

Badwater Ultramarathon

The Challenge of Champions

135 miles, 125 degrees of heat, 60 hours time limit

10am start on Monday 13th July 2009

Where do I start on this one? After running my longest run ever in Land's End to John O'Groats the appeal of longer distance was satisfied, now I was going more extreme – unsupported runs such as 190km across the Libyan Desert, the classic Marathon Des Sables, labelled as the toughest race on the planet, 7 days with just water and tents provided and now this – the ultimate in extreme racing – “the Hottest Race in the World”, 135 miles across Death Valley! Could I survive?

I had originally entered this race for 2008 but a stress fracture to my left hip put me out for 3 months at the end of May and had to enter again for 2009. 2008 finally finished on a high with a new pb in the 24 hour race in the freezing cold Bislett Stadium with 219km, this race was just a fraction shorter at 217km but guessed the heat and the hills would see a far slower performance.

2009 didn't start the best, yet another bone stress injury to my shin while attempting the 6 day record in the depths of winter, recovered just in time to take my place in the Great Britain team competing in the World/European 24 Hours in Bergamo, Italy at the beginning of May and the Surgeres 48 hours in France at the end of May, neither of which went exactly to plan but learnt a lot of lessons in these hot races which could be put to good use in Badwater.

The problem with my bones had been highlighted some time ago (possibly due to medication I was taking) but due to my age and not quite having Osteoporosis (my bone density is 1.7 deviations below normal and classed as Osteopenia) no treatment would be given. But this was finally changed in June and started on Bisphosphonates to try to improve the situation, which gives me great confidence that may be in a year or so I can have another attempt at the 6 days event.

So onto Badwater, the training had been going well, slightly reduced mileage to help the bones but twice as much cross training to compensate. I try to do at least one aqua-jogging session in the pool per week, do several hours on the elliptical trainer, biking, rowing, two weights sessions a week and around the 70-80 miles a week mark in running. For the last 4 weeks I had been doing my elliptical trainer work in the conservatory with all the windows and doors shut and managed to get the heat nearly up to the 50 degrees mark, regularly it was over 40 degrees. I did struggle with the higher temperatures but also there was little air circulating which did make conditions very hard – the floor looked like I just tipped the drinks all over it such was the sweat rate, but it got me used to drinking and weighed myself to monitor how well I was hydrating, I have always been pretty good at this as long as water is available.

So the training done, the bags packed and off to Las Vegas. We left home immediately after finishing the Mulgrave Woods race on Sunday 5th July, for the drive to Cambridge and an overnight stay with my sister (and five children) and a big Sunday roast dinner that Bill never gets at home. Next morning it was up at 5:30am and away by 6m for the drive to Gatwick, the Dartford Crossing was pretty clear and made good time getting to Gatwick just about on time for the 9am check-in and 11:30am flight with Virgin Atlantic, the only non-stop flight we could find to Las Vegas.

Three films later (including a choc ice) and we arrived in Las Vegas, we walked out of the airport and WOW!! This was hot, it was 42 degrees and was sweltering, it would be even hotter in Death Valley and this was really unbelievably hot and sticky, it was around 2:30pm in the afternoon (8 hours behind UK time). Immediately onto the air conditioned bus to take us to the car hire centre and collect our Jeep Liberty (air conditioned of course) and a drive up "The Strip" to our hotel at the northern end in the Stratosphere. The hotels here were enormous, something like 15 of the world's 25 biggest hotels are here, and ours was not to let us down –tower block 3, floor 23 and room 17. The room was massive, one of the biggest I had ever stayed in, super large tv for Bill, plenty of space and roaring air conditioning. We bedded down for a couple of hours to get over the journey and decided to get up at 8pm for a walk along The Strip. It was dark now and the heat was still overwhelming, there were not too many people walking around but guessed they all stayed in the air conditioned hotels, all of which had casinos on the ground floor. We bought some water and some milk for tea and cereal in the morning and went back to bed again at 10pm.

Tuesday 7th July

I only slept until 2am and then was wide awake. I gave up at 5am and was up making tea. By 7am we were out again, chose which show we wanted to watch, had a ride to the top of the Stratosphere – the highest point in Vegas I believe with views all round to the mountains and of course – The Strip. For lunch we went to the Circus Hotel, a real fun place and had a buffet meal here, the food was good quality, masses of choice and lots of it; we were stuffed by the time we left. In the afternoon we just relaxed by the pool, having a dip every now and then to cool off. That evening we went to see the American Superstars. A tribute show to five famous American singers, Elvis Presley, Britney Spears and Michael Jackson being three of them. Wasn't long before I was flaked out in bed again – just to wake up at 2am yet again.

Wednesday 8th July

Another early morning and went to the gym for a run on the treadmill, although I wanted to run outside in the heat it was hard to cross the roads and would have to keep stopping so decided it was easier to get a non-stop run without getting run over in the gym. Another great buffet breakfast/lunch at 11am, I got to eat the omelette, pancake and waffles for breakfast I had been itching to try and Bill had just about everything else – hate to admit it but topped this off with cream cakes (not as good as Wednesday afternoon cakes at the Russell's). We went back to the Circus to watch a few more acts and then mid-afternoon drove the 5 hours to the Grand Canyon. We camped in a massive but basic campsite, facilities were just water and pit toilets.

Thursday 9th July

After an early morning run on a nature trail and the road near the campsite we finally got to the South Rim and the stunning vista that opened up on front of us. It wasn't quite the view we had when we went to the Verdon Canyon, Europe's Highest Canyon, the sides were far less steep and more or less like a vast valley below the mountains. We did the scenic drive along the South Rim to the watch tower and went for a few shorts walks and had ice creams. Back at the campsite just before dark I saw what I thought was a wolf running though the campsite just yards away, we finally figured out it was a Coyote. Bears are also prevalent in the area as are Cougar's. We did see some Elk's as well. It was dark by 8pm and with all my early rises decided to go to bed early, and yes was awake early yet again. The Coyote's could be heard howling at night too!!

Friday 10th July

Back at the South Rim for a trek into the Canyon along the Bright Angel Trail. The weather was a bit cooler here than it had been at Las Vegas, may be because we were much higher – the campsite was over 6000ft and the highest point on the rim over 7000ft. There was also some light cloud patches today. The descent began, there were many warnings not to trek to the bottom and back in a day as the exertion and heat would be too much, so we took it one step at a time. This was the most popular route to the bottom of the canyon, it was easy walking and even mules could make the trek, but it was steep and expected the canyon to get hotter the further into it we ventured. I remember the Verdon Canyon being just like this – it was probably the hottest race I had ever experienced before this.

The first stage was to 1.5 mile rest house – a small shelter and drinking water available. The round trip here was supposed to take between 3-6 hours, the one-way trip took us just 30 minutes and had been quite eventful, we had overtaken numerous groups and individuals on the way down, had to stop for a group of mules that were hiking up and even stopped to video a Condor that was perched on a ledge around 200ft above us – it was a magnificent creature. We continued on and 30 minutes later reached the 3 mile rest house – another shelter and water, Bill was feeling fit so continued on to Indian Garden, an oasis of green with campsite, shade, shelter and water. It was teeming with people and Bill sat in the shade for a few minutes while I contemplated the route ahead. There were two choices, Plateau Point was a flat view point 1.5 miles from here directly across some open baking ground and there was a mule trip getting ready for the hike across to the view point to the inner canyon, the other choice was a further 3 mile trek to the Colorado River, which was what I really wanted to do. It depended on Bill, we had walked 4.6 miles all steeply downhill, the temperature was around 115 degrees and it was getting warmer, although we had been lucky with bits of shade and the odd bit of cloud cover. Bill knew what I wanted and said he felt ok so we began the final stage of descent.

It was initially quite flat, into a superb gorge that was cool and shaded and saw another Elk. Then a short open section before another big circling vista opened up in front of us, the path wound around the inner rim and then zig-zagged steeply to the bottom, which was only just visible. We continued on as the heat continued to increase and by 3 hours of walking total we had reached the white

roaring Colorado River. It was a great plume of water speeding on it's way. The panorama looking upwards was magnificent and I enjoyed it far more than looking down, the force of the river was incredible and watched a couple of rafts bump by. You could also do rafting at this point but we refrained, Bill is not the best of swimmers and I didn't like the force of the water. We rested for a while and watched a couple of squirrel looking animals fight over some peanuts we gave them before starting the long hike back to the top. It had taken just 3 hours to reach here – we had left at 8:30am and we reached here at 11:25am.

We started the hike at 11:45am and were soon back at the base of the zig-zags climbing continuously. I was loving the heat, trying to imagine what Death Valley would be like, Bill was beginning to suffer. The drinks we had consumed so far had all had a tablet of Nuun dropped into water for a bit of flavour and salts, but Bill was now getting a dry mouth and thought he had too much salt, so he relieved me of my only remaining can of coke (he drank his at the bottom of the Canyon) and gave me one small slurp before he polished it off. We made it back to Indian Garden's, Bill was now in need of some shade and further liquid, another litre of water and he seemed satisfied, we now took extra water for the hotter and slower hike back up, making use of all the rest rooms on the way.

Next up was the 3 mile rest room, Bill was beginning to turn rather pale and feeling a bit sick, he had hardly eaten anything so coaxed him into resting and eating a couple of ginger biscuits while listening to the tales people were telling the ranger in the shelter. They were talking about people who stupidly thought they could walk to the bottom and up again in a day!! On looking at our legs it was pretty obvious where we had been, the first three miles the track was like white sand that kind of dusted up and stuck to your legs, further down this turned a deep orange – our shoes and legs were deep orange and sat here surrounded by white sand, we just listened and got out about 10 minutes later. Onwards and upwards and soon we were back to 1.5 mile rest house, what took 30 minutes to go down was only taking 45 minutes to climb up so were progressing well. There was quite a bit of activity at this rest house and being nearer to the top far more people. We stopped only temporarily to refill our bottles and a quick 5 minutes on a rock in the shade. No sooner had we left and we realised what the commotion was about as a helicopter came in to land on an incredibly small perch, someone had collapsed in the heat and needed a lift out (I wonder if they had been to the bottom?). We reached the top at 3:45pm, so only 4 hours to climb out including breaks, not bad going, it had been the highlight of the holiday so far and was really chuffed to achieve this – it all depended on Bill and he did well.

Back to the campsite for dinner and a clean up and then decided to get on our way. Next day we were driving the route of the Badwater race and still had the drive to get there, so we drove for 4 hours to Hoover Dam, just outside of Las Vegas and although we intended to camp it was easier just to put the air beds up in the back of the Jeep.

Saturday 11th July

It was much milder again here and neither of us slept well and were back on the road at 5am again. Through Las Vegas and onto Death Valley. The roads here were very quiet and as we approached

the National Park so the warning signs began – “Danger, Extreme Heat” and we watched the temperature rise the lower we sank into the Valley.

We arrived at Furnace Creek around 9:30am and decided to head straight to Badwater where the start of the race was, around 17 miles away, I had wanted to get here for 10am and run the first 3 miles at the time I should be starting the race. We stepped out of the Jeep and the heat was incredible, I didn't think it was really humanly possible that any of the athletes could really survive this heat, it was scorching just standing around and Bill was plastering himself with sun oil while I got changed into shorts and t-shirt and downed another 500ml of water. But I was here to run and that was what I was going to do – the instructions to Bill were to treat it as though it was the race, park on the right hand side every mile and hand me a drink. So off I went, it was exciting, I could not believe I was actually here and running, the scenery was of desolate sand and rocky mountains, all without colour and the heat haze was rising, giving a kind of shimmering blurriness to the landscape. A mile on and there was Bill, it wasn't so bad running, it almost felt like standing around was hotter than running, the breeze you got when you ran cooled you down more, onto mile 2 and mile 3 and that was my first training run of the day, 28 minutes and 44 seconds and had tried to mimic race pace – so was definitely heading towards 6 miles an hour that I usually average at 24 hour race, but half guessed I would be walking some to keep the core temperature down.

Back in the Jeep and we drove to the next timing station at Stovepipe Wells, around 42 miles. This first section is supposed to be the hardest and hottest of the entire race and have heard that if you make it this far you have “cracked the race”. We noted the opening times and what supplies could be purchased here – had a coffee and then started to climb the first mountain range. This was 17 miles of non-stop climbing up 5000ft, there were warning signs to turn off the air conditioning to avoid over heating the engine and one stop-over point with water for radiators nearing half way to the top. Every 1000ft of elevation was marked. Over Townes Pass and a 13 mile downhill stretch to Panamint Springs, just one resort with a shop and petrol station here, similar to Stovepipe Wells. We again stopped to see what the supplies were like and opening times.

Then up the next mountain range – 18 steep miles of climbing to Darwin turn-off and then around 32 miles of flat and 1000ft downhill to Lone Pine. This was a real town with many facilities and the post race event and hotel was here. We drove straight through and out onto the Mount Whitney Road. Here I jumped out again for another 3 mile run to experience the gradient. This was around 5000ft of climbing over 13 miles. The gradient was steep but challenging, a steady run on fresh legs but I guessed when I made it here after 122 miles of running I would be walking this. Bill did his usual job of drinks every mile and this time the 3 miles took nearly 34 minutes to run, the heat was still intense and the wind was swirling and nearly blew my hat off, it also blew sand in my eyes despite wearing sunglasses so knew that the Marathon Des Sables glasses would be needed with the sponge protection areas to keep sand out of the eyes.

We continued the trip to the top as the gradient increased and hair-pinned upwards, it was also curious watching the change in temperature the higher we got. There was a campsite and masses of cars and people here so just drove straight around and back down to Lone Pine. We had a late dinner here, Bill got his massive burger he had been itching to try and I had a steak. Then the long,

scenic drive back to Furnace Creek to check-in and I took my turn of driving the automatic Jeep, we arrived around 6pm, it had been a long day of driving.

The place was teeming with runners, made all the more obvious because each car had to have the runners name on all four sides with the race number in letters no smaller than 6 inches. My Canadian crew were bringing my race names and numbers, there were many rules and regulations that had to be strictly adhered to. Furnace Creek had a grocery shop, a couple of eating places, a golf course, swimming pool, horse riding and a visitor centre. Our room was on the upper floor of block 9, no lifts here!! We transported everything out of the car so that it could be sorted and repacked with just the items for the race. I spent the evening putting everything into neat piles – drinks/food/clothing/shoes/medical and everything else was put back in the cases for after the race. My crew were to arrive sometime the next day, they had been competing in a 129 mile bike ride today and had faxed through their signed information to be included in the crew, so half guessed they may not make it for check-in. Finally got to bed around 10:30pm and slept reasonably well for the first time, but the air conditioning was even noisier here and room warmer than Las Vegas.

Sunday 12th July

Up at 7am at last, probably my best night's sleep so far. We went to the shop and stocked up with all the supplies needed for the race that could be bought now – 20 gallons of water, bread rolls with ham and cheese to make sandwiches, a few snacks for Bill, even a date and walnut cake I quite fancied. Time seemed to whiz by and 12-2pm was check-in time. We got to the visitor centre around 12:15pm and the queue was massive, rather than stand around in the heat waiting to go in I sat in the visitor centre while Bill held my place in the queue. About 20 minutes later he was near to the entrance door and joined him. First paperwork check was at the door, then we were allowed in to join the next queue for numbers. That done we were then split, crew in one queue, runners in the other. Next up was the mug shot, had to stand like a criminal with my number under my chin for a snap shot. It was then join the next queue, which I eventually found out was just to put a sentence on twitter, I was not prepared to queue for this and went straight to the bag collection which had the "caution runners" sign for the cars, a few goodies and books, then onto collect a signed copy of "The Tap" by Frank McKinney who had done the race three times previously and was here to run again – he advised reading the last chapter which was about his journey in this race "The White Line From Hell to Heaven". I did – and it was highly amusing and inspiring – there is to be no nudity in the race, yet another rule, but poor Frank was suffering and lying naked in the back of his crew's vehicle and crawled out in this state on all fours to be sick for half an hour, I might add that he went on to achieve his goal of a sub 48 hour performance and buckle that he so wanted after narrowly missing the 48 hour time the previous finish.

Then it was the Moben kit collection, white arm sleeves (XS), white leg sleeves (S) and white head cover (M), these were all the smallest sizes they had in the kit. I had wanted the arm sleeves as these were what I planned to use in the race. Last in line was the purchase of a Badwater bandana which I also intended to use during the race, this has pockets in it to add ice. Finally it was meet up with Bill and get back for lunch and a quick rest as it was nearly 2pm now and we had to be back for 3:30 for the pre-race mandatory meeting.

There was yet another queue waiting for the doors to open for the meeting. I finally saw Mark Cockbain in the queue ahead. Although there were five entrants from the UK, Mark and myself were the only two that currently lived and travelled from the UK. I had met Mark several times before – notably on the Libyan Challenge last year. He was with his crew and guessed mine could even be here now but was not easy to make contact, he re-assured me that there would be lots of people here desperate to crew should there be a problem, it was compulsory to have a minimum of two crew. The meeting was as expected, a quick film of last year's race, a few race rules, talk from the Sheriff and Doctor, all crew to stand and finally all runners on stage. It was at this point I pondered whether or not to go on stage as obviously the meeting was just about finished but half guessed my crew could be here and may be able to pick me out. Luck was on my side and as one of the last to go on stage exactly that happened and pointed them to Bill for when I came back.

Formalities over it was great to finally meet my crew – Isabelle, Mary and Barb. They were all experienced ultra runners, cyclists, adventure racers, Isabelle had entered the race but had failed to get in despite exceptional credentials – you have to have run at least two 100 mile races and she even placed second on one tough 100 miler and still didn't get in. By crewing you are given extra points so that improves future success in entering the event. For those of you that are not aware – there is a very strict entry procedure for this race, entry is only open for 2 weeks in January and you have to give details of ultras you have competed in, with times, dates and placing. You are awarded points based on your races and although there are a few "discretionary places", it is virtually the top 90 athletes that get in. Many are veterans of previous years too. So given how tough this race is supposed to be there are lots of runners out there desperate to run this race.

My crew had sounded great on paper and the contact we had so far had installed much confidence in them. They had made contact with Ferg Hawke who had run and placed in this event previously and were clued up on what to do in the heat. They were a really friendly, happy crew. We all went back to my room after they checked in and quickly went through all my stuff. What happened next was amazing, they left and returned with all kinds of cool boxes and big plastic boxes for my stuff. It was all put in boxes and labelled and prepared ready for transportation in the morning and promptly left me to my evening. Perfect, a competent crew that knew what they were doing, didn't need much instruction and had far more "packing gear" than me. They had driven across with doing their bike race the day before – their car was easy to pick out with three bikes on the roof rack. Barb had also painstakingly cut out my name and number 8 times on sticky paper to be put on the cars, 4 in black and 4 in white, not knowing what colour my car would be. I took the white ones having a burgundy coloured Jeep and Barb's car was a lighter colour better with the black lettering. Out into the heat for one last time to name my car, the lettering stood out really well. Then it was back to the room for more food and finally bed around 11pm.

Monday 13th July

Race day had finally arrived. There had been no need for an alarm clock this morning, although the plan was to get up at 7am for the 10am start we were up and having cereal at 6am and had been awake for ages. This race was beginning to really scare me. Could I really run in these stunning

temperatures? Surely it was impossible to avoid heat stroke? Would the stomach hold up with all the fluids it would have to take? Would dehydration set in? How would my feet do? I had seen the horror photos of blistered feet. But this was the challenge, this was what I wanted, the distance was 135 miles, I knew I could do this and so that wasn't the challenge, the heat and the hills were the challenge, the basic elements that would be thrown at me and deep down was really excited. I had waited a long time to do this race, I had prepared well, the best I could with what I had, it had cost a fortune to get here, and now it was going to start. I wasn't going to race this one, that would be impossible for my first attempt in such extreme conditions, just a very mediocre goal was to finish in the time limit of 60 hours (that meant a medal and finishers t-shirt) , then of course I had to try to get sub 48 hours to get the buckle, then of course came my overall placing in the women's race, I had this little goal of half the cut off time which meant 30 hours and this should place me in the top five women. Deep down I was also aware of the time William Sichel had run in 2006, he had been a member of the GB 24 hour team and achieved a time of 31 hours and 36 minutes and claimed this as a British Record. There were other forces against me here – poor Bill hates the heat and this was a mobile support crew, nothing like other events he had supported me on – it was like the 24 hour race but instead of sitting stationary with all the supplies around him he would have to work out the back of a car, drive along with things clattering all over the place, stand at the road side and mix drinks – and then have these three Canadian's with him helping out – how would it all work out? Would he get heat stroke? Would he suffer dehydration? Would the crew all get on with Bill? All this had been highlighted in the pre-race meeting. So many un-knowns, so many questions unanswered, how would it really pan out? How could I predict what could possibly happen? It was like being lowered into an arena, with people all around watching, wondering, what would the result be, would I survive to tell the tale.....

This was my proposed schedule for Badwater, no idea how well I would stick to it but it would give me an idea of what my finishing time could be depending on how close I was too it.

Miles	up/down/flat	timing point	segment time/speed	clock	time
0-42	42 miles flat	Stovepipe Wells	8.5 hours (5mph)	18:30	8.5 hrs
42-59	17 miles uphill (5000ft)	Townes Pass	4.5 hours (3.5mph)	23:00	13 hrs
59-72	13 miles down+flat (2500ft)	P Springs	2.5 hours (5mph)	01:30	15.5hrs
72-90	18 miles uphill (2500ft)	Darwin Turn	4.5 hours (4mph)	06:00	20 hrs
90-122	32 miles down+flat (1000ft)	Lone Pine	6 hours(4mph)	12:00	26 hrs
122-135	13 miles uphill (4000ft)	Finish	4 hours (3mph)	16:00	30 hrs

8am and Barb, Isabelle and Mary breezed in. They had done the shopping for the three things I had asked for – ice, orange juice and milk. Bill had run to the shop for the bananas I forgot to ask for (but never ate them). The bags disappeared before me, the plan was to use the Jeep as the main car for all race supplies, Barb's car was for everything else. I couldn't quite believe that all I had to do was sit there and everything got done for me – this was usually me up and all over the place putting everything where it should be, double checking it was in order and nothing had been forgotten. I just lay on the bed keeping hydrated in the cool, you could hear the commotion in the corridor that

had been going for some time. There were three start times – 6am, 8am and 10am. 10am was reserved for the faster runners and had wanted to be on the 10am start as I could never quite extinguish the entire competitive nature inside of me and wanted to see my opposition.

The room was bare, just waiting for me to leave now, there had been no point in leaving earlier than 9am, the 17 mile drive would have little traffic on it other than the runners and there was no point standing around in the heat at the start as there was no shade. Runner's had to check in and be weighed 30 minutes before the start. So on with the kit and down to the Jeep. We all had to squeeze in the Jeep to get to the start. As parking was limited only one car per runner was allowed on the first 17 miles of the course back to Furnace Creek. The back seats had been laid flat for supplies, I got the comfy front seat. The drive began and within 5 minutes saw the first of the 6am wave just approaching Furnace Creek, soon we saw the second wave of 8am runners and somehow Mark Cockbain managed to wave at me and see me in the car, all I could see was lots of runners dressed in white – the name on the Jeep probably gave me away. We arrived at the start and there was barely anywhere left to park, so had no choice but park in one of the two disabled bays temporarily. One last visit to the toilet, kit got soaked in water – from top to bottom I had a white cap with flap on the back, soaked in water and ice on my head under the cap, bandana soaked in water and filled with ice around my neck, stripped off my white t-shirt to soak in water (this had Darlington Building Society logo on main front and back and Spira logo on sleeves), the Moben arm sleeves that were again soaked in water, white Skins leggings sprayed with water, Thorlo Socks and the red Stinger shoes (from Spira, size 6 compared to my normal training size 5). My number was pinned around my waist above and below my bottle carrier and was number 45. I was weighed in with all my kit and shoes on and carrying a water bottle (120lb) and this was written on the back of my number. It was then off for the photo shoot of all the runners and then onto the start line. Isabelle had asked me if I was nervous, I was probably more scared witless than nervous, but also really, really excited and couldn't wait to see the event unfold, she thought I looked very calm.

Stood on the start line I got to the far right hand side, the rules were to run on the left hand side of the road at all times, the cars were all instructed to park only on the right hand side of the road and all four wheels had to be to the right of the white edging line. Bill was hovering and the bottle of water he had given me had already gone just standing around in the heat and he promptly replaced it. I had stood on the right so as not to get tripped in the starting of the event and to find my own space rather than be on the inside and squashed out. I don't know what was going through my mind, I took one last look around me at the dramatic landscape, a big wide desolate valley surrounded by high mountains, no colour, just pale, haze like outlines and sand. The heat was intense, far hotter than anything I had ever experienced, I have raced in Taiwan and Japan when conditions have been hot – one International 100km in Japan had been reported to be 35 degrees and 100% humidity but this felt hotter, I had run across the Libyan Desert for 36 hours, run the Marathon Des Sables in one of the hottest years ever but this was far hotter. Badwater itself is 282 feet below sea level and just has a small pool of very salty water. This is not a town of any kind, just this pool of water, salt flats, a toilet and parking area with information boards.

The countdown began and the journey into the unknown began. Some runners pelted off in the distance like a 10km race and was gob-smacked at this, I had expected a very slow start like the 24

hour event and for runners to be bunched up and gradually find their own space. It was interesting and remember seeing Pam Reed shoot off in the distance – I had read her book (Dean Karnazes was another runner here whose book I had read). Both were previous winners of this race. Jamie Donaldson was another face I recognised from the 24 hour International races, she had been 4th in this year's 24 hour race in Bergamo a couple of months ago and had set the course record here last year in just under 27 hours. I set off and tried to remain calm and settled in as slow as was practical. I felt great, it felt wonderful to be finally started and I was really running this challenging race, I was kind of smiling to myself and it didn't somehow feel real, here I was in this hostile environment with warning signs around about the extreme danger of heat and to avoid the heat of the day between 10am and 4pm and not to exercise and yet here were nearly 90 runners all defying the odds. It was great. The instructions were to stop every 1.5 miles to cool me down and give me drinks. So here goes, the car is there, Isabelle was there with the spray bottle, Bill was there with my drink, Barb was ready to take my hat and get it dunked in water and refilled with ice and Mary sprinted alongside when the hat was ready for putting back on – like clockwork, amazing, all smiles and encouragement and so the race began. It felt a bit like whacky races with all the cars overtaking and stopping and although I could not tell who many of the runners were, the names on the cars were the giveaway and no-one could hide. There had been one male runner dressed as a pink fairy on the start line, I was with him for the first hour or two and then left him behind. The first hour ticked by, then the second, this was really happening, I almost had to pinch myself to believe I was running, my crew were so cheerful who could but smile at them.

A female runner called Lorie came alongside for a bit and chatted, she had run this race in around 32 hours last year so was a good guide mark for me – she went ahead as I stopped for my first “pee stop” shortly after the first hour, there was no privacy out here – to the side of the Jeep was the only object I could squat behind. Everything I did – ate/drank/peed got recorded, no privacy out here.

Although the first 42 miles are virtually flat we did climb past Devil's Golf Course to the Artist's drive exit which was only 70 feet below sea level, then back down to Mushroom Rock at 170 feet below sea level, back to sea level as the first junction came into view and meant Furnace Creek and the first timing point was not far away at 17.4 miles and 165 feet below sea level. My official time here was 2 hours and 49 minutes – I had estimated around the 3 hour mark so was pleased that I wasn't too far off, I wasn't feeling too hot in the slightest, the crew were working very hard to keep me that way, to add to the wet and iced cap and spraying of kit a sponge had now been added so that I could drench my arms and wash my face and head and another was used to douse my back, although the spray gun was doing a great job it must have been hard running alongside on the rough ground at awkward angles spraying me. I had long given up with the sunglasses, the water was getting on them and they were just getting in the way, the cap was keeping the sun out of my eyes quite well.

Although the field had thinned out there were always runners around, always runners in sight and still a constant overtaking of cars. There were now even more cars on the course as at Furnace Creek we could now use the second car and Barb took over the driving for this vehicle. It was after three hours of running that I started my solid food, just one item per hour and started off with a sandwich (about a quarter of a normal sandwich). It was around 4 hours that I had my second “pee” stop, a very good sign that I was drinking enough at present and then shortly after my first

“unofficial stop”, I wasn’t sure if it was a stone I had in my shoe or a blister developing but it was right under the sole of my right heel, not a pleasant place for a blister. My hopes of it being a stone were dashed, it was a blister, nothing major, get it popped and hopefully it won’t develop any further, I used the pin off my number to stab right through it, put the shoe back on and was away again, this was around the 25 mile mark now.

I now got back into relaxing mode and remembered – if you get to Stovepipe Wells you have cracked it – I was now approaching the 30 mile mark and Salt Creek turnoff and 5 hours of running. At this rate I would be at Stovepipe Wells in 7 hours, just 2 hours away, this still just didn’t feel real, nothing major had happened, everything was running like clockwork, Bill was happy, he was getting pampered by our wonderful three ladies and was having a ball, I was still trying to pinch myself to believe this was really happening, everything was far too comfortable, something had to happen, something was going to happen, it just doesn’t work this well for an athlete from the UK to come here in this heat and not have problems. Next thing I knew I kept seeing the vans labelled Pam Reed, surely not, surely I wasn’t catching the master of this event, but yes, there in the distance was the distinctive style I had seen in other international races, Pam Reed and her many pacers. After Furnace Creek you are allowed “pacers” which are athletes to run alongside you to support you, but they must remain to the left of the white line. My crew (not Bill) were all able and willing to pace me but I rather liked running on my own, I liked to be at one with my thoughts and don’t do a lot of talking, but liked to know my crew were around me and it was a great comfort to know they were willing and able to run with me had I needed them.

I had been running along the white line, this is supposed to be better to cool the feet rather than the black tarmac that has been reported to melt shoes. I could feel it was now even hotter than at Badwater but had no idea of the exact temperature, I had heard whispers of 118 degrees at Badwater but nothing confirmed. I wasn’t that far off Stovepipe Wells now and was almost tailing Pam Reed. That same blister was beginning to bug me again, it had obviously started growing again, my feet had been permanently wet from the soaking of the kit, good in some ways as probably kept my feet cooler but the downside is that they were now shrivelled like being in the bath too long. My shoes were really comfy and airy and really didn’t want to change these as didn’t feel they were the problem, it was either the heat and water on the feet or the permanent camber on the road or combination of all these things, but decided to stop and pop this again before overtaking Pam, I didn’t want to overtake just to stop and so did this at just after 6 hours of running. It was now three times the size and had turned into a blood blister, oops! Not a lot I could do about that so another quick stab with the pin, back on with the shoes and off again – “do you want Ibuprofen?” I heard, “no, not yet” was the answer, not in enough pain yet. It was a great moment as I caught and passed Pam, I said “Hi”, but not sure if she responded or not, her pacers were constantly talking to her and had to run very wide to overtake her. Carried on by Devil’s Cornfield and some small sand dunes that were marked (nothing like the dunes in the Sahara on Day 1 of the Marathon des Sables). It was also around this time that I overtook Mark Cockbain, I hadn’t recognised him yet again, he was going ok but was about to hit problems. Mark had done this event several times and is one of only a handful of runners to have done “the double”, now there’s food for thought!!

Stovepipe Wells came into sight, 41.9 miles in 6 hours 54 minutes, this was just incredible, 6 miles an hour and 90 minutes ahead of my schedule, I looked around in disbelief, I had cracked it, but the blister was beginning to worry me as the mountains began to appear ahead, there was now just about 5000ft of climbing and 17 miles of winding roads. Stovepipe Wells was right at sea level and Townes Pass at 58.7 miles was 4965 feet. I decided to relent and take some Ibuprofen to settle into the climbing (and had yet another pee). Pam took me back and forged ahead, I just relaxed and settled into a nice steady rhythm. The heat of the sun was beginning to fade now and with each 1000 ft climbed the temperature was dropping – this is why they say that reaching Stovepipe Wells is the hardest section. This road was warning to turn off the air conditioning and remember Martin Deitrich telling me the story of driving through the mountains and having to stop his car every 10 minutes as it kept overheating. The Jeep had already done this journey once and as it had to keep stopping for me didn't think it would be a problem. Onwards and upwards and now the strong winds began. It had been almost still at the start and the wind had been getting gradually stronger on the approach to Stovepipe Wells, it had been quite a pleasant wind initially (the kind of hair dryer blowing in your face I had heard of feeling) but now it was quite strong and getting harder to battle against with the gradient. 7pm had marked the official wearing of night kit – fluorescent, reflective kit with flashing red lights front and back.

I had taken my hat off now, I hate wearing hats, but as the sun was retreating there was not the need to keep quite so wet- I was still having a spray down and soaking my face and head with the sponge as it was still quite a high temperature and climbing was creating a lot of internal heat. The signs came and went 1000ft, 2000ft, 3000ft, 4000ft and was still climbing and running well despite the fierce head wind. The darkness set in shortly after 8pm and had to put a head torch on now, didn't really need it for seeing as such as the moonlight was quite strong but it was difficult for the crew to see me so it felt like having a hat on again and it was easier to see the odd rock or stone that had fallen on the road here. In the dark I missed the sign marking the Townes Pass Summit at 4965ft and 58.7 miles of running, but soon knew when I was running down hill as the tenderness on the right foot screamed at me – it now felt like the whole of the sole of the right heel was a complete blister (and indeed it was) and really just could not bear to put this on the ground, the pain was too much, instead I was trying to run on my toes downhill!! Not a smooth running action but at least I was still moving, it was quite worrying have such pain at such an early stage, I knew things had gone just too smoothly but didn't ever think it would be blisters that would stop me – well not blisters – just one blister but a very big one!! I thought back to the Marathon des Sables again, one of the Sandblasters team – Paul Mott, had both his feet exactly like this after 3 days of running, the 4th long stage he had to admit defeat half way through and was hardly able to walk after that, I now know what pain he was going through – but he had this on both feet, heels and forefoot and was carrying a pack!! While on the subject of the MDS again – it appears that Mary had run this event last year too – and guess what – our tents were just a few yards apart and must have seen each other many times – I can even remember her Aussie tent mates that I talked to (and borrowed a lighter off at one stage) – she too had been the only female in the tent – such a small world that we could possibly have met before!!

Well the miles ticked by, the arm sleeves and bandana came off and the spray downs with water ceased, it was still very warm but not baking hot, the elevation signs were going down – 4000ft,

3000ft, 2000ft and down to 1640ft before reaching Panamint Springs at 1970ft and 72.3 miles. Looking back at the results and time splits now I was 28th place at Furnace Creek, 11th at Stovepipe Wells and now still in 11th place at Panamint Springs with 13 hours 57 minutes (approaching midnight). I had maintained my 90 minutes ahead of schedule that I got at Stovepipe Wells, but still kept thinking something else was going to happen, this was a very long hard race, one mountain range conquered, still two more to go and yet another day in the heat. I knew I was still well hydrated but was much easier to go for a "pee" in the darkness and didn't need the protection of the Jeep now.

Panamint Springs behind me and it was straight into the next climb, Darwin turnoff was 18 miles away and an elevation of 5050ft. I heard the warnings that parking would be difficult on the next section as there was limited places and there were still quite a few cars around, in fact it was the cars that made the next section all the more amazing, as I walked and ran up the next mountain range, although it was dark all you could see was a long streak of flashing red lights from the cars. The rules were that headlights had to be on at all times the car engine was running (day and night) and that four way flashers had to be on when parked, most of the indicators here were red as opposed to the orange we have in the UK, Barb's car was one of the few that did have orange flashers that made my life a little easier for picking them out (there was one other close by that deceived me every now and then). The higher I climbed and the more switch backs made the more magnificent the line of red lights became, only on this night in Death Valley could you have witnessed this, I felt lucky to be here and experience this and I looked ahead at the next switchback and the red lights above me in the distance.

It was while on this section that I finally had enough of the hourly sandwiches I had been eating from the 3 hour mark, I was struggling to eat them and needed something a bit more moist so opted for the custard now, I was also struggling a bit with tiredness, not something I usually suffer with at night time but my body clock had been thrown out completely with the 8 hour difference and had woken really early most mornings and struggled with sleep. There were no markers on this bleak road and so had to keep asking how far I had run as knew Darwin turnoff was around 90 miles. Although I felt as though I was pestering I got the reassurance from the crew that was nice to hear "you are so low maintenance", compared to other athletes I requested little, there was a runner close by that was getting weighed very often and given this, that and everything else, I was just water one stop, carbohydrate drink the next and food once an hour (and the soaking of course). My other requests were few and far between and not stressful.

The sun just started coming up behind me as the final approach to Darwin turnoff was made and could finally ditch the head torch, I was disappointed I could not see the sun rise behind me, but did take the odd glance behind to see. Darwin turnoff was nothing spectacular, just a small gazebo tent by the road side, reached in 19 hours and 01 minutes and 13th place, just one hour ahead of my schedule. Then the downhill and flat began, all 32 miles of it as the heat began again. Within 3 miles I was in agony, the right heel was just so tender and the left one was now going the same way, I was trying to tip toe down but the tenderness was increasing, there was no way I wasn't going to finish this but it was going to be a painful affair and could see the clock ticking against me. I stopped to take a look at my feet and change my socks, they were as expected, the whole of the right heel was

loose skin and shrivelled and white like trench foot. I was still very happy with my shoes and reluctant to change them as still didn't think they were the problem, the toe box was spacious, there were hardly any blisters on my toes – just one toe had a blister and there was one to the side of the left forefoot – probably more to do with running the entire way on a camber.

Slowly, painfully, taking more Ibuprofen I continued, tip toeing gingerly to start with then a little splutter of very slow running, the rest of the legs felt great, quads and hamstrings felt good, stomach was comfortable, although was going off most of my food now, I had tried a mouthful of cous-cous but this had gone off in the heat and did eat a couple of pieces of ginger cake and the date and walnut loaf I had got a Furnace Creek. As Lone Pine was not so far now Barb and Mary drove off in search of breakfast while Bill and Isabelle cheerfully attended my needs. It was shortly after the 100 miles that I really needed “the toilet”, there were very few cars around now, the runners were really spaced out with barely anyone in sight, it was still very early in the morning so chanced my luck just a few yards off the road side – didn't really want to put the crew through this next to the Jeep!! How unfortunate was I?? There had been no cars by for ages, finally pulled my tights down for the business and one car was approaching – too late now, it was a Sheriff's car!! How embarrassing was that!! I guess he looked but there was no point in telling me off – where else could I go? That done I never saw another car for a good 20 minutes, my luck was running out.

The next 30 miles were a long hot painful walk, hobble, stop, change socks, change shoes (into yellow Stinger Elite), dunk feet, change socks again very slow affair, overtook another runner, also got overtaken by a runner. That was Lorie that had overtaken me long ago, had not even realised I was back in front – Isabelle did inform me I was third lady, but it was just as Lorie was approaching. It was almost the last section now and although I could not see Lone Pine I knew I was closing in and if there was anything left in me I had to give it a shot now, this was the only time I could really have a race, I tried to focus, I tried to run, I tried to put the pain in my feet out of my mind, I was frustrated at stopping to cool my feet but it seemed to do the trick and keep me running a bit more so was worth the 10 minutes or so it took that that I could run rather than walk. Barb and Mary returned with breakfast for Bill and Isabelle – the omelette of Bill's looked good, indeed it was as I ate a few mouthfuls for him. The last suggestion made to me was as my feet were now so wet from the continuous soakings again (the hat, bandana, arm sleeves were all back on and back into yesterday's routine of ice under the cap and wet clothing) why did I bother taking my shoes off to dunk my feet, why not dunk my feet with the shoes on to save time – why didn't I think of that? Saves loads of time and did the trick perfectly, so there was no need to stop before the finish now, just fight it out, the quicker I get there the quicker I can finish and the quicker I can finish the pain. Was I still enjoying it? Why yes!! It was fantastic!! I still looked around me and found it incredible that so much had gone well, the crew were just perfection. I had come here for a challenge, I had come here for an experience, this was all just part of it and was still in my element, the crew were all incredibly happy and still having a ball so why shouldn't I? I now knew I would finish, the battle against the elements was won and looked like I would achieve all my initial goals – I was going to finish, I was going to finish in the top 5 women and, although I wasn't going to get 30 hours, I wasn't going to be too far out and could still make the fastest time ever by a British Athlete, there was lots still to fight for and being uphill the feet shouldn't be so bad, that's even more good news.

I could finally see the final climb up Mount Whitney with the steep hairpins and a small area below that must be Lone Pine, on and on, I was running again and fighting every step, the pain was being blocked and I was on a high. Lone Pine came and went (27 hours 24 minutes and 14th place) and had only lost one place since Darwin turnoff, my time was now around 90 minutes behind my planned schedule, I knew I had lost time but the goal was now to beat that best British time. The final climb was hard, I had written 4000ft in 13 miles in my schedule, Lone Pine was 3610ft, the finish was 8360ft, so that was getting close to 5000ft in climbing, my schedule had 4 hours to do this section, so that made 31 hours 24 minutes and would just shave a few minutes off the 31 hours 36 minutes by William Sichel.

I battled on, it was just far too steep to run which I had known beforehand but certainly wasn't slouching, the arms were pumping and was striding out the best I could – I can be a pretty good walker when I want to be, the drinks were still going down and just the odd Ritz biscuit now. Barb and Mary had to go straight to the top from Lone Pine as only one car is allowed for support on this section with it being narrower and more restricted parking spaces. But the good news for them was that they got there in time to see Jamie Donaldson win again in 27 hours 20 minutes and take 5th place overall. Second lady in 7th place was Pam Reed with 29 hours 03 minutes, third lady in 12th place was Lorie Hutchinson with 30 hours 23 minutes. Sharon Gayter meanwhile was doing her best, savouring the moment, taking in the glorious scenery that stretched out for miles and miles, head down and there were some curious signs – I had got used to seeing the Union Jack appear on the most weird of places but now, neatly written on paper, held down in the sand by stones were around 10 messages about 10 feet apart alongside the road, can't remember what they all said but all highly encouraging – along the lines of - my performance was awesome and inspiring, I was an incredible person, it was a privilege to crew for me, they had all been proud to crew for me, my ability to fight the pain was amazing, Isabelle had written them and taken the time to put these in the sand, how wonderful, it really did the job in perking me up, the last message was one from Bill, I could tell he had written it as the hand writing wasn't so neat, but just to tell me how proud he was as ever, he had been just champion too!!

The temperature was dropping slightly as the heights were reached and guessed the air was just a bit thinner at around twice the height of Ben Nevis, but on and on, a surprise last checkpoint at 131 miles before the last major hairpin, Bill and Isabelle went straight to the finish shortly after this, I overtook one last runner from the 8am start who was really struggling, Hung-Kwong Ng, the last 4 miles took him nearly 2 hours!! It was a long winding road and had forgotten just how far this last section was. All the cars coming down were bibbing and waving – many were the earlier finishers, Lorie came down as I approached the last mile and got a hug out the car window.

Around yet another corner and again, just where was that finish? Finally I saw Bill running towards me with two bottles of water in his hands, yes, the drink had gone long ago so long was this last section. "How far?" I whined "ooh, still about a mile" he hardly dare tell me, more words of encouragement about how proud he was of my achievement and that the ladies were just around the corner. More shouting and cheering and the smile was back on my face, this crew had just been fantastic, the best ever, they had just understood me so well with such little communication beforehand, did everything just right, knew exactly what to say to me and what not to say, never

once put a foot out of place, had kept me cheerful throughout and gave Bill the time of his life, it was absolutely exhilarating the last half mile as we all walked along together, it had been an amazing adventure, a real journey and the event had lived up to all I had expected of it – a real tough challenge.

The finish is round the next hairpin, oops! No, it wasn't, may be the next one? I'll wait and see until I see that finish line. Finally another hairpin and there was the finishing tent, one last effort to run with me and crew all finishing together and the Union Jack held high, unfortunately we didn't have a Canadian flag for Mary, Barb and Isabelle. The finishing banner was held across the line for me to break, a big hug from all while I had to fight back the tears of joy, it had been just fantastically painful, unforgettable, incredible and had crossed the line 4th lady, 14th overall and achieved the fastest time ever by a British athlete – 31 hours and 12 minutes, just heaven, it had been and incredibly phenomenal event, not one I will forget in a long time.

So what to do now? Well there was the race director Chris Kostman to present me with my medal, finishers buckle and finishers t-shirt (made from Bamboo), then there were the photos – of me, the crew and Chris Kostman. A little sit down for a few minutes. Well we might as well just go, the sooner I get back the sooner I can get cleaned up and off my feet. A short stagger back to the Jeep and then Isabelle popped in wanting her drinks bottle – she was running back to Lone Pine, I thought she was joking but she wasn't – I obviously hadn't worn her out!! What a drive back down, watching the poor runners still coming up. I couldn't stop smiling and believing that I had really done this and all I got was the "odd blister or two", no heat stroke, no sickness, the crew had a lot to do with this, they must have stopped around a hundred times to look after me, they had been absolutely faultless and couldn't believe how lucky I had been to have a crew that I didn't even know do such a good job, I was immensely proud of them as they were of me.

Back at Lone Pine and the Dow Villa Hotel car park was filling up with competitors cars, there were only two floors at this hotel and didn't we just have to be on the upper floor with a flight of stairs! No problem. I showered while the crew sorted some bags for me and then went to the medical centre to get "my big blister" looked at. Jon Vonhoff was the footcare specialist – I had read his book "Fixing Your Feet", but there was little he could do, the blister was popped so it's just a case of hold the skin on as long as you can while the tenderness underneath subsides. Pretty much what I thought. Back to the room and Bill was there, was just becoming a bit light headed and needed some food – fast food in Lone Pine – only one choice – McDonalds just opposite. So a Big Mac and chips later and was feeling just fine. Bill had his second McDonald's of the day – hadn't realised but when I came through Lone Pine I knew it had been a long "1.5 miles" but they had gone ahead to get their lunch – a McDonalds. It was now dark again and little more to do other than settle down for the night, content in my thoughts that I had survived Death Valley and all it had thrown at me.

Wednesday 14th July

Bill finally roused slightly after 8am, I had been tossing and turning all night with my feet on fire. More cereal and tea in bed and it wasn't until trying to get to the toilet that I realised I really couldn't walk. I had been so used to running on my toes as the heels were just too painful to touch

but my right calf in particular had now completely seized up now that I had stopped running and was not going to let me go any further, I had to literally crawl to the toilet – but at least I could do it in private without the world (and Sheriff) to see!! Today was really a day of lounging around and reflection anyway. Bill and the rest of the crew went back down to sort out the rest of the kit and sort out “ours and theirs” that had been used during the event, the names were taken off the cars and the clean up process began. Bill just popped in intermittently to make me more tea!! His duties were not over yet – even managed to get a wonderful massage off him – the calf couldn’t take much but sure I got a benefit from it. Late morning I repacked all the cases for the journey home and double checked there was nothing I shouldn’t have, lunch was chicken and noodles in my room and finally after lunch I was brave enough to venture out.

I had heard that during the night there had been a forest fire at the immediate finish and the new finish was at 131 miles at the surprise checkpoint, but that as the road was about to reopen again any 131 milers were allowed to go up and finish the remaining 4 miles if they wished to do so. The clock was still ticking though and their time would be the official time they crossed the line (but a mention would be given to how long they had been delayed due to the fire). I would have felt cheated had I only done the 131 miles so was pretty glad I got there when I did – would I have gone up and done the last 4 miles had I been affected? Of course I would have done – but don’t think the rest would have helped, more likely would have hindered the state I am walking in today – did I say walking? Well hobbling and hanging on to Bill for stability more like it.

The first person I met on achieving getting down the stairs was Keith, he was one of the British men that lived in the US, he was the one dressed as a fairy. His thoughts were that he would never do it again and couldn’t understand why anyone would want to do it – it was like sticking your head in a pizza oven and was not fun!! Well I had kind of guessed that was what it would be like but for me that was the challenge – could you stick your head in a pizza oven and still run? In the Grand Canyon there had been signs that showed you the temperature and read “this is the temperature your brain is being fried at! .” Well my brain doesn’t seem any worse for the cooking it’s had, I can still write and still run so all is well.

I finally went out to relax by the pool (in the shade I might add) and finally get to know my crew (Isabelle was returning from yet another run). I bumped into the Doctor, Lisa, she was a previous runner of the event – she was full of congratulations for me and said she had seen me out running but thought I was fine as I was always “smiling”, good to know it wasn’t just in my head that I was happy!! Although there had been a few visits to the Emergency Room at the hospital (and had seen loads of emergency flashing lights around the course) all had recovered and were well.

The crew had done all this work for me but other than a few emails and the briefest of meetings beforehand I really hadn’t had much chance to chat. It appeared that I certainly had not put them off wanting to run this themselves, Barb definitely had no desire to run this but was up for supporting, both Isabelle and Mary were now even more intent on wanting to complete this event – so good luck to them and really hope the good job they done on supporting me this year will go a long way in getting them a place in next year’s race (I did put a word in to Chris at the finish – but later heard so did just about every other finisher that had a crew that wanted to run). The afternoon

was great getting to know my crew a little better, if there was one time you really needed a spot on crew this was the time, I still found it hard to believe how well they got on with the job and understood me so well – apparently they wanted to know my birthday – they had guessed, rightly so, that I am a Scorpion and guessed that from my emails!!

Later that evening was the big pizza party – somehow couldn't imagine many runners would be dancing – it kicked off at 6pm at the local school – no alcohol allowed!! Bill drove me there although it was probably only a 400m walk, my excuse we needed to fill the Jeep up with petrol for the journey home the next day!! Another quick shower and change and off to the party. Well I thought it started at 6pm but many had been here at 5pm and we got there just in time for the second delivery of pizza, it was excellent and loaded the plate up high and devoured the lot!! Soon the post race event began. First a film of the race – a good couple of shots of me and crew dousing me down with water, a quick report on how the race had gone and the problems with the forest fire and finishers. There were to be two finishers times for 131 miles and 135 miles – now can be seen easily on the results who did what, a salute to all the crew and finally all the runners out at the front for recognition. A final interview with first man – Brazilian Marco Farinazzo (23 hours 39 minutes), first lady Jamie and the youngest ever finisher, Nickademus Hollon, 19 years old in 33 hours 21 minutes – now that was good running from a youngster!!

There was then after drinks in the local drinking place, but as it was likely to be very busy and I was still very wobbly with my feet starting to swell I retreated to my room. My crew got a few cans and found a quite spot to celebrate and dream of next year.

Thursday 16th July

The last drive back though Death Valley and wave the place good bye. We all left at 6am, Barb and Mary had a 17 hour drive home, and Isabelle sneaked a lift with us to Las Vegas airport to fly back as she had work the next day. It was a long journey home, a long overnight flight to Gatwick and over 7 hours to drive home on Friday evening, to be welcomed by heavy rain, I was back in England alright.

At home and the first I saw were the congratulations balloons and banners in the porch for all to see. Inside were even more – and one big massive “congratulations Sharon, 135 miles” that had been intended to go on the front wall of the house but apparently the heavy rain had prevented this, was somehow stuck across everything in the living room – there are still there now as I write this.

Reflections

So now how am I feeling? What are the thoughts and reflections on this one. The big flame of desire has been extinguished, I have been there, done that, got the t-shirt, but there is still a little glow that still says – well you could go faster now you have done it and race it, and “what about the double?” Who knows, there are many more races still on the agenda, many more places to go, I doubt that any of the others can be more extreme than this one, just different challenges. I was blessed with such a wonderful crew they would be hard to replace or get another crew quite as good as Mary, Isabelle and Barb. They kept Bill highly amused and looked after him as well as me. Their

constant enthusiasm just bubbled over and always seemed so cheerful and continuously spurred me on with their encouraging words and actions. My preparation had been as good as I could have expected, my feet were really the only point that let me down and will struggle to know what I could have done to have prevented this, may be taping the whole of the sole of the foot was the answer. I had practised in my conservatory with all my shoes and the Spira Stinger shoes were definitely best for me, the only thing that did make them slightly better was a change of socks, not the change of shoes, I wore thick Thorlo socks to start with, my second pair were thinner and noticed the difference and soon changed back to thicker socks again. May be the point at which the cold water sprays stopped during the evening would have been the point to change into clean dry socks. The Stinger shoes being a very light mesh top dried out very quickly and now home the white walking Spira shoes are definitely the softest, cushioning shoes for recovery.

It is worth noting – there are no prizes for the event, the prize is the glory and prestige of finishing against all odds, medals, t-shirts and buckles are the prizes, only for those that accomplish this feat beyond all imagination, it truly is an inspirational challenge, a really awesome event, there certainly isn't a hotter race and doubt there are many more challenging courses of this distance so has to rate up there with the toughest ever.

For me my top three amazing races before this were:

No 1 Libyan Challenge – 190km unsupported, unmarked run with GPS through the desert carrying all supplies – 36 hours of hot running, challenging course and the most amazing scenery and rock formations ever.

No 2 Verdon Canyon – 4 day stage race, certainly my hottest ever before Badwater, sheer cliff faces to the bottom and top of the canyon, unsupported again but an amazing adventure, probably made all the tougher for me as had just come back from injury and was not fully fit and was second lady which made me fight that bit harder!!

No 3 Trans-alpine race – 7 days across high alpine routes, from Germany to Austria, Switzerland and finishing in Italy, an amazing high level route, was running with a partner who was slower than me so never really “slogged” this one, just had a wonderful time admiring the panorama, something you can only ever see on foot. Great atmosphere every evening too.

So where do I place Badwater in these? – unfortunately all the above have far more amazing scenery than Badwater, all of these are “unsupported” races in that water is only supplied at checkpoints and you can't have a support crew. Having a support crew does make the race so much easier. I have done some tough International races in my time – River Shimanto in Japan was reported to be 100% humidity and 35 degrees heat and that was almost 50km uphill in the mountains and 50km downhill, Taiwan was similar, not quite as hot but a challenging 25km that was up for 12km and down for 12km on each loop, but was this tougher? Yes, it certainly was, to climb nearly 5000ft after 122 miles, to climb over 12000ft in total, to slog out three gruelling long distance non-stop climbs, to suffer the heat and blistered feet and consuming gallons and gallons of drink sloshing around inside and avoiding dehydration and heat stroke – yes, got to say this probably was my toughest race ever and was certainly my biggest challenge ever against the elements.

So what next, what can be tougher, what can be more extreme – who knows but I will try to find something. The next one for now is a more sedate, boring 24 hour event, but it will be the first ever Commonwealth event as the race takes a further step into recognition. The event will be held in Keswick, England on 17th – 18th September, my selection has already come through for England as part of the team and ranked as Number 1 in the Commonwealth last year there is a lot to stand up for. England will be hoping for individual and team gold on this one, so no pressure!!

I had hoped to run the Himalayan 100 mile stage race this November but I think finances are having a crack down and the more expensive events will have to be put on hold. Next year will probably be a few more of the British ultras unless a sponsor can be found. Spira will continue to give me footwear and Mannatech my nutritional support for which I am truly grateful. Darlington Building Society have been a great sponsor for the last few years giving a life line that would have even restricted me from competing in Badwater. But all good things must come to an end and the financial services in this country have taken a real battering so guess this will be the last from them.

Just a few thoughts and memories to end on

The “defying nature” element that I was really running across Death Valley.

Reading Frank McKinney’s “The White Line From Hell to Heaven”

The feeling running to Stovepipe Wells having “cracked it” on the hardest and hottest section.

The great feeling that both Bill and the crew were having a wonderful time (backed up by the forever smiling faces).

The “hair dryer” blowing hard and hot in my face on the climb to Townes Pass.

The sight of a line of red lights down and up the mountain behind me after Panamint Springs.

Bill laughing at the antics of my hilarious crew (didn’t tell you but they put a sign out for Lorie pointing her to the wrong turn-off and Mount Whitney 200 miles!!)

Getting caught going “al fresco” by the Sheriff.

The desolate feeling and pain between Darwin turnoff and Lone Pine.

That long, lonely white line that I followed for miles and miles.

The adrenalin rush climbing Mount Whitney to the finish.

Another British Record and many goals achieved.

The pain and inability to walk the next day!!

Getting to know my new friends Barb, Mary and Isabelle – AFTER the race!!

I have conquered and survived the 135 miles Badwater run across Death Valley – that memory will live with me forever.....