

Breaking Point...And Beyond

Reprinted From *POL*, July/August 1978

Story by Roger Allebone

Photography by Eric Rahkonen

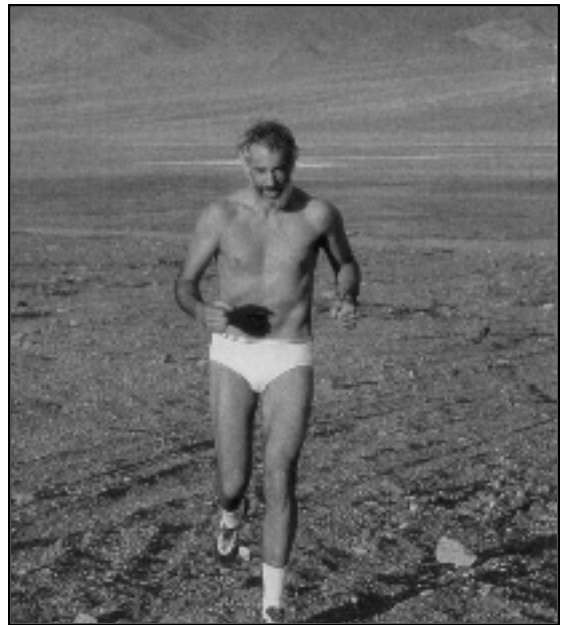
From athlete to invalid...and back, Al Arnold is perhaps the ultimate example of human potential and survival. ROGER ALLENBONE meets an Iron Man with an iron will.

This is the saga of one man's defiant pilgrimage to the breaking point of human endurance, and beyond ... and of how Mother Nature extracted a crushing revenge. It's the story of Al Arnold. Occupation: runner, surfer, lover and journeyman-tinkerer with all things mental and mechanical, frontier scout for the tribal consciousness. When the history of California's human potential movement of the 70s is written, Al Arnold will be one of its extradimensional heroes.

For, at the age of 50, this shambling phantom from suburbia tucked his rubbery body inside a white flannel cape and set out in a quest of his impossible dream – to run non-stop from the subterranean swelter of America's Death Valley to the freezing granite peaks of Mount Whitney, at 14,496 ft the highest point in the continental United States. Could a man, half a century old, jog ... walk ...run, or even drag himself, across 145 miles of some of the most awesome and inhospitable desert and mountain terrain to be found anywhere in the world?

Al Arnold had already broken his body on those hostile elements enough times to know that only a superman could take on such a challenge. Yet, with three previous attempts at Death Valley, the thousands and thousands of miles of training, years of mental preparation – all his experience – told him it could be done.

What price would he pay? Not even his wildest guesses could have foreseen that the road he was embarking wouldn't end



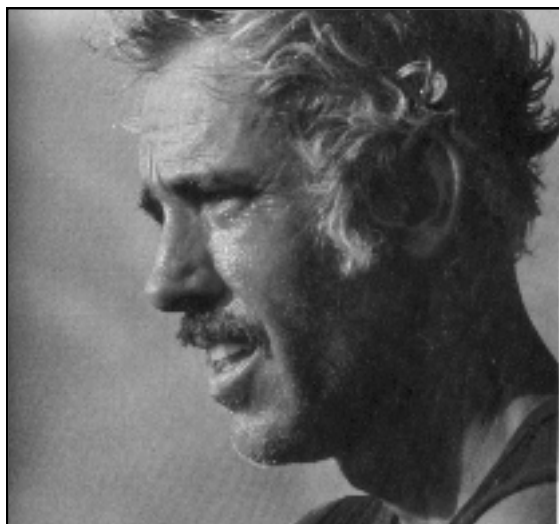
atop the Sierra Nevada. Instead, the forces which had fascinated the grey-haired, thick-boned athlete since childhood lay poised in wait at a more distant destination ... the thundering surfline of Hawaii. Within days of pitting his strength against the eerie western badlands, Al Arnold found himself trapped and fighting for his life beneath a massive wall of water. A new element had taken his proud body and snapped it in an instant on the ocean floor. Those powerful limbs which had seemed invincible were suddenly senseless and inert. Al Arnold was at the real breaking point – a breathless quadriplegic being smashed about below the waves with only his mighty will left to save him.

Since the end of World War II, California has been the birthplace of a succession of revolutions including the aerospace and entertainment industries, the student power movement, and more recently, the human potential disciplines. One of the expressions of this growing individual

awareness in the 70s has been the boom in physical exercise and recreation. With its temperate climate and year-round sunshine, the Golden State has nurtured legions of New Age warriors—backpackers, cross-country skiers and cyclists, along with the most noticeable and prolific cult, the joggers.

Clubs like the Quail Boulevard Athletic Club at Walnut Creek sprang up throughout California in recent years to cater for older jocks who still prefer the familiar combat of the gymnasium, weight room and handball courts into the new wave of Zen mystics whispering around the running tracks. Al Arnold was the perfect mentor to oversee the several hundred members who regularly work out on the basketball court, par course and heavy metal facilities at Quail Court. He loves to compete. The kind of urger needed about the locker room to taunt the boys into a thousand or so push-ups and some strength tests pumping iron.

Al Arnold suffers from a chronic Skinny Kid syndrome. Back in the 30s when he was six years old and hanging around the San Pedro beachfront and the Los



Angeles breakwater, a tidal wave warning sent most of the locals scurrying inland. But Arnold, determined to prove his courage, grabbed an inflated tyre tube and paddled out to sea to await the 25ft wave which dumped the boy onto a pile of sandbags lining the roof of the two-story bathhouse. Miraculously, the child was unhurt.

At high school, Arnold was 6'5" and only 135lbs when he played on the football, basketball, track and baseball teams. Three years in the armed services, then college athletics including rowing, rugby, boxing and weightlifting converted the spindly youth into a 273lb giant. He could pick up the back end of a 1950 Ford and just to show the world, he and a college friend set a 72-hour record for teeter-tottering. The pair went up and down on the see-saw 46,000 times. Anything to be different. "It's always been part of my make-up," he recalls, "If the crowded masses are going this way, I'm headed in the other direction. It's harder to be that way but you enjoy more about life."

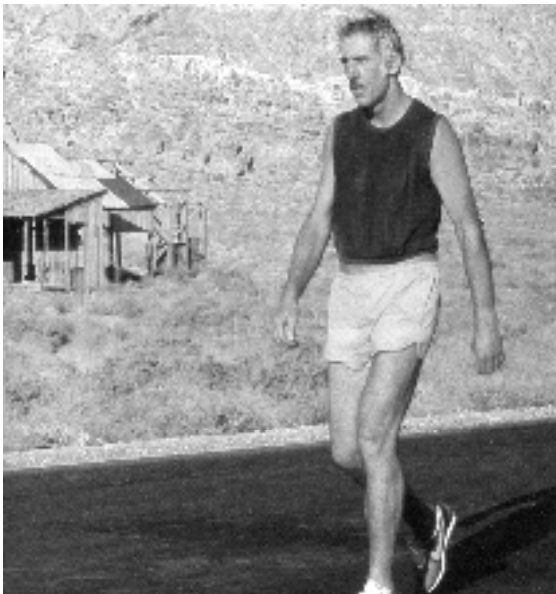
Although he originally entered college in 1950, Arnold drifted through a succession of undergraduate courses and in and out of the first of his three marriages. He finally graduated in 1962 and went to work at the University of California's engineering school where he spent the next 15 years as an electromechanical technician in oceanographic work. He specialized in building equipment to simulate and test the force of breaking waves, particularly tidal waves. What effect would a single wave have crashing onto a beach that was almost eroded?

In his personal relationships, Arnold was unforgiving. A second turbulent marriage broke up, he dropped out of graduate school, and for relief, he turned to sports. But on top of the anxiety and stress, Arnold developed glaucoma which

deprived him of the hand-eye coordination needed for tennis and handball. So, at the age of 40, he took up running and swimming again to help him cope with the pressures in his life.

Running can easily become an addiction. Once the weekend jogger has run in a City-to-Surf or Bay-to-Breakers race then a whole new world of potential opens up. Would it be possible to make a marathon? How far and how fast can I go? These are the kinds of thoughts one dwells on as the imagination tries to block out the pain of each mile.

In Al Arnold, such thoughts had to be extreme. He had always been impressed by the desolation of Death Valley. He wanted to attempt the perilous run non-stop in the scorching heat of mid-summer.



"I'm essentially a lazy man and it takes an awful lot to challenge me. I guess I enjoy having my back against the wall."

Arnold, the student of forces and balance, had very little idea of how to prepare for the grueling trial. But he'd kept in shape with regular running and swimming. Taking two friends as a support team, the

tall athlete covered only 18 miles in his first attempt at the run in 1974. The air temperature on the day was 139-degrees.

"I felt like somebody hit me in the middle of the stomach with a 16 lb shot," said Arnold as he described how quickly his body had dehydrated. "I vomited and had no strength to move ... could hardly breathe. Your pulse rate changes, the blood pressure and body temperature go crazy ... you begin to pass out. It's a very precarious position because if your heart goes into ventriculation then you could easily die from heat prostration. That's what happens when tourists driving through Death Valley stop to sightsee and never make it back to their car."

"My friends and family thought that would have to be the end of my wild ideas, especially as I'd nearly lost my life, but I wasn't going to let go of that dream so easily."

Arnold changed gears into a much more strenuous training program. He set up an exercise bike in a 200-degree sauna and began riding 45-minute sessions to acclimatize himself to the heat and stress he'd undergone in the desert. At first he'd stagger nauseous from the sauna but gradually his physiology began to change. "I've never been able to conquer the stress level of my nerve which controls all of the vital functions of your body if it goes into a shock situation."

"My body temperature is now 97.6 degrees, whereas before it was 98.6. It can be 20 degrees outside at night and yet I can sleep naked with just a sheet over me." He also started running long hours around Mount Diablo, a 4000 ft peak overlooking Walnut Creek, 20 miles from the San Francisco Bay."

The intensive exercise whittled Arnold's frame down to 200 lbs and on a "cool" August day in 1975, with the barometer at only 105 degrees, a second attempt was made. He didn't get far.

"I hyper extended my right knee – it swelled up to the size of a cantaloupe and wouldn't support my weight after the first 50 miles." Undaunted, the veteran went back into even more rigorous training mixing the sauna-cycling with two swims and half-day mountain jogs. But in 1976, a test run lasted only 60 miles so he decided against taking a support team into the desert that year."

Arnold, then aged 48, had married for a third time in October 1975. His new wife, Betty Marie, was 34. He didn't look much older. Arnold also took on a seven-year old stepdaughter to add to the three daughters from his previous marriages. By that stage his whole family had given up on attempts to talk him out of his Death Valley obsession.

"In 1977, I didn't tell anyone what I was doing. I just went out and averaged 45-50 miles a day, four or five times a week. I would run all night and all day, whole weekends non-stop on the mountain ... walk ... jog ... walk ...jog. I'd do a circuit that brought me back to my car for a drink or else I'd tie a hiker's cup around my waist and sniff out the streams.

"When you initiate a long-distance program like this, you have to start with a mind effort. Then it becomes a conditional reflex. The body settles down and your mind departs. There have been times I've started to run on Mount Diablo before dawn. The next thing I remembered was the full moon coming over the mountain the following night.

"I'd have no recollection what went on during the day ... a total escape out of mind for 14-15 hours. I simply became an animal on that mountain. Sure, sometimes I'd think about my family, or work out a mathematical problem or notice how beautiful the country was ... but then it would be one-step-in-front-of-the-other, my mind would be a blank, sort of in hypnosis ... what you'd call a deep and involved trip.

"Unless you're a marathoner, you can't imagine how different it is. The long distance running and five-mile rowing races were the most difficult events I'd attacked. You almost have to be a masochist – enjoy pain. Except the pain is totally removed from your body. It's non-threatening."

Arnold taught himself to pace a 20-minute mile, keeping his pulse rate at a steady 120. "At that rate I knew I wouldn't have any concern with my heart on the Death Valley-Mount Whitney run. I'd think of myself as a refrigerator door. A hinge might break – my knee or hip might collapse – so I had to keep the stress level very, very low."

Death Valley is an inferno of sun-blistered salt flats, endless gravel fans, sand dunes and parched creek beds sagging between craggy canyons and cliffs which rise as high as two-miles above the desert floor. Amid the bristlecone pines and pickleweed, lizards, scorpions and sidewinders crackle and rattle across the shale slopes. Yet these gigantic, bleak badlands have an awesome beauty despite the fact that it rarely rains and the mercury dries in the thermometer with ground surface temperatures soaring as high as 190 degrees in summer.

"If you don't have thorns, thistles or sting, then you don't belong there," Al Arnold is fond of saying. He'd chosen to begin his

run before dawn on August 3, 1977 which turned out to be the hottest day of the year in the southwest.

His task was to start in Badwater (300 ft below sea level and the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere) and jog, walk, climb the 145 miles to the top of 14,496 foot Mount Whitney which caps the Sierra Nevada on the western border of Death Valley. Under his belt, he had 12,000 miles of training, three previous gutbusting attempts, and the knowledge that this time no matter what, he would not give in.

AT 5 am, the temperature was already well over the century. "I wanted to go with the full moon so I could see it settling down over those mountains. There were one or two bats flying around and coyote here and there, but otherwise I was all by myself, no sounds at all. The support crew stayed back to have a few beers.

"I was excited about the beauty and fantasizing about the old prospectors, the Indians, the battles that might have been fought ... the people out here struggling or perishing maybe within a few feet of where I was running. Yet I was fully prepared, fully confident, eager, glad to be on my way and thrilled by the enormity of what I was trying to conquer."

As he paced along the highway, Arnold thought, "This whole run will be like an hydraulic shock ... if I push hard against it, it'll push hard against me, so I have to flow with it, settle down and relax because I know this is a privilege to be a small part of this massive country.

"I had to do it with humility. If I tried to attack, I'd fail. To run eight minute miles was attacking, to run them in nine was still attacking ... I had to drop down to 15 even 20 minutes for a mile. That takes a

whole different motor response in the muscles. You don't have the momentum going for you.

"It's a matter of conserving energy, keeping the pulse rate low and preserving your fluids. It's as if you were making a lemon meringue pie-fold it too fast and you destroy it. That was my analogy: I was folding myself through the desert."

He also had to forget about how long the run would take. Instead, he concentrated on the scenery – the sheer cliffs leading to Dante's Viewpoint, the red sunrise, purple mountains and white clouds in the background, the golden sands beside the highway. He was working himself into the necessary trance. But soon after dawn he realized this was an experience he'd have to share, for a procession of tourists, park rangers and maintenance crews driving through the Valley all stopped to gawp at the strange desert apparition running through the shimmering heat haze.

"The short breaks spent explaining what I was doing weren't wasted even though they were included in the overall time. I couldn't have gotten anywhere if I'd have ignored those spectators-too many athletes fail to acknowledge the appreciation of other people."

After signing autographs and posing for pictures, Arnold descended down into Furnace Creek, then pushed through the Devil's Golf course to Stovepipe Wells. In spite of all the public relations, he'd covered 40 miles in 10 hours. Then came the mile-high climb along the steep slopes of the Panamint Mountains-gaunt, eroded rock formations where stray burros, bighorn sheep and mountain lions climbed among the mesquite. But the 15-mile climb was taking its toll.

"I was nearly to the top when I had a lot of problems with my knee. It wouldn't take my weight and I got sick." Arnold's two-man support team, Erick Rahkonen, a newspaper photographer, and Glenn Phillips, a commercial pilot, were also sick after a long day driving slowly through the boiling heat.

"We tried to pull it together but I realized I was pushing my luck pretty hard. I couldn't run any more so we had to stop there while I spent hours and hours on stretching exercises trying to get my knee back into shape. I knew I wasn't going to stop. I just shut my mind off to that possibility."

Arnold pushed on through the dawn of the second day. A road maintenance gang fed him beer and sandwiches and relayed the news of the runner's progress to workers further up the line. To ward off the intense heat, he ran in his "Lawrence of Arabia" garb—a white tennis hat fitted with a flannel shield that draped over his neck and shoulders.

Descending into the Panamint desert, Arnold met a geologist returning from a desert checkpoint where the air temperature was 138 degrees. The runner consoled himself with periodic ice-water showers and guzzled down cool drinks. During the run he consumed 30 gallons of fluids.

"The worst part of the run was the first 15 hours. The enormity of the heat gets compounded by the fact your adrenaline is up - the two elements combined could have been devastating. But then on the second day I relaxed ... maybe I should have begun to run a day earlier."

He had to climb over the Inyo mountains before descending into the searing Owens Valley where violent winds blasted him with sand and silt. "That was the first

time I could see Mount Whitney and I said to her, 'Well, you probably thought you'd never see me but I'm going to be on top of you.' She's a very powerful lady and I didn't want to conquer her - just be part of a relationship.

"Still, there were so many miles left to run. I immediately wiped it out of my mind and concentrated on putting one-foot-in-front-of-the-other on the white line marked on the roadside. I just glued myself to the line. I didn't dare look left or right. I was locked in a hypnotic trance. The photos taken of me at 100 miles shows a red glow around my body.

I couldn't even look back to glorify what I'd already done. Sometimes I got lonely and felt like crying a few times. My body was going through tremendous stress. Yet I felt there was something out there helping me ... a God, a religion, a what-have-you ... I'm not a church-going person but I have a strong feeling that we're here for a purpose and not by chance. That feeling seemed very strong while I was out there running."

Arnold maintained the rhythmic jog, walk, jog along Highway 136 leading to the small settlement of Lone Pine. "People started coming out of town saying, 'There's a crazy man who's just run from Death Valley!' and took photographs. Three girls offered to massage me. But that would have blown the run."

At last, Arnold reached the Sierra foothills. It was a hard climb from Lone Pine at 3000 ft up to the end of the asphalt at 8000 ft Whitney Portals. He then faced an even steeper ascent 10 miles up a rugged trail along the cliffs to the top of 14,496 ft Mount Whitney. "It was still one-foot-in-front-of-the-other ... I was just going from rock to rock.

"But as I got closer and closer, I was more relaxed. I could look around. One of my support crew ran ahead to tell hikers what I'd done. They all cheered and congratulated me – it was like a ticker-tape parade although I was weaving and staggering along the path and a couple of times they had to hold me up. One foot wrong and I'd have fallen several thousand feet to my death.

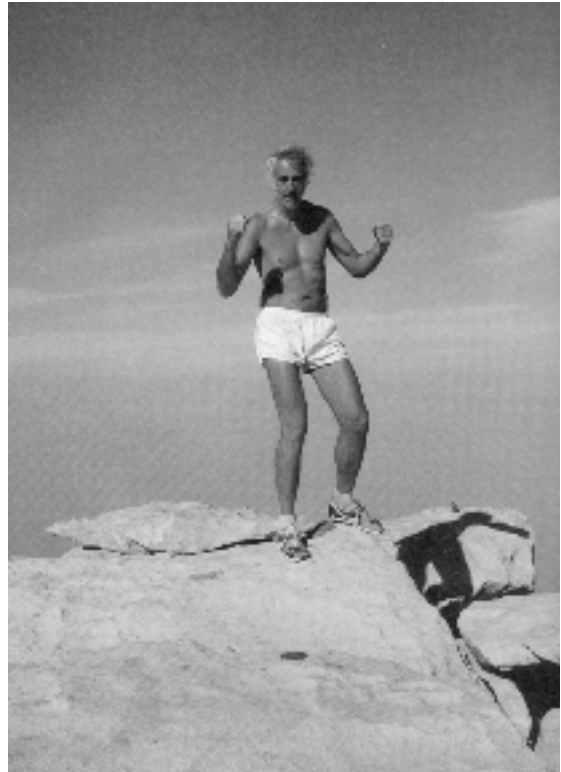
"Then I became obsessed by the need for total quiet. When I got up there, about 50 yards from the top, I sat down and did some stretching exercises and looked up at the sky. Then I very leisurely walked up to the summit and burst into tears. I couldn't stop crying. My friend turned to me and said, 'You son-of-a-bitch ... I never knew you had a soft bone in your body.' The hikers standing around hugged me.

"I just stood up there and looked back to where I'd started and I couldn't believe it. You couldn't even begin to see where I'd started. There was a valley, then a mountain, a valley and a mountain, disappearing 144 miles into the haze. It had taken me 84 hours. Maybe some day I'll go back there and realize what I've done."

Yet at that stage, Al Arnold was in a precarious situation. The sun was setting on the cold mountaintop. He was dressed in only his thin running shorts. Tired as he was, the big athlete accelerated down the trail to Consolation Lakes.

His companion had already pushed on to report the news to Lone Pine before Arnold discovered his camping gear, left for him beside the trail, had been stolen. The runner was in real trouble. All he had was a thin plastic survival sheet to wrap

around his almost naked body. "I had to sit down on that granite mountain at 12,000 ft and experience the temperature



falling below 20 degrees. With the wind howling, the chill factor was below zero. Despite all the exertion, I still couldn't sleep. During the night, I watched the satellites and constellations, waiting for the sun to come up. I was shivering but I wasn't frightened or lonely, not even hungry. It was simply another challenge ... one-step-in-front-of-the-other.

"When I stood up in the morning, the left knee wouldn't work. I had to soak it in an icy stream for three hours before it'd click back into place." Eventually he made it into Lone Pine and home to Walnut Creek. "My wife wanted me to get some sun," he smiled wryly, "so we went to Hawaii." At Brennecke's Beach on the island of Kauai, Al Arnold was able to indulge his other great love - bodysurfing. Already he was in training for the American Master's swimming titles. It was the tenth day of his vacation and he'd spent most of the afternoon lapping the beach and riding waves. But when he caught a longcrested "bonsai" wave, it suddenly sucked out. As

he tried to avoid a young surfer on a boogie board, the dumper spearheaded Arnold into the sandbar.

The impact totally dislocated the whole cervical area of his neck, separated both shoulders and caused a severe contusion to the athlete's spinal cord. "I was totally paralyzed under the water and being repeatedly pounded into the sandbar by this huge wave. It seemed to happen in slow motion. I realized I couldn't get up for a breath.

"Immediately I was embarrassed about losing my life. I thought it wouldn't be fair to my wife. But I was helpless. The only force I had going for me was my mind. I just held my breath ... one-foot-in-front-of-the-other ... one-more-second ...one-more-second ...then my face came out of the water, I gulped in air, then went back down eating sand. I came up about seven times before I was rolled ashore. As the waves sucked me back out I used my last gasp to call another swimmer who hauled me onto the beach."

In the hospital, Arnold's crippled body was wedged between sandbags to keep him from moving while doctors x-ray the neck to see if it is broken. "At first they thought I'd been mugged. My face and scalp were covered with welts and burns from the sand. My body felt like millions of needles had been stuck in me. "The only feeling I had below my neck was some movement in my little fingers and big toes. My wife was there and I felt sorry for her, but there was no point feeling sorry for myself. I was just waiting for them to tell me I had a broken neck.

"But because of all the intense training I'd done for Death Valley, the stretching and conditioning, everything came back into

place. Anybody else would have either been drowned, or finished their days in a body cast."

Five days after the accident, the runner, still paralyzed, was folded into a wheelchair and flown home to Walnut Creek. "It was an interesting experience to be totally dependent on other people. My body was in neurological confusion. I was excited – this was another challenge."

The runner used his enormous concentration and discipline to visualize the extent of his injuries and recapture his sense of movement. Within weeks he was standing and taking a few tentative steps. Then he began to slowly jog. Three weeks after the surfing accident, he'd run 10 miles across country although he couldn't hold a pen to write, tie his shoelaces or even go to the toilet without help.

A week later, Al Arnold was on the starting line for San Francisco's Bridge-to-Bridge race. He ran the 7.2 miles in 65 minutes, only 12 minutes slower than his best time for the distance. "I was really excited ... the further I went the faster I got. I was passing people.

"I'm not a puritan. I'm devious. When I complete I like to know how many people I can beat. After running Death Valley I'd found out some other guy was training to do it. When he heard I'd made it all the way to the top of Mount Whitney, he was terribly disappointed and cried. Boy! Did I gloat ... perhaps that's selfish but it's an indication of how serious a 50-year-old man can be."

However the initial recovery owed a great deal to the remaining condition from the Death Valley run. In the following weeks, business pressures prevented Arnold from returning to Mount Diablo and it was two months after the accident before he could settle into a routine using a weight-

ed rowing machine he designed himself and the heavy punching bag to begin regaining the power in his arms and shoulders.

"At present, my strength is about 20 percent of what it was," he told me in October. "If I bend my neck then my whole body becomes numb. But I've got to do this myself. The doctors originally told me I'd need a walker for at least six weeks. But I left it at the hospital.

"Sure ... I listen to medical advice. But there's still a lot of mystique surrounding medicine and they don't know much about sporting injuries. So I'm going on my gut feelings. It's not a question of whether I make a full recovery. My only concern is whether I make a damned good effort. It can be, it will be."

The Quail Boulevard Athletic Club has a number of orthopedic surgeons among its members. Several have refused to talk to Arnold about the accident. "The people they treat can't even begin to approach what I'm doing. But whether the doctors listen or not, I feel I've got a unique insight into what the human body can achieve.

"I love my body whether it's in condition or like this. At the same time I think maybe this experience will motivate someone less fortunate. The one point that keeps going through my mind is – 'train for the breaking point' – I've always pushed myself through the miles of arduous conditions, the tremendous heat and mental discipline ... I went to the very limit and finally reached the breaking point in the surf.

"I was able to meet it because I was adequately prepared ... not so much in the body, but in the mind. Lesser people would have been panic stricken or drowned. I came out a winner even

thought I may be permanently disabled. The injuries would be just another asset. You see, when I lost the power of my eyes, I developed into a runner. Now, who knows where this challenge will take me? Maybe I can pioneer techniques that could rehabilitate handicapped people."

Arnold acknowledges he's not an ordinary person. "If reincarnation is true, then I must have lived before as some kind of scout with an army or with pioneer settlers. I really feel that you could drop me almost anywhere in the world and, barring human adversity, I'd survive."

The members of the Quail Boulevard Athletic Club agree. They've given him until July 1 to rebuild his crippled body. "My biceps will go from 13 to 17 inches. I'll build up my neck, my abdominals, there'll be no fat. I'll be really powerful. Then I'm taking them on.

"I'm going to run against a horse and rider over a 100-mile course in the Sierra Nevada. I'll have to cross 50 miles of desert without water. I'm going to learn to swim again and compete in the Masters' titles in 1979. I know that as I get older and older, I get better and better while everyone else falls apart. It's no use trying to domesticate this man. I'd only be a caged animal."