a second time.

Granite Beach aid station. Mile 95.6. 80th place. Time 23:24:27.

It appears I only fell back 9 places from where I was at Rattlesnake Bar aid station. This was surprising, as I was stumbling along at what can only loosely be described as walking. The normal situation would be a large number of instances where pacers are calling out asking to let their viable runners get by on the narrow trail. I suspect a larger than normal number of runners in my proximity never made it out of the Rattlesnake Bar aid station.

I sat in the chair at this aid station for couple of minutes, and downed a whole can of coke fearing Shavi is going to make me swallow another Gu gel. The section for the last 4 miles is runnable trail with a lot of rolling hills along the Folsom lake water front. As we left the aid station, I started getting cold again as my body is getting hypothermic. Shavi offered another jacket, but I decided the best path was to get moving. The temperatures were dropping but still reasonable. I just needed the heart rate back up.

We gave up the ghost on a sub-24 finish somewhere along the trail in the meat grinder. Our new target was to finish sub-25. In the last mile, the trail joins the top of the levy where we met Charley Jones, Gus Excarchos and Kristin Gustafsson who were waiting to stumble along with me to the finish line.

*When he rides up on his horse
And you feel that cold bitter wind
Look out your window and smile
Don't let the old man in*

■ *Toby Keith (Don't Let The Old Man In)*

Finish Line. Beals Point. Mile 100.5. 82nd place. Time 24:56:30



Picture → Finish Line. Beals Point. Mile 100.5.

*Many moons I have lived
My body's weathered and worn
Ask yourself how old you'd be
If you didn't know the day you were born*
■ **Toby Keith (Don't Let The Old Man In)**

Thanks to Yvette, Charley, Eric and Shavi for the assistance, companionship, and encouragement through the day & night.



Picture → Apparently this morning I'm King Moonracer. And with me are my friends from the Island Of Misfit Lost & Broken Toys

*I'm not afraid of getting older.
I'm one less day from dying young.*
■ **Rob Thomas**