



## ADVENTURECORPS AT 40 YEARS— A PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL HISTORY

Founded in 1984 by yours truly, AdventureCORPS® has made its name producing the world's toughest endurance races in dramatic, remote locations that few people would ever visit, let alone run or bike across. Held under the Badwater® banner, AdventureCORPS events have allowed runners and bicyclists to explore the Death Valley, Salton Sea, Cape Fear, Mojave Desert, and Nevada outback regions in the USA, as well as the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, Mustang region of Nepal, Yunnan Province of China, and the Republic of Artsakh. In all, AdventureCORPS and I have now produced more than 170 endurance sports events!

### ***But how did this all get started?***

Please indulge me a little bit as I take you on a trip down memory lane, as it was 40 years ago that this whole AdventureCORPS enterprise began, which led to my taking over the Badwater Ultramarathon 25 years ago!

*(And now I will somehow boil 40 years of history down to about 2000 words!)*

I got my start early in ultra sports as an athlete and as an event organizer. I was a junior at Glendora (CA) High School in 1984 when my journey began. As fate would have it, I was inspired by the "Race Across America" bicycle race – begun in 1982 – and I was mentored by its founder, John Marino, the "godfather of ultracycling." (I met him in the fall of 1983; he saw something in me and took me under his wing.)

I set the first ever world ultra cycling record for riding against the clock from San Francisco City Hall to Los Angeles City Hall on April 17-18, 1984. At age 17, I put together the route, solicited sponsors (racing bike, clothes, shoes, helmet, nutrition products, and cash), marketed the event, got media coverage, and organized the support. Now four decades later, I offer my special thanks to my first supporters in this endeavour: my support crew comprised of my parents Wayne and Shelby Kostman and my friend Doug Campbell. I was also accompanied by a Race Official from the Ultra Marathon Cycling Association, Mark Straley, who oversaw and certified my effort. I covered the 472 miles in 32 hours, 13 minutes. I had set a record, and I had produced my first event!

A month later John Marino put me to work on the race staff of his 750-mile Race Across America qualifying event, the John Marino Open. I was literally learning about organizing ultra sports on the open roads of America from the master, the man who invented the



1984: Age 17, at Los Angeles City Hall, after cycling the 472 miles from San Francisco in 31 hours, 31 minutes. The birth of AdventureCORPS!





1984: Age 17, yours truly on left, with my mentor John Marino (far right) and two other race staff working at the the 750-mile 1984 John Marino Open.

whole idea. It was a privilege, and I was over the moon. Still 17, I had now worked at my first professional event, and the wheels were in motion for what would transpire over the next forty years.

As records are meant to be broken, my SF-LA record was shattered just one week after I had set it. Not to be outdone, I broke it back a year later on my 18th birthday in 1985, with a time of 22 hours, 38 minutes. (My brother Keith was on the support crew that time!) A month after that – and two weeks before graduating from high school – I placed 12th in the 750-mile John Marino Open, and and qualified to enter that year's Race Across America.

In that summer of 1985, I was preparing to head off to U.C. Berkeley. I was not quite ready for the transcontinental race, so Marino recruited me for his race staff. I had the front row seat and the most pressure-filled job – outside of Marino, the Race Director – as I oversaw Jonathan Boyer, the first American to compete in the Tour De France just two years prior, and who would now win the 1985 Race Across America in world record time. Over those nine days I barely slept between Huntington Beach and Atlantic City as I kept a watchful eye on Boyer and his crew, and dealt with law enforcement officials, race route detours, inclement weather, and the effects of extreme sleep deprivation on everyone from racers, to support crew and staff.

1986 was another year of heavy racing, another year in college, and another year as the lead race official at the Race Across America, and then in 1987 I entered as a competitor in the 3127-mile transcontinental race. Over 10 days, 23 hours, and 58 minutes I raced my bicycle from San Francisco to Washington, D.C., placing 9th overall and 3rd rookie at age 20, becoming the youngest finisher ever. This was the greatest experience of my life and completely changed my perception of what's possible. It was this which really put me on the path of providing others the opportunity to have that kind of life-changing experience!



1987: Age 20, with my support crew, at the Race Across America finish line (Brother Keith on the far left; Mom Shelby on the far right. My friend Doug Campbell - to my left, holding a camera - is on the Badwater 135 race staff this year!)

"Chasing the horizon" became my vision and motivation as I applied my endurance talents to more than cycling events. Immersing myself fully in the wide world of ultra sports, I competed in events as diverse as three 100-mile snowshoe running races on the Iditarod Trail across the Alaskan wilderness, the Triple Ironman triathlon in France, the 6.5-mile Skaha Lake Ultra Swim in British Columbia, the 10km Bridge to Bridge Swim in San Francisco, the Escape from Alcatraz Triathlon, six Ironman Triathlons, an Ultraman-distance triathlon in Vermont, the 100th anniversary Boston Marathon, and many other endurance races.

From that first year in 1984, and then throughout all these years of competing, I never lost sight of my true path and calling, and continued organizing events for others.



*Furnace Creek 508 racer David Holt. Image by Badwater legend Ian Parker.*



*1993: Age 26, en route to finishing my first 100-mile ultramarathon foot race, on snowshoes on Alaska's Iditarod Trail, self-supported with just two checkpoints along the route.*



*1993: Age 27, sprint finish with Gunther Teichmann of Germany, after 78.6 miles of running (preceded by 7.2 mile of swimming and 336 miles of cycling) at the Triple Ironman distance "World Challenge of Endurance" in Le Fontanil, France. I became close friends with the organizers and joined their race staff as a French-English interpreter the next year.*



This included working for prestigious organizations at the highest level, from the Race Across America, where I became a race director at age 22, to the Los Angeles Marathon, where I created a bike event to celebrate the tenth anniversary LA Marathon, convincing the Mayor of Los Angeles, Richard Riordan, to ride the event with a celebrity team that included Bruce Jenner, John Marino, and other sports luminaries.

As for Death Valley, I first went there in May of 1987 at age 20, but I wasn't there to tourist; I broke the record for a south to north to south double-crossing of Death Valley by bicycle. Somewhere there is a photo of me with my bike in the night at the Badwater Basin sign as I stopped there briefly for the photo op. (Little did I know how many more times I would return to that hallowed spot...)

Three years later in 1990, at age 23, I graduated from U.C. Berkeley with an archaeology degree, and entered the Berkeley graduate program. At this time, John Marino handed me the reins to the small ultra cycling race that would become known as Furnace Creek 508. From a humble field of just 25 racers that first year, I grew "The 508" to 249 racers at the final edition in 2013. It became the biggest and most influential ultra cycling event outside of the Race Across America.

**Side note:** I stayed at UC Berkeley for a total of ten years, earning multiple archaeology degrees and working on, or leading, expeditions to Pakistan, United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Egypt.

**Fun fact:** In 1991 I was actually invited to compete in the Badwater 135! I had a long list of ultracycling races on my resumé, plus one Ironman Triathlon. At the same time, I was offered the chance to direct a three-day ultra triathlon stage race in British Columbia. I chose the meager paycheck – and the chance to live in the Okanagan Valley for the summer – over the chance to run Badwater 135. (To a large degree, I regret that choice, but that's another story. Life is a learning experience.)

In 1999, the opportunity to take over the Badwater 135 Ultramarathon presented itself, when the Hi-Tec Sports USA shoe company – which had organized the race since its second edition in 1988 – decided to get out of hosting running events and had also stopped producing "Badwater"-branded shoes. They invited me out to come spectate the 1999 race and be introduced to the competitors as the new organizer.

Incredibly, under the Hi-Tec corporation, there was no Badwater website, no known path to entry, a race staff of literally just two people, no timing checkpoints, no medical support, no race officials, no webcast, and no media coverage. (I know, it's hard to believe, given the millions of dollars potentially behind it! But the race really only existed as a means to market shoes.)



2000: Chris with Angelika Castaneda - 1999 Badwater 135 + 1999 Furnace Creek 508 finisher - at the 2000 Badwater 135.

In 2000 I embarked on my journey of hosting the world's toughest foot race: It was this year that the giant, multi-million dollar, multi-national company handed off the event to one guy working from his laptop on his tiny kitchen table in an even tinier apartment.

I was that one lone guy, who worked my butt off and had learned a heck of a lot about hosting races on the open roads of North America over the previous 15 years. I had also steadily built up a team of seasoned ultra sports veterans who loved working at these amazing events. It was my mission to give this event the world-class production – and international exposure – that it deserved.

And so it was that this small race of about 25 mostly American runners would begin to rise from obscurity to become the absolute pinnacle event in the world of ultra running.

The very first Badwater 135 hosted by us at AdventureCORPS was in July of 2000. No foreigners had won the race since the first edition in 1987, but in 2000 the top five finishers were from Russia, Slovenia, Japan, Russia, and Russia. With sixty-nine runners representing 11 nations on the start line, 49 finished officially, while both the men's and women's course records were shattered by Russian amateur runners. The modern era of Badwater 135 had begun!

A decade went by and the event began to evolve into what it is today. Each year, it got bigger, more international, more coveted, and more competitive. Today the Badwater Family is stronger, bigger, and more diverse than ever: The roster each year features runners from 20 to 25 American states, and representing 20 to 25 nations. It's been won overall by women three times. Runners from 18 to 77 have finished, as have blind runners, deaf runners, runners with prosthetic legs and arms, and runners from sixty-three nations have taken their finisher buckles back to their homeland!

There is just one continuous glaring problem each year as the Badwater 135 Application Review Committee sends out invitations: We can only invite 100 athletes to compete!

This found me pondering how to share the Badwater experience with more athletes and from a broader base. And so, Badwater Salton Sea, born in 2013, and Badwater Cape Fear, born in 2014, came to fruition as a way to grow the Badwater brand, experience, and family.

Last year we celebrated ten years of Badwater Salton Sea, an 81-mile team ultra event like no other on the planet and a “mini” Badwater 135 in terms of low-to-high geography, extreme weather, and mandatory support crew.



*2015 Badwater Salton Sea - the Team Ultra.*

And this year we celebrated ten years of Badwater Cape Fear, our “(B)east Coast Badwater” race in North Carolina which has become our new home and at which many now well-known Badwater runners have launched their careers on the 50km or 51mi race course.



*The 2019 Badwater Cape Fear gets under way.*

These sister races have quickly become must-do races with their own individual identities and reputations, while sharing the three main hallmarks of all Badwater races:

- 1) A dramatic, gorgeous location which most people wouldn't otherwise visit.
- 2) Top level competition with a diverse race field from all over the USA and across the globe, but with intentionally small fields to encourage both camaraderie and time alone on the race course to facilitate what I call “exploring the inner and outer universes.”
- 3) The highest level of professional event production with an exacting eye for detail and a laser focus on the athletes first and foremost while working in close collaboration with local partners.

Badwater went virtual in 2021 and the response has been phenomenal ever since! As other virtual races came and went, Badwater 267 VR has flourished and become The Badwater Way to start the New Year, laying down a foundation for a season of success. The virtual experience is fun and interactive while bringing all three Badwater race courses to life, and the private Strava Club provides an awesome venue for the growing Badwater family to build camaraderie.

It was my background in archaeology and love of travel, history, languages, and “foreign” cultures that eventually led to AdventureCORPS launching international events under the Badwater banner. These included Badwater Presents Mustang Trail



Race in Nepal in 2015, an eight-day trail stage race held in the little-known Mustang region of Nepal at elevations from 10,000 to 14,500 feet (3000-4500m.) My brother Keith and I even got to participate in Nepal!



The competitors - including Chris Kostman - gather at the start line of the eight-day Mustang Trail Race in Nepal.

The following year, 2016, I was hired by Explore China to help develop and co-race direct the inaugural Badwater Presents Mt. Gaoligong Ultra in China. Held in the Yunnan Province of southwestern China, this was a 104-mile (168km) mountain trail ultra through history and time. It was a remarkable experience.



Chris Kostman and his fellow race staff at the conclusion of the 2016 Mt. Gaoligong Ultra.

Many of you know I spent five years developing a six-day stage race across the Republic of Artsakh, a place and people that will always be close to my heart. Sadly – with runners from ten nations set to compete – the inaugural event in 2020 was canceled due to Covid. And then, horrifically, a war perpetrated by Azerbaijan led to the forced displacement of 120,000 Armenians from their homeland, a travesty of the grandest scale. Artsakh is no longer, and the “Artsakh Ultra” will never come to life.



The “We Are Our Mountains” sculpture in Stepanakert, Artsakh was featured on the Artsakh Ultra buckle.

From those starry-eyed beginnings in high school, forty years have largely flown by, but I have not lost my drive “to seek and share adventure.” I’m excited to add the new Cape Fear Marathon & Half to our AdventureCORPS event calendar this October, I am starting work on a brand-new overseas stage race, and I’ve got my sights set on celebrating the 50th anniversary of Al Arnold’s Badwater to Mt. Whitney run – and the 40th anniversary of the Badwater 135 – in 2027. I guess I’m a lifer when it comes to making these experiences come to life!

I hope you will continue to “chase the horizon” with me and the entire AdventureCORPS event staff – the heroes who help bring each race to life – in 2024 and well into the future!

Thanks for indulging me... and I will see you “out there”!

*Chris Kostman*





*Chris and some of the race staff during the 2022 Badwater Salton Sea.*



*Chris and some of the race staff at the conclusion of the 2023 Badwater Cape Fear.*





Chris with racers, crew, and staff at the 2023 Badwater 135 pre-race meeting.

