

DEATH VALLEY

-A Sojourner's View

By Jay Birmingham, 1981 and 2004 finisher



Jay in 1981, en route to a new course record.



Jay in 2004.

Al Arnold, Ben and Denise Jones, Marshall Ulrich, and Rich Benyo—these are names well-known to hundreds of athletes who have challenged Death Valley over the past 25 years. I believe I have a unique perspective, having run Badwater to Whitney Summit in 1981, then returning for a successful Badwater to Whitney Portal race in 2004. The 23-year span between efforts is the greatest so far.

My perspective is unusual for another reason. The vast majority of Repeaters are Californians, or, more accurately, Southern Californians. For many, including honorary Death Valley citizen Ulrich (who lives in Colorado), covering the route is an avocation. My first run was my first look at Death Valley. I arrived in '81 from the hothouse humidity of Florida to the desiccated desert of 20-mule-team borax miners. My crew was an equally inexperienced woman and three teenage children. Two decades later, now coming from prairie state Nebraska, I revisited my old acquaintance. Much had changed—much remained the same.

Death Valley was a modest-size National Monument in 1981, the western boundary of the park just halfway up the west-bound climb to Townes Pass. Now a massive National Park, it spans more than 100 miles, east-to-west. The roads are the same (hot and hard), the grades are the same (steep). German tourists still visit in amazingly large numbers and automobile prototypes still threaten the safety of runners and lizards.

Death Valley wields its threats with the same randomness and power: Sandstorms, temperatures of 130 degrees, mudslides born of far-distant flash floods, UV radiation that burns and blinds. Insidious powers in the sagebrush



Jay in 1981.

1981



and in the asphalt still nauseate the fit, suck water from constantly-hydrating athletes, blister tough feet, and thwart meticulously planned challenges.

Badwater, the start, has not changed. Tiny arthropods still troll its brackish waters. But in 1981, I debated whether to even walk to the water's edge as it was several dozen meters from a rude dirt parking lot. Now, one parks on asphalt, complete with white stripes. You can pad across a boardwalk and lie on your belly to watch the little critters swimming.

While we solo adventurers of the late 1970s and early 1980s had the road to Furnace Creek Ranch to ourselves, runners now see dozens of their fellows stretched to the horizon, their support vans leaping past them like frogs. Support crews are bound by rules, just like the racers. Many current runner-crew combos are smoothly efficient, their routines honed from simulations and previous races, like astronauts and crews from Cape Canaveral. Packed with state-of-the-art medical gear and enough food and drink to start a roadside business, the support vehicles are a far cry from the simple ice chest and picnic basket of the pioneers.

A proud, protective attitude has been a constant among those charged with preserving Death Valley, the National Park Service staff. Every man and woman is helpful and vigilant, watching the valley and each visitor. Their roles

are now supplemented by Chris Kostman, proficient and fiercely protective of the race. He has assembled an amazing staff to preserve the safety and purity of the event.

The facilities at Furnace Creek have grown nearly as much as Las Vegas, the gateway to Death Valley for those of us from the east. The simple restaurant with a postcard rack has evolved into a village. Yet Furnace Creek remains a luxuriant early oasis on the long trek to the mountains.

Stovepipe Wells has enjoyed an even greater transfiguration in two decades. When my family and I stopped there in 1981, we were the only guests at the inn. Now Badwater racers pack the greatly expanded lodgings to overflowing. With another miniature village over Townes Pass at Panamint Springs, I felt in 2003 and 2004 like I was trekking from one town to another. The scarce amenities in 1981 made the run feel far more desolate.

The Dow Villa Motel in Lone Pine is still there—we old guys like returning to a place to find that some things have not changed. Lone Pine seems much the same as it did. The forest service office still doles out permits to climb Mt. Whitney, but there was no difficulty in the 1980s to gain access to the trail.

My approach to the route in 1981 was vastly different from my race in 2004. With only the specter of Al Arnold before



2004

Elapsed Time Comparison: 1981 vs 2004

Furnace Creek: 1981: 3:00 / 2004: 3:50
 Stove Pipe Wells: 1981: 15:50 / 2004: 9:38
 Panamint Springs: 1981: 31:59 / 2004: 24:02
 Darwin: 1981: 37:20 / 2004: 30:33
 Lone Pine: 1981: 55:09 / 2004: 46:07
 Whitney Portal: 1981: 59:54 / 2004: 50:10

me, I focused on beating 84 hours to the Whitney summit. Since I had no night running experience (and a real fear of stepping on a rattlesnake in the dark), I chose to run only in the daylight. Fit enough then to complete several marathons in the low 2:40s, I was able to push the pace each day for 45 miles, three consecutive days. The downside, of course, was dealing with the intense sun and temperature for the entire run. The upside was plenty of rest. Stopping for good at Whitney Portal was not a 1981 option.

How do my two successful performances compare? The 1981 trek was an adventure into the unknown. My crew was my inexperienced family (read details in my book, *The Longest Hill*, or in Tamara Dickey's story, "I Was There When Hell Froze Over" on the race website.) I ran more than 80 percent of the entire route, much at a brisk 8 min-

utes per mile pace. Even through the Alabama Hills, ascending the final miles to the Portal, I was able to run. Ah, the joy of being young!

In 2004, I was a racer. Tentative at first because in 2003 I had dropped out at 75 miles (due to a sick crew and bruised feet), I kept momentum from start to finish. Still possessing an aversion to sleep deprivation, I left the road for more than 10 of my 50 hours from Badwater to Whitney Portal. Despite the breaks, I bettered my 1981 time for the 135 miles by nearly ten hours.

Running from Badwater to Whitney Summit as a 36-year-old was a solo triumph, shared with only my family. Nobody paid it much attention, but the satisfaction it brought was deep. Sharing my 2004 success with a crew of five and 70 other runners and crews was profoundly different. Although fear of the unknown is gone, I felt reverence for the unrelenting challenges of Death Valley. I especially enjoyed the mutual respect for, and from, my fellow competitors.

Being a pioneer in Death Valley is special once. Being a finisher in *The World's Toughest Footrace* will be special forever.

