

CAN'T TAKE IT BACK

by Davy Crockett, RD

The Pony Express Trail 100 is a unique 100-mile race, following the historic 1860 Pony Express route in the western desert of Utah. This very remote section of the country has been untouched by modern development, herds of antelope are always seen roaming the course, and this year runners even got to see wild horses galloping through the desert. You could look any direction and only see low mountains, sagebrush, huge anthills, and jackrabbits hopping along the trail.

For the 2009 race, 13 100-mile and nine 50-mile runners assembled at the starting line at Lookout Pass (6,570 feet). This pass received its name because Indians often ambushed Pony Express riders and stagecoaches here; they were told to "Look Out!" To avoid any modern dangers on our long run, we would each have a crew vehicle providing support along the entire route. This is the most popular feature of the race because family and friends can witness an entire 100-mile race and get out at any point to pace their runner. While this is a very fast 100-mile course, it is deceptively tough with a finishing rate of less than 50 percent. There is only about 4,000 feet of ascent along the way, but during the night, with a nice warm car driving near you, it is mentally tough to continue when those inevitable low points arrive.

Nine runners took the two-hours-early start at 6:00 a.m. and the rest of the pack started at 8:00 a.m. as the sun just started peaking over the mountains. Phil Lowry (running the 50-km) and I (running the 100-km) led the pack through a beautiful winding canyon dotted with junipers. After three miles at a seven-minute-mile pace, we spilled out into the wide-open Skull Valley where we could see for miles to mountain ranges to the west. In the 19th century this area was known as "Piute Hell" named after the Indian tribe there and because the desert was blazing hot in the summer and frigid cold in the winter. On this day, we had perfect running temperatures all day with not a cloud in the deep blue western sky.

Near Government Creek, the location of an 1860's telegraph relay station, we spied two lone antelope watching us. Several runners reported seeing some wild horses near the 14-mile point at Simpson Springs where a historic pony express station has been reconstructed. We caught up with many of the early starters and it was quite a scene to look out and see the crew cars along a stretch of dirt road that extended across the desert for miles.

At mile 25 we dipped down into an amazing, dry, ancient riverbed and passed by the site of a Pony Express station that 19th century visitors



PAUL CANNON

Runners following the historic Pony Express route

believed was haunted. There were no ghosts to bother us today, but I knew that I would be returning in the night and needed to be careful.

By mile 40, I had run up and over Dugway Pass and now felt very isolated. As a race director, I started to get very worried. What have I done? I've led about 60 - 70 people, including the crews, out into the wild, remote, western desert, a place most had never seen. Just at that moment I almost stepped on a coiled snake in the middle of the road. It too was surprised and only started to rattle as I passed by. At that point we were about three hours away from any hospital.

I soon rounded a low mountain range and could look out clear to the horizon across salt flats. Near the 50-mile turnaround, a relay team that had arrived a couple of hours earlier set up an amazing aid station with a party atmosphere. My spirits were perked as their cowbells rang

out across the desert. The turn-around point was marked by a "Slow, Children at Play" sign. It seemed quite appropriate.

Turning around to head back, I greeted all of the runners over the next six miles. The sun went down and we were all presented with an explosion of stars. One runner commented, "It soon became very quiet and serene as the stars lit up and the silhouette of the mountains surrounded me everywhere. It looked and felt as if I were enclosed in one those snow globes that you shake and the snow scatters everywhere. But instead of snow it was stars - what a treat." At times, I would turn off my light and run along the road with my head pointed to the skies. Shooting stars were seen continuously through the night.

As I ran along at around mile 73, I recalled that along this stretch, the story is told that during the 1860s a lone woman passenger on a



RANDALL DAVIS

Four-footed ultrarunners along the course



PAUL CANNON

The aid station at Blackrock Pony Express Station Monument

PONY EXPRESS FAUST, UTAH | OCTOBER 16 DIRT ROADS

100 MILES

1. Davy Crockett, 51	22:58:19
2. Matt Watts, 53, CO	23:31:54
3. Scott Dakus, 45, NV	26:09:00
4. Don Landry, 64, QC	28:05:00
5. Olaf Questereit, 41	28:45:36
6. Gary Stosich, 53	29:18:00

50 MILES

1. Phil Lowry, 43	9:30:30
2. Jarom Thurston, 35	9:42:00
3. Matt Ricks, 32	10:42:49
Craig Lloyd, 36	10:42:49
5. Rand Nielson, 49	11:54:00
6. Frank Bott, 52, NC	12:39:00
Pablo Riboldi, 41	12:39:00
8. Quintin Barney, 50	13:12:02
Marilynn Phipps, 51	13:12:02
10. Leslie Peterson, 54	13:19:00
11. Gary Horlacher, 41	13:25:00
12. Steve Gray, 48, NV	13:30:00
13. David Loveland, 48	13:57:00

stagecoach awoke to find the horses and coach standing still. Her driver had an arrow in his heart. She drove the team ahead to my next destination, Simpson Springs.

For the last 25 miles there were pockets of cold air dipping down into the low 30s, and just a mile later it would jump into the 50s – layers on, layers off. It was a lonely feeling running in the desert at night. But looking behind me I could see crew car lights up to 18 miles away stretched across the dark desert floor.

Attacking the final climb back up to Lookout Pass, I finished in a new course record time of 22:58. It was an experience that I would relive in my dreams for days. Five other runners would cross the 100-mile finish line later that morning.

RANDALL DAVIS:

Perhaps the best part was at about mile 14 when I came across a herd of antelope and a group of wild horses just in front of me along the road. I reached for my camera, and then realized my crew out ahead had it with them. Fortunately, they captured the pictures for me. In the early 1800s, the pronghorn antelope were numbered in the millions; what we see now are the remnants and the preservation efforts to save remaining herds. The horses and antelope didn't seem to pay attention to me along the road, but then they moved westward into the distance. It was a real treat in the early morning. A few hunters stopped and asked me if I was either lost or if my vehicle had broken down somewhere. They didn't seem to get the idea or thrill of running in the desert.

OLAF QUESTEREIT:

One thing I noticed about the night: As I would stop at the side of the road for a break, Tony and I would stop talking. It was so quiet my ears felt as if they were humming. The Riverbed station for the Pony Express (mile 75) was said to be haunted and as Tony and I approached the site by the monument, I heard a two-footed animal walking away from us. I asked Tony if he heard the footsteps moving away, he said no. Then, as we got to the bottom of the bed I saw a shadowy figure ahead. I was sure it was a "Desert Fairy," but it was just Neil, my crew, coming back to see what we would need.

SCOTT DAKUS:

I was aware of the very real possibility of not finishing even though we were within 14 miles of the finish. I was trying to avoid the van as much as possible; still trying to just stay on the course every second that I could. I know how creative an athlete can get when they are looking for reasons to sit down and I hate being that guy. My crew had busted their asses for me and I wasn't going to have them babysitting me over the last ten miles because I was uncomfortable. I knew this wasn't going to be easy and for once in my life, I was correct. Joe paced me all the way up to the finish; when we passed Lookout Station, it felt like a huge weight had been lifted. From that point, I could crawl or roll uphill and still make it. Everything was light and jovial and I actually ran the last 100 yards or so. When I hit the top and was done, I snapped my hat to the ground and stood in that familiar bent-over stance that real runners have after finishing a real race. Done and in the books, you can't take it back... 26 hours, nine minutes. ■



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