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Men vs. Mountains

Why would anyone do this?

BY DAVE PHILIPPS THE GAZETTE

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The instructions for the Hardrock 100 Endurance Run are easy to sum up but hard to pull off. “If you see a mountain in front of you, climb it,” race director Dale Garland told 140 runners gathered at the starting line earlier this month. “If you see a snowfield, go down it. If you see a creek, cross it … And remember the No. 1 rule, no whining.” Hardrock is widely considered the toughest 100.5-mile race on the continent. The roller coaster of rocky trails and Jeep roads through Colorado’s San Juan Mountains climbs 11 mountain passes and one 14,000-foot peak for a vertical gain of 32,962 feet. Almost all of it is in the thin, lung-burning air above tree line. And except for quick passes through Telluride and Ouray, it sticks to remote, lonely valleys. Racers have 48 hours to finish. Even though the event draws some of the top ultrarunners, historically just more than half succeed. In the crowd this year, two very different runners from Colorado Springs stood wondering the same thing: Will I make it?

Neal Taylor, 45, is a veteran ultrarunner. Most people know him as the cheerful caretaker of Barr Camp, but hidden in the back of the mountain cabin is a hefty “1,000 mile” belt buckle documenting that he has finished the Leadville 100 — the state’s second-toughest ultramarathon — 10 times.

Jon Teisher, 32, moved to Colorado Springs in 2006 from Texas after running the Pikes Peak Ascent and falling in love with trail running. He has a desk job. He ran his first mountain ultra last summer in Leadville and barely finished.

“The first 60 miles was OK, but once it got dark — you’re just all alone out there. I almost gave up,” he said. “If I have to do that for a second night at Hardrock I don’t think I’ll make it.”

Taylor is a strict vegetarian. Teisher likes to finish a long run with a double cheeseburger at King’s Chef Diner. Taylor rarely drinks. Teisher often chugs a can or two of Pabst during races. His plan for resting up for Hardrock was to run a sixmile race the Sunday before but get hung over enough the previous night to prevent a fast run. He ended up getting so drunk that he didn’t run at all.

“Hey, I didn’t start running ultraraces to turn into a monk,” he said.

The biggest difference is that Taylor has run Hardrock twice (he placed eighth in 2006) and knew what he was getting into. Teisher didn’t.

In fact, Teisher didn’t really want to get into Hardrock. The race has a weighted lottery to enter. A first-time runner has only a 17 percent chance of getting in. The more years a runner enters, the more likely he or she is to be picked. Teisher signed up last winter knowing he wasn’t ready, but figuring he would be by the time his name came up in four or five years.

Then he got in.

“It scared me. I knew I wasn’t ready. I think I went out as soon as I found out and did the (Manitou) incline,” he said before the race. He started

running 60 to 70 miles a week. He entered a 50-mile mountain race for practice and did well. He knew Hardrock would probably take all he had just to finish. For extra energy, he had the owner of King’s Chef vacuum pack two bacon double cheeseburgers to munch during the run.

Slow and steady

There is no start or finish line at Hardrock, just a 2-ton block of granite — a relic from Silverton’s mining days — that gives the race its name.

Runners gathered around the rock at 6 a.m. the day of the race, knowing that most of them would be back at the same spot after struggling all day and all night (then all day and all night again for many runners). Instead of a finish line, returning racers kiss the rock to stop the clock.

Teisher wore a floppy desert camouflage hat as a reminder of a tour he did in the infantry in Iraq. He carried a small backpack with water, food and a light jacket. He looked around nervously at the tan, skinny

ultra athletes assembling at the rock.

Taylor came over and wished him luck.

Then Taylor stepped off to the side to run through a mental checklist. “I have my water, my jacket. My nipples are taped so they won’t bleed.” He looked up at the mountains around town, still mottled with snow. “I guess I’m ready to go . . . Yikes.”

A minute later, the director informally said, “On your marks, get set, go.”

The pack didn’t run. Racers didn’t even jog. They sort of sauntered down the street, chatting in a group.

To finish Hardrock, a racer has to keep a pace of about 2 mph — a slow walk. The winner this year smashed the record by averaging just over 4 mph — barely a jog. The trick is to be steady — to not drop out from blistered heels, twisted ankles, dehydration, exhaustion, hallucination or demoralization.

The course is a nonstop assault of what Taylor calls “Oh-my-god moments.”

“You say ‘Oh my god, this is beautiful’ or ‘Oh my god, I can’t believe we’re going over this,’” he explained. It climbs straight up trail-less peaks. It drops down ankletwisting slides of loose cobbles. It cuts through glaciated cirques where century-old mining relics hang next to waterfalls pounding along columbinecovered ledges.

The pack cruised out of town and splashed through a thigh-deep creek. Their feet would be wet the rest of the race. Three hours and 11.5 miles later, Taylor and Teisher reached the first aid station at almost the same time. From there, the course shot up above tree line to a notch in a jagged ridge near 13,000 feet.

Already, one of Taylor’s feet was hurting, but he knew from previous races that pain was part of the game. Anyone who thought training would prevent suffering was in for disappointment.

“When I have a hurt, I just let it hurt,” Taylor said as he trudged into an alpine meadow. “Pretty soon, a new hurt will come along and make you forget about it.”

He headed up to the notch. Beyond it, the course skidded down a snowfield, then dropped 3,000 feet into a steep valley, only to climb up the other side, then drop a vertical mile, then up, then down. There is no rest. The uphills pound your lungs, the downhills pound your legs.

At the notch, Taylor passed a plaque, bolted to one of the granite walls, in memory of a runner who did the race in 1998 and died from a brain hemorrhage the next day.

Fuel for the tank

Aid stations at Hardrock look less like the typical running race table of paper cups half-full of Gatorade, and more like Golden Corral.

Tables are piled with fruit, cookies, mac and cheese, pasta, sandwiches, chips and rows of 2-liter bottles of Coke and Mountain Dew. Racers often lounge at the stations, grazing.

Taylor paused at the second aid station only to refill water bottles and grab a quick snack. He doesn’t like to stop at aid stations. It wastes time, especially as the race wears on and runners’ brains grow increasingly foggy.

Teisher took a different tack. When he dropped down to the second aid station, he cracked open a Corona. At a later aid station, one of the volunteers offered him a tequila shot and he thought, “Why not?”

After a 3,000-foot climb to a windswept, snowy ridge, the racers dropped almost a vertical mile to Telluride, crossed the town and started skyward again before dropping more than a mile to the streets of Ouray, where many racers’ support crews waited.

By the time racers trickled in to Ouray, 44 miles from the start, the miles were showing. It was dusk for most. Many were limping. Their eyes were red. Their faces hung slack with fatigue.

Taylor arrived with salt caked to his face from evaporating sweat. He was an hour ahead of his best time, but he was unsure if he could keep it up.

“I could say I feel good, but I don’t,” he said as he sat down to change his shoes. “I’m not looking forward to the night, so I’ll just take it easy until dawn. When the sun comes, we’ll see if there’s anything left in the tank.”

Taylor expected to climb 14,053-foot Handies Peak just before dawn.

He called his wife, ate some watermelon — all he could manage to choke down — and slipped on pants and a jacket for the cold alpine night. In a few minutes, he was gone.

Teisher ambled in two hours later, tired, but nowhere near defeated. A friend handed him a Pabst in a paper cup.

His girlfriend, Katie Throndsen, handed him his first double bacon cheeseburger.

“This is crazy,” he said. “It couldn’t get any steeper. They’re taking us through stuff I’d be afraid to do while

climbing a fourteener."

He took a swig of beer, shook his head and said, "There's no easy part — no break. I really didn't think it would be this hard."

With the sun setting, it was about to get much worse.

A thirst for toil

In the dark, Taylor took a wrong turn and wasted hours getting back on course. Teisher collapsed at an aid station and slept for more than an hour before his crew got him moving again. Feet, legs, necks, eyes, stomachs — everything was screaming "Stop, lie down, forget about it."

Most people would wonder why anyone would pay a $210 entry fee and train for months to struggle through so much suffering. Even the runners question it.

In the middle of the night, Teisher stopped at an aid station to warm himself by the fire, and the racer next to him vomited into the flames.

"What the hell am I doing here?" Teisher remembers thinking.

But he kept going. It says something about human nature that people have worked for centuries to eliminate hard physical toil from daily life, only to spawn things, such as Hardrock, that intentionally seek that toil.

There must be something etched in the human genetic code that makes the primitive struggle for survival impossible to sate.

"I used to think it was crazy people ran 100-mile races," Teisher said. "But then I caught the bug. I don't even know how I caught it, or how you can get rid of it. After every big race you swear you'll never do it again, and then there you are."

In a way, the Hardrock race, which follows trails that miners blasted into the mountainsides, also follows the irrepressible urge that drove the miners — the idea that there is some precious nugget out there for those willing to go through the trouble to seek it.

What doesn't kill you ...

The rising sun gave both runners a little jolt of energy, but the fatigue kept piling on.

By the afternoon, Taylor couldn't eat or drink. Racers are cursed with the quandary of needing massive amounts of calories to finish the race but usually being too exhausted to digest. Try to force food and the body revolts. The course is marked with vomit.

By 3 p.m., Taylor had 10 miles to go, over one more cruelly steep pass, but all day he had managed to eat only an energy gel, a tomato slice and a few cubes of watermelon with salt.

Halfway up the last climb, the bit of food he had forced down came back to decorate the trail.

Taylor hunched over, his hands on his knees, breathing hard and spitting. He stayed that way, staring at the ground, for two minutes. It looked like he might not go on.

Years of running ultras have taught him something: It will get bad, you will suffer, but you're not going to die, so keep going.

Taylor looked up at the trail zig-zagging up along a waterfall to a rocky saddle at 13,000 feet, wiped his mouth and started marching with renewed vigor.

"I'm a new man," he said with a grimace that wasn't quite a smile. "I should have puked a long time ago."

He scrambled up to a barren mountain shoulder and saw the tiny grid of Silverton in the valley below. He didn't say anything. He barely looked up from the trail in front of him to see the slopes covered in columbine.

He was too tired. There was nothing left in him but determination.

Two hours later, a little more than 35 hours after starting, he stumbled to the Hardrock rock and kissed it with a smile.

He was hours behind his fastest time, but who cared? He was 17th overall, and more important, he said, he had made it. Forty-two runners — almost a third of the pack — would not.

"Any day you can finish Hardrock," Taylor said, "is a good day."

Help in the final stretch

Halfway through the race, runners are allowed to be joined by friends, called pacers, who run with them,

carrying food, prodding them along and navigating once fatigue has eroded judgment.

Taylor didn't use a pacer. But Teisher asked an old friend, Melissa Heggen, to pace for 35 miles at the end.

"It wasn't pretty," Heggen said. Teisher begged and bargained to stop and sleep. He argued until, twice, she let him lie down for 10-minute naps in the middle of nowhere. But then she cajoled him down the trail again.

As they walked, she did the math for him, calculating what pace he would need to finish before the 48-hour cutoff. Sometimes they were ahead. Sometimes they were behind. But as the race wore on, and Silverton crept closer, Teisher felt the finish pulling him in like a reel.

He trotted in to the last aid station, nine miles from the finish, just before dark on the second night. His face was gaunt. His eyes looked like they had been rubbed in sand. His voice was soft and raspy, but under his faded camouflage hat, he was wearing a satisfied smile.

His girlfriend handed him a cold Pabst.

"I know I'll make it now," he said. "Nine miles. I can do that in three hours. No problem."

He shoveled down a big bowl of mac and cheese (stomach upset was never a problem with Teisher), slipped on his iPod with a new Widespread Panic concert cued up, and splashed across a creek to start the climb.

Four and a half hours later, after midnight, his headlamp appeared, bobbing at the end of an empty Silverton street.

He had been hallucinating so much about bears and cougars behind every tree that when he saw a human pointing him through a confusing intersection, he didn't believe she was real.

A few minutes later, he kissed the rock.

At 42 hours, 55 minutes, he finished 59th.

People can't imagine how good it feels, he said.

After so much pain and worry and struggle, there were few moments he yearned for as much as pressing his lips against that cold stone. Right after he was done, another yearned-for moment came when he pressed his lips against a cold Pabst.

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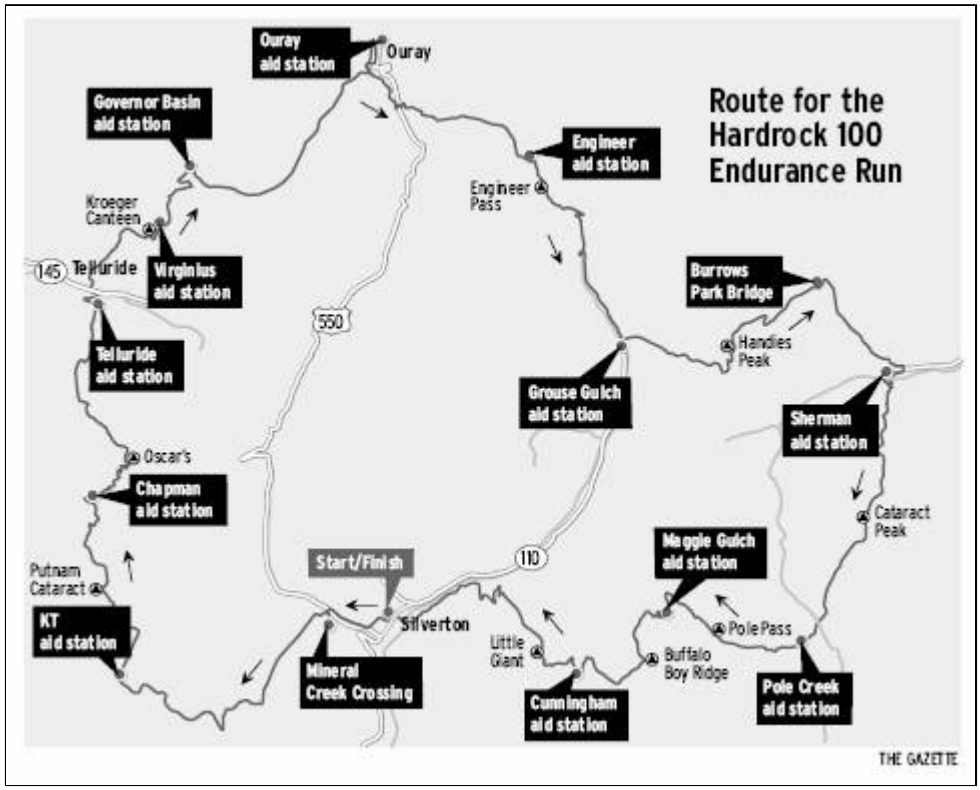
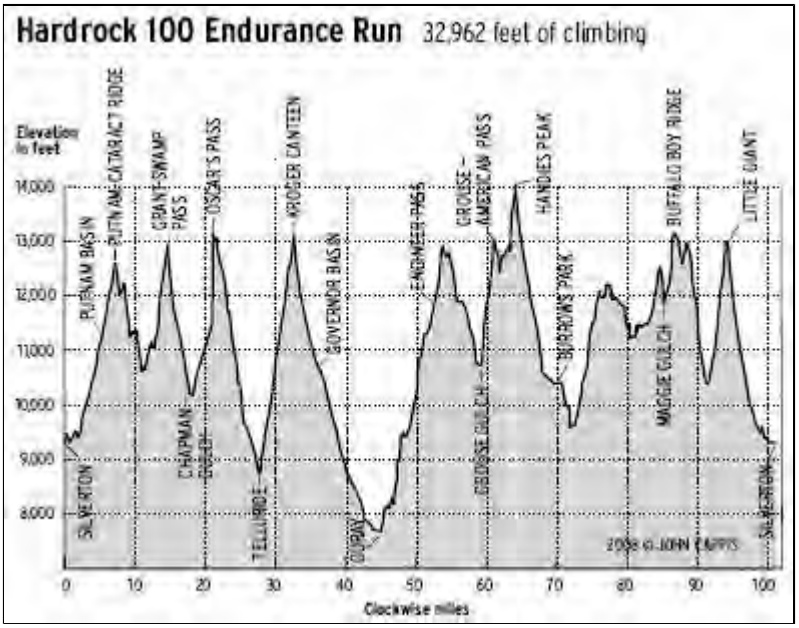
Founded: 1991 Distance: 100.5 miles Average elevation: 11,016 feet Percentage on trails or Jeep roads: 99.8 Number of runners in 2008: 140 Average percent of runners who finish the race: 54 Average age: 46 Number of males/females: 124/16

Neal Taylor, among 140 athletes to take on the Hardrock 100 Endurance Run, crossed the South Fork Mineral Creek just after the start of the race, which began in Silverton on July 11.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTIAN MURDOCK, THE GAZETTE Jon Teisher crossed a snowfield while climbing Oscar's Pass during the Hardrock 100 Endurance Race in the San Juan Mountains on July 11. The runners gained 3,000 feet in two miles while climbing the 13,200-foot pass — one of 11 mountain passes included in the 100.5-mile race.



PHOTOS BY CHRISTIAN MURDOCK, THE GAZETTE Darkness fell on the Grouse Gulch aid station during the first night of the Hardrock 100 Endurance Race in the San Juan Mountains on July 11.



VIDEO & SLIDE SHOW For video of the Hardrock 100 Endurance Run, as well as a slide show, visit gazette. com.

Neal Taylor was in good spirits as he changed his shoes at the Ouray aid station, 43.9 miles into the race. “I could say I feel good, but I don’t,” he said.

Jon Teisher ate a King’s Chef hamburger at the Ouray aid station and chased it down with a Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. “They’re taking us through stuff I’d be afraid to do while climbing a fourteener,” he said.

CHRISTIAN MURDOCK, THE GAZETTE Jon Teisher enjoyed a cigar and a beer after finishing the Hardrock 100 Endurance Race. With a time of 42 hours, 55 minutes, Teisher was 59th out of 98 finishers.