



# Inventing 100-Mile Trail Racing

(And Living To Tell About It)

BY GORDY AINSLEIGH

**T**HERE ARE defining moments in every person's life when he or she must decide either to be sensible and do the reasonable thing or to embark on a perilous journey through a fog of uncertainties and attractive unknowns that cannot possibly be estimated for their risk potential. Faced with such a choice, we make our best guess and then either turn back or press forward.

Those who go forward and make it through the fog-shrouded unknown to the far shore often partake of great adventures—and possibly even become famous in the doing. Those who don't make it through in one piece often end up devastated or dead—and possibly famous, also.

For me, the afternoon of August 3, 1974, was one of those defining moments.

## AN INAUSPICIOUS START

As so often seems to happen with events that change so much in a person's life—and in our world—the day began with a conspicuous absence of fanfare. Roughly 10 minutes before the 5:00 A.M. start of the world's premier horse endurance event, the Western States 100-Mile One-Day Ride, I approached Betty Veal, the head veterinary secretary, and Ralph and Betty Dever, the head timers, who were quietly making their preparations for the start of that year's big event.

"Well, I guess I'll head out now," I said.

They said, "Good luck, Gordy," and timed me out.

With that, I disappeared into the darkness before dawn: an endurance rider without a horse but with a good bit of running talent and savvy, sidelined for over a year by a lameness-prone steed, going for a day and night of great adventuring with my horse-riding comrades.



*Gordy Ainsleigh giving his horse a break on the downhill into Michigan Bluff (56 miles) during the 1972 Western States 100-Mile One-Day Ride, back when he was still riding horses, two years before his famous 1974 run.*

My earlier training for the 42-mile Levi's Ride & Tie race in Klamath Falls, Oregon (which my partner Jim Larimer and I had won), had left me in excellent condition to run in the marathon-through-50K distance. On top of that base, I did six weeks of specific training to prepare myself to run with the horses at Western States. I continued with my regular workouts, but I also ran from Michigan Bluff to Auburn (a distance of 44 hilly miles) every 9 or 10 days.

As the daylight of August 3 dawned and the morning wore on, I shared the trail with my favorite people and their magnificent beasts. I ran with exuberance and vigor, occasionally racing with the horses, happy to be alive and still part of it all (even though horselessly), after having missed out the year before when my horse went lame at Robinson Flat (30 miles).

## IN TROUBLE EARLY

Not surprisingly, by midday I was tired and dehydrated. But I was still having a great adventure—until I pushed myself up out of Deep Canyon (which isn't

really all that deep) and started across the ridge to Dusty Corners (the 40-mile point) and Last Chance (43 miles).

Intense heat had been a frequent companion of this horse race on the weekend of the full moon in late July or early August. This particular afternoon, the temperature in the trailside town of Cool hit 108 degrees.

The section of dirt road after Deep Canyon, which today winds through a forest of 30-foot-high pines, was then a recent forest fire burn. The trees and bushes were only a few feet high, and there was still scorched earth between the sparse vegetation. The sun's intense radiation was being absorbed by the trail, from where it bounced up to reheat the shimmering air.

Whether from the baking my body and brains were getting or from the distortion of heat waves shimmering off the dust, or perhaps both, I couldn't focus my eyes on the dusty road. Every step forward was difficult. Each step seemed to be one of the last I could muster. I had almost nothing left.

In desperation, I carefully reviewed my physical condition. My energy had been deteriorating progressively and relentlessly since near Red Star Ridge, about 17 miles from the start. Perhaps I had been too cocky. Perhaps my quick jump from marathon-level conditioning had left me woefully ill-prepared for this unprecedented challenge.



*Gordy makes his way up Cougar Rock (mile 13) on the day that founded the sport of ultramarathon trail running, August 3, 1974.*

## A SIMPLE DECISION

Considering how bad I felt and my rate of deterioration, I had to ask myself the big question: Was there any chance at all that I could make it through the remaining 58+ miles to Auburn before 24 hours had elapsed? Given the relentless decline over the past 22 miles, the answer was clearly, No Way! Then after a few more steps, I asked myself the question relative to making it to Michigan Bluff, the 55-mile point, which was waiting for me on the other side of two 1,800-foot-deep canyons, and the answer was just as painfully obvious: No, I couldn't make it to Michigan Bluff!

Okay, okay. Too far away. Desperation rising within. How about this? Could I make it to Devil's Thumb at 48 miles, perched high on the ridge between the two canyons? No! clearly not possible, was the reply. The rate of decay I was experiencing would definitely hit dirt level within a few miles. It was hopeless!

So what should I do? Quit? "No!" my mind screamed. "I can't quit!" The very thought of quitting was a horror gnawing within me. So I posed the next question: What *can* I do? And the answer came back from the hollow desperation deep inside my soul: I can still put one foot in front of the other, can't I? For once the answer came back—"Yes!"

This was the defining moment, with everything that had gone before building toward it, and everything afterward forever changed by it. And, as such things so often are, it was so simple. The decision formed in my mind, and I made a commitment to it: I would keep putting one foot in front of the other until I could no longer put one foot in front of the other. It didn't take a genius. All it took was complete and total commitment.

Today, in our enlightened state, we would call my decision quasi-suicidal. Race directors and medical directors would wax long and eloquent about how there is always another day—provided you don't do something incredibly stupid out there today. But remember I was doing this run before we became enlightened, before we knew better. And besides, I was 27 years old and nearly immortal!

## KNOW FEAR

Once I had made my decision to keep putting one foot in front of the other until I could no longer put one foot in front of the other, Providence provided everything else I would need to succeed. But before Providence was done with me, there was still another momentous obstacle to overcome—one that I didn't know about yet. At the bottom of the first 1,800-foot-deep canyon, I went from "No Fear" to KNOW FEAR.

As I jogged onto the wooden suspension bridge that crosses the beautiful North Middle Fork of the American River, I saw a group of riders downstream struggling desperately with a grey horse that had collapsed and was lying limply in the water. I backtracked and went down the steep trail to the water to help them drag the horse into the shallows where it wouldn't drown. My body was failing me, my legs were going into spasms and giving out. But we got the horse as far into the shallows as we could. I staggered and clawed my way back up to the bridge-crossing and started up the long, slow, humid, and steepest climb into Devil's Thumb. As I climbed, I continued to dwell on what I had just seen. That horse was obviously dying and would never leave the canyon alive.

I later found out that, even with the rescue efforts of a gutsy veterinarian who ran in on foot, the grey horse died early the next morning in the bottom of the canyon.

My mind kept dwelling on the grey horse as I climbed, and my brain was so sluggish that I was halfway up the canyon before I suddenly realized what the implications of that horse dying meant for my prospects of survival. In spite of the hellish heat of the day, I felt a chill go through my heart and guts. If the horses were dying out here today, then the much less genetically appropriate human was definitely at risk of dying. Up to that point, the question had always been whether I would make it or not, but I had never thought—and nobody had ever mentioned—that I might die out there on the trail from trying.

## MEETING MY ANGELS

Badly scared and somewhat delirious, I staggered into Devil's Thumb at the top of Deadwood Ridge, having decided to quit before I ended up like that horse at the bottom of the canyon. But my fate had already been decided. I was met at Devil's Thumb by my angels.

Diane Marquard and Paige Harper, two of my most steadfast and knowledgeable endurance-riding friends, were waiting there to welcome me into the checkpoint. Their horses had both gone lame at that point in the 100-mile gruelathon, and they were waiting for a stock truck to take them and their horses to the finish area in Auburn. Well, at least that was the pretext.

Paige died a few years later, so we haven't been able to get his take on all this, but it seems pretty clear to Diane and me that I was put on this earth with a mission: to bring ultradistance trail running to a host of oddballs who would otherwise be damned to spend their lives visually brutalized by the often obscene works of Man while breathing the foul stench of car exhausts at the same time. And it's equally clear to us that Diane and Paige were put at Devil's Thumb that afternoon to soothe my aching spirit, to calm my fears, to feed me salt tablets, to make me feel loved, to massage my legs, to renew my interest

in the vigors of life, and to send me on my way, happy to be doing what I was doing and happy to be so vitally alive. They were my *visible* angels.

## A "WALK IN THE PARK"

After that revival meeting, the rest of the run was the usual "walk in the park" that typifies the last half of the Western States Endurance Run that we know so well today. Of course, there were still some great stories to be lived out.

Cow Mountain Clyde, a man of infinite mirth and awesome talent who trained for difficult runs primarily by resting up for the coming ordeal and who carboloaded gently on beer, had volunteered to run in with me from Michigan Bluff. Twelve miles later, at the lower end of Todd Valley, where the old trail hits a ridge a mile before the long descent to the river at Ruck-A-Chucky Rapids, we were met by my girlfriend.

She had only met me at Michigan Bluff that day because she had chosen to go to the jalopy races with a friend in Auburn on Friday night rather than spend the night with me in Squaw Valley sleeping in the back of Diane's mostly cleaned out horse trailer, listening to horses chewing hay all night and taking in the horsepoo-laden breezes wafting by.



Gordy and Cow Mountain Clyde head out of Michigan Bluff in the historic 1974 race.



I had been shocked that she hadn't wanted to be there with me in the darkness at the start of the most important do-or-die event of my life, but I guess she figured it was a given that I'd be just fine until evening. (She dumped me shortly thereafter for a guy who could barely wipe his own nose. I guess I didn't make her feel needed enough.) So there she was when we popped out of Todd Valley onto McKeon-Ponderosa Road. We hung out there for 5 or 10 minutes, just talking. I should have noticed that Clyde was more subdued than his usual boisterous "Glad I can bring you up to speed on the World According to Clyde" ambiance. I should have known that a quiet Cow Mountain Clyde was an omen that bode no good.

## CLYDE BITES THE DUST

Clyde started to fall behind when we were about two-thirds of the way up to the top of the other side of the canyon, headed for Echo Hills, a checkpoint that was way up on the top of the canyon rim past Ruck-A-Chucky Rapids. (Today's Western States 100 stops climbing about halfway out of the canyon at Green Gate, so runners no longer get to enjoy the full gut-wrench of the old Echo Hills climb.)

When we reached Echo Hills (82 miles), Clyde and I went in separate directions to the people who were waiting to tend to us. When I was ready to go, I yelled for Clyde and heard him yell back. I became busy with my preparations, and when I looked back up, there stood Clyde with his arms draped over two strong men who also had their arms wrapped around his waist. He was still smiling and yelling, as usual. "You're incredible, Gordy! Go for it! I regret to say I won't be going with you the rest of the way! God, this is a hard trail! If I'd a known it was this hard, I woulda rested up more!"

I thought he was standing a little funny, so I looked down at his feet. They were turned under, pointing in the wrong direction, back behind him, with little drag marks in the dust in the direction he had come from. A great runner reduced to a non-walker by a mere 20 miles of this sweet stuff.

"Yep," I said. "looks like!"

## DESTINIES REDIRECTED

I took off down into the Middle Fork Canyon beside a hot item on a pretty chestnut Arab, a lady I had had my eye on for a while. I talked to her all the way to Auburn, figuring that this was probably my best chance to make a favorable impression on her. After all, I needed a woman whose idea of romance was horses munching all night with the gently wafted aroma of horsepoo.

Many destinies were redirected by that hot day in August of 1974. For one thing, I was haunted by the image of the dying grey horse. So the next year I asked Wendell Robie, the founder and godfather of the Western States horse ride, to station me at Last Chance to disqualify any horses that looked like they might not make it through the North Middle Fork Canyon to Devil's Thumb. Wendell did just that. As soon as the veterinary committee heard about my idea, they liked it and adopted Last Chance as a designated vet check. That move strengthened the only weak point in the veterinarian safety-net that protects the horses, and no horse has died on the Ride since.

A lot has changed on the Western States Run, too. And, of course, a lot has stayed the same. The trail from Foresthill to Highway 49 is now much harder because "the management" took out all the gravy-train cruise sections in the mid-80s and replaced them with terrain more typical of the event we know and love so well. Meanwhile, the trail from Duncan Canyon to Michigan Bluff is



*Gordy Ainsleigh crosses No Hands Bridge on a training run a week before the 1994 Western States Endurance Run, which, at age 47, he finished in 23:42—to the minute the same time he ran in his first Western States 20 years earlier (when the course was almost 11 miles shorter).*

much easier because of the milder temperatures we get in late June, when the foot race is now held.

These days, macho runners whine about the ungodly heat whenever the temperature on the Western States 100 trail gets anywhere near 100 degrees. But back in the good old days when we still ran with the horses in late July and early August, temps of 106 or higher happened about every third year. In 1974 I had 108. In 1977, Andy Gonzalez, Peter Mattei, and Ralph Paffenbarger had 109. Ron Kelley in 1975 (DNF, 96.5 miles) and Cowman in 1976 (24:29) had it easy—nothing over 102 degrees.

Bear in mind that none of us had ever thought of keeping our shirts wet so we wouldn't have to sweat so much, nor did we put ice in our caps (if we even wore caps at all). We just took it, full-force. I don't recall anyone giving much thought to trying to find an easier way to do much of anything back then. Our core temps went unbelievably high, the body water content went unbelievably low, and suffering on a scale unknown today was just part of the fun.

It hurts me to see modern runners missing out on all that fun we used to have in the bad old days. But there's still hope, even in this coddled modern era. Once in a blue moon, even in June, we get some of that old-time glorious furnace weather in these Sierra Nevada foothills. I remember a Levi's Ride & Tie race



*Gordy chumming with Shannon Weil, one of Western State's first race directors, at the 1987 race.*

that was held in Angels Camp in June 1973 when the temperature was 111. So hope does spring eternal that even in June, outrageous temperatures may be had at the Western States 100. Just keep coming back until you get one of those extra good days!

Think of all the bonding we could experience and all the great stories we could tell (for decades!) if we all went through just one more +106-degree day of epic suffering. Ah . . . the good old days!

