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Ultraman

Runner, 63, doesn't just endure marathons, he relishes a challenge

By Lela Garlington
Contact
August 23, 2006

For the past six years, Ruben Cantu has sweated through a grueling two-day, 135-mile race in Death Valley where temps can spike up to 130 degrees. When he couldn't go to the Badwater Ultramarathon this year, the 63-year-old reserve firefighter and "papaw of the department" for Munford and Atoka decided to make his own heat this weekend.

Unlike a marathon of 26.2 miles, an ultramarathon is five marathons rolled into one.

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"I haven't had a good challenge this year. My primary goal is to do 100 miles within 24 hours. Depending on how I feel, I'll continue for another 35 miles or I'll stop," Cantu said.

He is hoping to run 675 laps along the 1/5-mile paved track around Munford City Park starting at 8 a.m. Friday. Between water, Mountain Dew and fruit drinks, he'll eat slices of turkey breast and Swiss cheese or hardboiled eggs while he's walking. If he's tired, he'll sleep. He's inviting

anyone to join him.

"Rain or shine," Cantu vowed. "I'll be out there." Unlike some runners with wiry bodies, Cantu is solidly built. He is 6-foot-2, weighs 210 pounds.

His fellow firefighters will be on hand to verify his laps.

Munford/Atoka Fire Chief Jay Bonson initially questioned Cantu's request for fellow firefighters to participate: "I told him, 'Man, you've lost your mind.' A few firemen will run a few laps with him but I'll be watching on the sidelines."

A Tipton County newcomer, Cantu, formerly of San Diego, moved to Atoka last November after retiring as an aerospace engineer. He and his wife, Carol, have three grown children who live in the area, along with three grandchildren and a fourth on the way. Since 1969, he has been running "for health reasons" as a way of averting his family's history of cardiovascular disease.

Over the years, he increased the number of miles he runs until he was competing in 5Ks, 10Ks, half-marathons and marathons. At 50, he tried a 50-mile mountain race. At 53, he ran his first 100-mile race. "I told my wife I found a new love," he admitted. "I fell in love with the trails in the mountains."

While the run around the park won't be any picnic, Cantu plans on running in future Badwater races -- which is considered the apex of human endurance. In the past, he's trained his body to withstand Death Valley's high temperatures by turning on his mini-



Photos by A.J. Wolfe/The Commercial Appeal

Cantu runs in dirt alongside the road as he trains near his Atoka home. A five-year finisher of the Badwater Ultramarathon in Death Valley, this year he was unable to attend the race. He plans to run laps around the Munford City Park for at least 24 hours instead.



Ruben Cantu, 63, has a collection of belt buckles awarded to finishers at some of the most difficult ultra-marathons in the country.

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van's heater in the summer until the interior reached 115 degrees or higher. By the time he drove the Anza-Borrego Desert and its 100 degree temps to train: "It felt cool," he said.

The Badwater race, which is by invitation only, starts in California's Death Valley and ends at the trail head of Mount Whitney. Cantu has won five belt buckles for finishing five of his six Badwater runs under 48 hours. He wants to add five more to his growing collection.

So far, the Badwater veteran is making daily runs from Atoka to Millington. "It's a habit," he said. "It's like a drug." As long as he can put one foot in front of the other, Cantu will continue pounding the pavement. One day at a time.

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