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S.J. man shows he can take the heat

DAN MARINSIK, 46, TAKES ON WHAT IS BILLED AS WORLD'S TOUGHEST FOOTRACE

By Mark Emmons
Mercury News

DEATH VALLEY - As the temperature climbed to 120 degrees near a godforsaken patch of desert called Devil's Cornfield, every shuffling step Dan Marinsik took seemed like it might be his last.

The stiff breeze striking his weather-beaten face felt as refreshing as a blast from a hair dryer. Beneath him, heat waves shimmered from the sun-cooked asphalt.

The oven-like conditions had slowed Marinsik -- a San Jose resident encased in a white protective suit and hat worthy of the French Foreign Legion -- from a steady trot to a torturous crawl.

And he had only 99 more miles to the finish line.

Marinsik wasn't concerned.

"It's still cooler than I expected," he said in a hoarse voice, sounding vaguely disappointed.

If that sounds nuts, well, it is. But adventurous souls mad enough to enter the 135-mile Badwater Ultramarathon, touted as the world's toughest footrace, want to take everything one of the globe's most inhospitable places can dish out.

It's not enough that competitors travel the equivalent of more than five marathons, starting at the lowest, hottest and driest spot in the Western Hemisphere and traversing three mountain ranges - all within a 60-hour time limit. The race, which took place last week, also is run at Death Valley's most uninviting time, forcing runners to endure scorching heat from Badwater, elevation 282 feet below sea level, to Mount Whitney Portal, at 8,360

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Dan Marinsik walks down Route 190 in Death Valley at dusk on Monday, July 11 while competing in the Badwater Ultramarathon.

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feet.

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Yet for ultra-marathoners such as Marinsik, a 46-year-old brain tumor survivor, Badwater is an irresistible challenge, one where competitors must look deep within themselves for strength they can only hope to possess, searching for answers to questions they often cannot articulate. They certainly don't do it for fame or fortune, because Badwater offers no prize money and is held with little fanfare.

"It's pretty much impossible to explain why you do this," Marinsik said. "People just think you're weird. But you're trying to find your limits where you completely tax yourself. For me, Badwater is that limit."

Or almost. Marinsik took out a wilderness permit that would allow him to climb an extra 11 miles after the race, to the top of Mount Whitney -- at 14,494 feet the tallest peak in the continental United States -- so he could say he went from the lowest to highest points.

But to accomplish that feat, Marinsik would have to overcome gruesome foot blisters, inner thighs that were so chafed they bled, battered leg muscles and fatigue that left him falling asleep on his feet.

At Devil's Cornfield, the agony had just begun.

Hot start

• Eighty-one entrants begin the ordeal

Just after sunrise on Monday, 81 competitors from 12 countries started assembling in three waves at the Badwater Basin salt flats in the heart of Death Valley National Park. They ranged in age from 28 to 70. Two competitors were blind and one had a prosthetic leg.

Race organizers carefully screen applicants, who pay \$295 to enter, because they don't want anyone to die. There's a reason they call this *Death Valley*.

A sign notes that the Western Hemisphere's highest temperature, 134 degrees, was recorded here in 1913. It was so hot that swallows in flight fell from the sky. At Badwater two years ago the high reached 132, said race director Chris Kostman. During this year's race, he joked, "We're going to have to hand out down parkas."

Marinsik didn't have a parka. But he did wear an FDA-approved suit designed for people with sensitive skin, complete with material to cover his hands. He had protective insoles that use NASA-developed technology, because during the race in 2003, his socks melted into goo. And as his group started at 8 a.m., the sun already had begun to bake the hardpan desert floor and the only shade was beneath the brim of his hat.

The rules are simple. You must finish within the 60-hour time limit. You're automatically disqualified if you require intravenous fluids.

Marinsik felt prepared. Part of his training for the race, in addition to logging 70 or so miles a week, had involved sitting in a health-club sauna wearing heavy clothing and driving around with the car windows shut and the heat turned up. And that was meager preparation compared with runners who had installed treadmills in home saunas.

The first 42 miles of Badwater cover a surreal, moon-like landscape and include ominously named landmarks such as Furnace Creek, Devil's Golf Course and Stovepipe Wells.

Marinsik set out at a brisk pace along Highway 190, accompanied by a supply-laden sport-utility vehicle. His seven-person support crew of friends and family, who worked in shifts, stopped every half-mile to provide water, energy gel packets and bars, salt pills, ice-filled bandannas and encouragement.

During the last 93 miles, which features the daunting mountain climbs, competitors must deal with all the damage inflicted by the earlier, energy-sapping heat. But Badwater's real test is mental.

"I've always been intrigued about how your mind is tougher than your body and how you're capable of much more than you think is possible," said Marinsik, an affable medical device company executive and father of two.

Marinsik challenges the conventional notion about who is an athlete. At 5-foot-10 and 205 pounds, he doesn't look like a runner. His short-step stride, with arms high and tucked close to his body, isn't pretty. But it is efficient. And he possesses almost inhuman endurance. He might not move fast, but Marinsik is stubborn. He just keeps putting one foot in front of the other.

Concerned about his family's history of heart disease, he took up jogging about 15 years ago. When he entered a marathon, another runner casually mentioned he would be a perfect ultra runner.

"Ultras" are loosely defined as any race longer than the 26.2-mile marathon. While these extreme events remain a subculture to the mainstream running community, they have become more popular, especially among older competitors.

When Marinsik, who has done about 120 ultras, started this hobby, his wife, Lily, made him buy more life insurance.

Because his body seemed impervious to many common problems runners encounter in the heat -- nausea, cramping, heat stroke -- Marinsik decided to try Badwater, the granddaddy of ultras, in 2003.

The first person to successfully complete the grueling 146-mile Death Valley-to-Mount Whitney summit trek was Bay Area native Al Arnold, who did it in 1977. It evolved into a full-fledged race, which now ends short of the summit, at the portal.

Six months before his first Badwater, Marinsik awoke with a buzzing in his ear. The diagnosis would be a brain tumor. The consolation: Doctors assured him that the tumor was benign and slow-growing.

Worried he might not be able to run again following the surgery, Marinsik wanted to compete in Badwater as perhaps his final race. Physicians said there would be no harm in delaying surgery.

"I remember Lily telling a doctor that clearly this wasn't something I should be doing," Marinsik said. "But the doctor said there was no risk."

So he postponed the procedure until after Badwater, which he completed in just under 54 hours. The ensuing operation claimed his left inner ear, which was replaced with fat from his stomach.

"So now I really am a fathead," Marinsik said.

And his brush with mortality left him even more eager to push himself. Just 30 days after the surgery, Marinsik entered a triple marathon around Lake Tahoe -- much to the chagrin of his wife.

"I had this feeling he was going to die," Lily Marinsik said. "I finally told him to do whatever he wanted. But for a normal person when the wife says that, the husband understands what she really means is no. He did it anyway."

He also did Badwater again last year, shaving about eight hours off his time. This year, he tacked on the goal of reaching the Mount Whitney summit.

"It's never enough," Lily Marinsik said. "First it was 50 miles, then 75, then 100. Then it had to be 135 miles in the worst conditions. He keeps adding to it. It's crazy."

"But at the same time, I'm really very proud of him. Everything he does, he has to be the best."

Strong support

• Crew of seven aids endeavor

Marinsik staggered into the hamlet of Stovepipe Wells, the 42-mile mark, about 10 hours into the race. He quickly headed toward a motel pool, stripped down to his running shorts and jumped in for a few minutes.

The covered pool deck had been converted into a temporary medical center as runners rested and assessed their bodies. After toweling off, Marinsik ate soup and yogurt as Stephen Della Ratta, one of his crew members, opened a tackle box filled with medical supplies. Della Ratta went to work lancing, cleaning and taping the numerous blisters on Marinsik's feet.

"I knew for several hours they were getting bad," Marinsik said. "But I wanted to wait for my break at the pool."

As the sun began to set, he gingerly set off toward Townes Pass, a 16.8-mile, 5,000-foot climb. Wearing a flashing red light, he spent all night ascending the pass and coming down the other side toward the Panamint dry lake bed. Under a breathtaking blanket of stars, he power-walked with his mountain-climber friend, George Gluck. Marinsik took one catnap -- he would sleep just 75 minutes during the entire race -- but that wasn't the only slumber he got.

"You can tell when he dozes off because he slows down and starts wobbling all over," Gluck said.

By dawn Tuesday, Marinsik's blisters had worsened. More troubling was the severe chafing in his thighs and groin. Hobbling along, he looked like a cowboy with saddle sores. There would be precious little running the rest of the race -- meaning he was losing about two miles an hour.

He spent the heat of the day on a 17.8-mile climb of 3,000 feet that was filled with switchbacks. Each step was beginning to feel like a jackhammer pounding up his legs.

During a break, he got word that trail-running standout Scott Jurek already had finished the race in a course-record 24 hours, 36 minutes, 8 seconds -- an average of 11 minutes a mile.

"That's depressing, because I've still got 60 miles to go," Marinsik said.

By the 90-mile mark, Marinsik had recalibrated his goal. Gone was a chance to finish within 48 hours, which would earn him a coveted Badwater belt buckle. Now he wanted to make it before the 60-hour cutoff.

“Just finishing is the most important thing,” he said. “You got to deal with the hand you’re dealt and tough it out.”

Stops became more frequent to treat his feet and legs, get massages and rest. The entire bottom of his left foot was essentially one large blister. But at least he wasn’t hallucinating, which had happened to him at his first Badwater, when he thought he saw a factory in the middle of the desert. And Marinsik never expressed concern that he might have to drop out -- as 14 others did.

After limping through the night, with Gluck and Lily taking turns accompanying him, Marinsik arrived Wednesday morning in the town of Lone Pine, just 13 miles from the end.

But it’s a cruel finish -- a 2,660-foot climb over the final six miles -- when an exhausted body has nothing left. Facing the hot sun for the third consecutive day, he was reduced to what he calls the Marinsik Death Crawl as he trudged upward with the help of pacer Joe Jones.

“Any of this hurt?” Della Ratta asked while rubbing Marinsik’s calves during his last break.

“Everything hurts,” Marinsik said. “I feel like I’ve been walking on tree stumps for 60 miles.”

Yet just before 2 p.m. Wednesday -- 53 hours, 56 minutes and 24 seconds after starting -- Marinsik, looking oddly refreshed, managed a slow jog across the finish line with his team members. He had ended up in 57th place. After posing for pictures, he practically fell into a chair under a cool stand of towering redwoods.

He could barely feel his feet. His tongue was like sandpaper. His legs ached. So this probably was not the best time to ask if this would be his last Badwater.

As Marinsik pondered the question, his wife laughed.

“Don’t let him kid you,” she said. “He’s already thinking about next year.”

After recovering for a few hours, Marinsik began his summit attempt of Mount Whitney. But he only got 1 1/2 miles into the climb before accepting that his swollen, blistered feet wouldn’t allow him to reach the top.

“But that’s OK,” Marinsik said. “There will be another day to do this.”

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While running in 120 degree heat in the Devil's Cornfield portion of Death Valley on Monday, Marinsik gets help from his crewmembers Joe Jones, left, and Stephen Della Ratta.



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Crewmember Scott Corchero, left, cools off Marinsik while he walks on Route 190 through Death Valley on Monday afternoon.



Patrick Tehan / Mercury News

After a day of running in 120 degree heat, Marinsik gets his blistered feet tended to by crewmember Stephen Della Ratta in Stovepipe Wells in Death Valley.



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Marinsik cools off in Stovepipe Wells in Death Valley on Monday afternoon.

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Marinsik cools off in a motel pool in Stovepipe Wells in Death Valley on Monday afternoon.

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« PREVIOUS 7 of 10 NEXT »



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Marinsik walks along Route 190 in Death Valley on Tuesday morning, July 12.



Patrick Tehan / Mercury News

Crewmembers massage Marinsik's feet.

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« PREVIOUS 9 of 10 NEXT »



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Marinsik on Route 190 at dusk on Tuesday.



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Marinsik and his wife Lily share a moment after Marinsik crossed the finish line at the Mount Whitney Portal Wednesday afternoon.