

## **HARDROCK 100 ENDURANCE RUN JULY 11-12, 2008 by Andrew Hewat**



I peered out from under my flimsy blanket. Through the fog of semi-delirium I could see other runners in a similar state of malaise. I heard Beth's comforting voice: "Andy, Larry is going on. We are leaving. You have plenty of time. Try and get some more fluids in. Natalie will check on you. Don't worry, you have plenty of time to recover and still finish." I doubted that. But I had to believe Beth was right. She was pacing her husband Larry, a Hardrock100 veteran. Beth is an ultra veteran in her own right. I was sorry to see them go but I had to trust her judgement. I didn't have any choice. I was thoroughly depleted and couldn't stand up let alone tackle the 6 hours it would take me to get over Handies Peak at 14, 048 feet. Natalie? I had no idea who she was but she became my guardian angel bringing me cups of ginger ale for the next hour.

Nearly 24 hours into my Hardrock adventure I had to dig deep and call upon all the determination I could muster. Curled up in the fetal position on the end of a cot, I was lying in the first aid tent at Grouse Gulch, shivering uncontrollably. Was this how my race would end? Someone poked their head into the tent and announced we have a new course record: Kyle Skaggs had just finished in 23:23! Oh god, he was finished and here I was at just 58 miles. Could I really do this? My heart was heavy. I never contemplated pulling out but feared I was defeated. In this condition I was in real danger of not making it. My mind swirled. Sleep. I really needed sleep but I was freezing cold and my heart was racing. Closing my eyes just sent me into a spinning vortex. My tongue was swollen in my mouth. I was worried, really worried about my physical state. Waves of nausea swept over me. I had been in a bad state before at ultras but never anything like this. The altitude was killing me. I was thoroughly depleted. I peeked out again from under my blanket. It was like a death zone. One guy was buried under a pile of blankets on another cot. Two others were huddled in chairs, faces expressionless. Steve McBee was sitting on the end of my cot staring at the propane heater in a trance. I've got to get out of here. If I stay here my race is over.

I had no idea how long I had been there. I kept thinking: this is Hardrock. Hardrock: I've been waiting for this for years; I've been training so hard for so long; I've come half way around the world; I kept thinking of my wife, my kids, my friends, and the whole on-line running community back home in Australia watching the webcast, willing me to go on. I

thought of all my new Hardrock friends out there slogging away and imagined sitting through the presentations on Sunday morning and not getting my finishers certificate. This is Hardrock, the pinnacle of trail running. This is what I run for. No, this is what I *live* for. What was I doing here wallowing on this cot? I could hear runners coming and going outside. That's it, I have *got* to get going. I felt terrible but that's no excuse. If I could walk I could go on. I threw off the blanket and staggered to my feet. I tried to portray an impression of stability and assurity. There was no turning back. I thanked Natalie, cast a glance around and asked if anyone wanted to join me. No takers. No response. Leaving the tent and bracing for the predawn chill, I found my camelbak and informed the officials that number 129 was back from the dead and checking out.

The sun was about to rise on day 2 of my run. I wasn't done with just yet. Not by a long shot.

### Day 1 **Silverton to Kamm Traverse** (11.5miles, 3hrs 39mins)



Moments before the start.

The race had started so well. Race Director, Dale Garland sent us on our way from outside the school gym in Silverton at 6am. It was almost surreal milling around at the start. Hardrock entrants are some of the most experienced trail runners on the planet and brushing shoulders with them was rather intimidating. In fact the realisation that I was about to actually start Hardrock was overwhelming. I tried to relax. I had my photo taken in front of *the* Hardrock and almost missed the start. Amidst cheers and adrenaline all 140 runners quickly streamed out of town and up onto the Shrine Road and out towards Nute's Shute. There was lots of banter as the gun-runners raced to the front while others were competing to be last in the long line. Kyle Skaggs could be seen racing away from the rest of the field as he turned below the Shrine, overlooking the town. I deliberately settled into a walk to avoid getting swept up by the early pace. After nearly 3 weeks of

acclimation and course marking I was as fit as I could be, but my heart was already racing in the thin air above 9,000 feet.

After just over 2 miles we dropped from the Nute Chute trail paralleling high above the highway. Like so many lemmings dropping off the shelf, down the hill, across the road, we slogged through the marshy bog alongside Mineral Creek to the river crossing. Supporters and crews were lining the road cheering us on. There was no queue at the river crossing, just a steady stream of runners plunging into the icy snow-melt water and grabbing the fixed guide rope to haul themselves across. I followed suit, lunging into the freezing thigh deep current. My feet would be wet now for the next 2 days. The adventure had really begun. I was loving every minute of it.

The first climb of the day was slow and steady following Silverton Bear Creek. There was much conversation as excited runners found their rhythm all around me. I was happy to get caught behind others, forcing me to go slow. The narrow trail up the wooded valley meant that a conga line soon developed. Occasionally an impatient runner would surge past. My plan was to be conservative early. I harboured aspirations of breaking 40 hours but my main focus was just to finish. As the trail climbed higher, the valley opened above the tree-line into grassy meadows dotted with bright yellow wildflowers. It was a truly beautiful day. The kind of day made for running trails. The snow banks we had encountered during trail marking had receded and the going was good. My spirits were high. The views were spectacular. There was nowhere else I would rather be.

The course was easy to follow as runners were spread out as far as the eye could see. We crested the blunt summit and followed Putnam-Lime ridge at 12,600 ft before a steep descent. My plan was to hold back on the downhills early to save my legs for later in the race. Despite this my natural flow took me past many runners on the uneven terrain as we crossed into the basin below. Snow banks framed this wide open grassy basin. Once across we climbed again to Cataract-Porcupine saddle before descending on singletrack and crossing a creek back into trees once again. There were large boggy sections that sucked at your shoes. The trail undulated and I was suddenly alone in the bush. But not for long, as I emerged and forded another creek the first aid station of Kamm Traverse came into view and there were runners everywhere. A quick refill and a bite to eat and I was off again. (3 minutes at KT.)



### **Kamm Traverse to Chapman Gulch (7.4miles, 2hrs 25mins)**



Looking back at KT Aid Station from the Kamm Traverse

The Kamm Traverse is a deceptive but steady climb up the edge of a steep slope with sheer drops to the valley below. The footing is good and I ate as I climbed. Looking around I could see all the way down the Mineral Creek valley and the early sun glistened on the water creating a magical setting between the steep tree lined mountains. We disappeared back into the trees and wound our way to the river crossing at Porcupine Creek. I opted for the fallen log crossing rather than the icy water and had no trouble negotiating the mess of branches and logs. Then a steep, dusty climb. I passed a runner doubled over sucking in air. I felt for him in this much trouble so early in the race. I knew what the rest of this climb was like. There was still a long way to go. And this was only the second of the twelve major climbs over 12,000 feet that we had to cross. After some steep switchbacks we joined a well formed but muddy trail: Ice Lake Trail. The trees gave way to grassy meadows and the thick skunk cabbage that lined the path. We broke off the main trail and climbed higher eventually traversing a steep scree slope overlooking the spectacular Island Lake, so named because of the little island in the middle of this glacial lake. I was surprised that what had been frozen solid just two weeks ago was now clear aquamarine blue water. This small glacial lake features in many photo albums from Hardrock and encapsulates the true majesty of the alpine scenery. I could see runners ahead of me all the way up to the saddle, some climbing hand over hand as it got steeper and slippery on the loose scree.



Island Lake from the climb to Grant-Swamp Pass. Spot the Marmot?

Grant-Swamp Pass, 12,920ft. The saddle is a narrow shelf with steep drop-offs on both sides. I picked up a small rock to place ceremoniously on the Joel Zucker memorial cairn and worked my way around to the descent zone. To my amazement, there on the edge of the path was a mountain goat. How superb to encounter such a magnificent wild creature in this environment. I edged out onto the ledge and Scott Hirst, up there photographing runners, told me to get in front of the goat so he could get a picture with the caption: “who is the biggest goat?”. The goat flitted away and I decided it was time to go as well. There were a couple of runners inching down the scree slope backwards on hands and feet. I couldn’t follow for fear of showering them in rocks so I moved over to the rough edge of the slope and took off. This is probably my favourite descent of the whole run and with wild abandon I slipped and slid to the bottom. Momentum carried me down into Swamp Canyon and I glissaded on a couple of snow banks before working across the rocky slope to the trail down the left of the canyon. My heart was pounding in my ears as I sucked thin air, catching my breath again. What a hoot. Sometimes you’ve just got to go with the flow.

Apart from a couple of slippery snow banks it was now good running. Disappearing into the trees the path wound its way down to Swamp Canyon Stream. I splashed through the creek, pausing only to dunk my quads to cool them off after the long descent. I expected the aid station to be here but signs indicated it had been moved down the road a 1/4 mile. It was a short haul along the picturesque aspen lined road to the atmospheric aid station at Chapman Gulch. A definite Mexican theme with margaritas and coronas on offer. I was tempted by the beer but settled for some water and a cheese frajita. First dropbag checkpoint so I rifled through grabbing a few goodies. A handful of corn chips dipped in guacamole were a real treat and I was back onto the road to the well marked turn-off to Oscar’s Pass. (15 minutes at Chapman.)

### **Chapman to Telluride** (8.9miles, 2hrs 52mins)

I was now entering an unfamiliar part of the course. Coming down Swamp Canyon you could see the intimidating switch-backs that ascend Oscar’s Pass in the distance. Now I

was climbing those very switchbacks. The afternoon sun was shrouded by cloud but the still air was making me sweat profusely. Up, up I went. I could feel the altitude sucking the energy out me. The road deteriorated until it was just a pile of rocks. I passed a couple of runners who seemed to be struggling. And still more climbing until I was crossing a steep slippery snow bank. Steps had been cut into the snow face with rocks dug in to help give us traction. We had been warned about these crossings at the race briefing. A slip here would be treacherous and I paid due respect. Considering some of the steep narrow cliff top trails we would pass I found the snow banks the most dangerous part of the course. As a southern hemisphere flat-lander I was not used to travelling on steep icy snow and it really slowed me down. Oscar's Pass climb went on forever. Another dangerous snow bank. Again I looked down and realised that a slip here could end more than just my race. And then finally the summit at 13,432ft, and the views took my mind off any pain from the effort.



Sneaking up on Larry Hall.

There were runners ahead of me and I managed to pass a couple. I was surprised to catch Larry Hall so early. I quipped with him about being old and slow and we ran together for a while. The course dropped rapidly and we crossed snow banks and wound down into Telluride Bear Creek canyon. Cresting a rise on singletrack John Capps, Co-Course Director was laying like a sniper off the side of the trail amongst the wildflowers with his long lens camera. Fantastic course, I commented as I ran past. What an understatement. I was in trail running heaven.

The trail turned into a kind of road that kept descending until the township of Telluride appeared through the trees on my right. I had pulled ahead of Larry and was running strongly but well within myself. There were lots of day walkers on the trail, some offered encouragement. A playful dog decided he wanted to race me down the trail and ran with me until his owner was out of sight. Finally, I passed a volunteer sitting beside the trail, radioing our numbers ahead and signalling the turnoff. I dropped steeply off the road through the trees and into the aid station to much applause and cheering. I was feeling good. Even better with the warm reception. After a quick trip to the toilets I grabbed some food and a refill and off through the town, following the well marked chalk arrows. (11 minutes at Telluride)



Looking back up Telluride Bear Creek Canyon.

### **Telluride to Kroger's Kitchen (Virginius Pass) (5miles, 2hrs 29min)**

After leaving the bitumen on the edge of Telluride, the jeep road climbed steeply, switch-backing through the thick conifers. Periodically I glanced back through the trees and could see other runners working their way through the streets. Nestled in the alpine valley, Telluride would look at home on any postcard. Following my mantra of 'survive the climbs and restrain on the descents' I soon found myself being caught and passed by others. This was another part of the course I hadn't seen but knew how it ended, with a steep pitch and traverse up to Virginius Pass and the aid station of Kroger's Kitchen. It was a short leg but it packed a punch climbing from 8,750ft to 13,100ft in just 5 miles. The trees provided shade until we broke into the alpine meadows. Now the craggy-saw-tooth peaks that represented our next climb came into view. Oh man, we really go over that? Having other runners around me kept me honest but I could feel my energy levels dropping. I needed some food but figured I could wait until I reached Kroger's Kitchen. Bad idea. The higher we got the colder I got. I found myself traversing a steep snowbank and shivering. Enough. I stopped and pulled on my jacket and grabbed a gu to get me going again.

The last steep scramble to the pass (13,100ft) and I could see the tarp strung across the narrow saddle, flapping in the wind. Unbelievable. The wind seemed to channel up through this narrow opening. The aid crew were great but with limited supplies that were

all packed-in I just grabbed a coke and some fruit. I huddled out of the wind but couldn't escape the cold. I quickly realised I had to get out of there. (7minutes at Kroger's)

### **Kroger's Kitchen to Governors Basin (3.2miles, 46mins)**

There was a fixed rope on the steep snow covered pitch down the other side. A volunteer offered me the rope, suggesting the groove worn into the snow by runners glissading was getting thin and exposing dangerous rocks so the rope route would be safer. I will take my chances. The slide was a hoot and I managed to bounce off a couple of rocks and end up with a ton of snow in my shorts. Up and across a short shelf and then another slide with even more chance of hitting rock before slipping and sliding down the last pitch.

Larry had passed me while I was huddled at Kroger's but I picked him up again on these descents and we ran shoulder to shoulder down the jeep road. The downhill pounding was relentless and it was a relief to reach the Governors Basin aid station and stop for some food and a refill. (6minutes at Governors)

### **Governors Basin to Ouray (7.9miles, 1hr 35mins)**

After my little energy crash up at Kroger's Kitchen I was keen to get calories. I shovelled in food and had both bottles filled with Mountain Dew. It was early to hit the caffeine but the sugar would be more than welcome and should get me to the major stop at Ouray. We were now on a wide open jeep road with steep cliffs to our left and a sharp drop down to the raging river below. At one point the rock face above jutted out completely across the road that had been blasted out of the cliff. But this road was nearly all downhill so we settled into a steady run. There were two runners just in front of us and we gradually caught up to the first, veteran Randy Isler. He joined us, matching our pace, eventually running all the way into Ouray with us. As we finally approached the town it was time to leave the road. I was familiar with the new turnoff onto the Ouray Perimeter Trail, having scouted it a couple of times in training. It was a relief to get back onto trail after the pounding of the hard road for the last hour. As we rounded the corner to a short bridge over the canyon the other runner we had been following appeared: another veteran, Rickie Redland. The little metal bridge gives a spectacular view of the raging river snaking through the tight canyon way below. Across the footbridge, I lead the group into the narrow tunnel ducking my head cautiously. The only light filtered in from the other end so I blocked all the light for those behind me. I heard some swearing and cursing as the others stumbled along blindly. The trail then dropped steeply out the other end and I actually grabbed the rail to break my slide. The four of us trotted together through the streets and then ran shoulder to shoulder into the Ouray aid station.

I was very happy to make it here in daylight. Even happier to still be feeling so good. This was a major aid station and I had to prepare for the night. I was quickly ushered to a

chair alongside the food tent. Teresa and Bob adopted me and waited on me while I fossicked through my bag, added a layer of clothes and grabbed my lights. There was plenty of food and I was hungry so ate heartily. I asked after some of the others and they told me John Dove had left only ten minutes or so before me. Wow, I expected him to be much further ahead. I grabbed some food to go and left thinking how cool it would be to catch him. After spending so many hours training together on the course leading up to the run it would be good to at least run with him for a while. Refilled and loaded with night gear, my camelbak settled heavily on my back but it had become a part of me, an extension of my being. For the moment, I was carrying my world on my back. I walked the length of Ouray slowly, still eating and digesting and by the time I reached the edge of town my trusty headlamp was on. Bring on the night. (15 minutes at Ouray)

### **Ouray to Engineers Pass (7.6miles, 4hrs 9mins)**

By the time I checked out, John was actually 1/2 an hour ahead of me. My delusional aspirations of catching him were just that. He would go on to finish with a great time of 38:51. I had spent many hours learning the course with him and knew how strong he would finish. In my rush to leave I forgot to tell Larry I was going but I knew he was picking up his wife and pacer, Beth, to accompany him through the night. I was sure he would catch me again before long.

Once clear of the town and onto the trail I was surprised how much climbing and descending there was on this short section up to the Highway crossing. I hadn't seen this section and had to stop several times to check directions and spot the next marker. At one point I headed for a reflector before it started moving: it was a deer, it's eyes flashing in my headlight. Finally I heard traffic close by and the climb brought me out onto the highway. Familiar territory again, the long climb up Ouray Bear Creek canyon.

Ouray is the lowest point of the course at 7,870ft and this climb is the longest of the race. (Up to Engineers Pass at 12,910ft.) But I felt strong and worked the series of switch backs over the loose shale steadily. The shale tinkled. Someone had described it as like running on broken china. I could hear voices and see lights above and below me, but I was all alone. Once the trail levelled out along the steep canyon wall I even managed to run some sections. In daylight this is one of the most spectacular parts of the course, with the trail literally cut into the steep canyon wall. In the darkness the roar of the river far below reverberated up the sheer canyon walls. The beam of my headlamp dissolved into the inky blackness of the void below. A trip here would be fatal. But that is Hardrock. Many times during the race I would look down a sheer cliff and realise a slip here would mean certain death. No exaggeration. Definitely not for the faint hearted.



Ouray Bear Creek Canyon on trail marking day. Many ran this in the dark.

I passed a couple of runners with pacers. The night had brought renewed energy and I wanted to make the most of it. The night also brought solitude. I was remembering how we had seen a bear further up this canyon on the trail marking day. And just then a small cascade of pebbles came tumbling down from the shelf above me, as if disturbed by something. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. I stopped and turned my light into the darkness above. Nothing. My imagination took over and I started running again. I don't usually get spooked but back in Australia the nightlife is likely to be small, furry and herbivorous. Not so here.

I caught up to Randy again and we hiked up the trail to the Yellow Jacket Mine site, where we also caught up to Rickie and her pacer. We all stopped to don jackets as the elevation and night were combining to bring down the temperature. I pulled away from the others but could feel the energy gleaned from all the food at Ouray draining away. I knew Engineer was a pack-in aid station but looked forward to any kind of food as I was getting really hungry again. As the lights of Engineer appeared I headed straight for the food table. A young volunteer asked for my bottle. He said he hoped Succeed would be OK as they were out of water. Um, no. I kind of need water. So he drained the ice water out of his cooler to fill my bottle. I wondered what he was going to do for the next 70 runners behind me. The soup was chicken, sorry, can't eat that. I looked around and there wasn't anything I could face. I grabbed a handful of dry crusty foccacia-like-bread and made a cup of black tea with sugar. I dunked the bread to make it easier to swallow and decided I needed to get to Grouse where there would be more food choices. (14minutes at Engineers)

### **Engineers to Grouse Gulch (6.9miles, 3hrs 57mins)**

I was above the tree-line and alone in the wide open basin below Engineers Pass. The trail ahead was dotted with slow moving lights. Far above I could see the flashing fixed red light signalling the top of this climb. I was starting to struggle. The constant climbing from Ouray for the last five hours, the cumulative toll of all the climbs of the day, the body clocks natural need for sleep and the altitude were conspiring to wear me down. The narrow track was easy to follow and despite having to cross icy creeks I slowly

overhauled the summit. Across a slippery snowbank and I reached the road at the top, 12,910ft. There seemed to be runners all around me. I didn't linger and started running down the road towards Grouse Gulch. I looked at my Garmin GPS watch and made a mental note of how many miles to go and settled into a steady pace behind other runners.

We passed a fork in the road and continued to our right, down the hill. I barely cast a glance, following the trail of lights in front of me. I passed Rickie's pacer who was falling behind her and caught up to her just as the guy in front of us came to a stop. He looked around and asked me when I last saw a trail marker. At the top. This is all wrong, he said. The hill is on the wrong side of us. He had run Hardrock before and so had Rickie but no consensus could be reached. I pulled out my map and compass and we crouched over it in the middle of the road, in the middle of the night. Yep, we should be over there he said. That fork at the top, we went the wrong way. My heart sunk. Are you sure? If this is the right road it is only another mile to the aid station. I really wanted to see that aid station. I was tempted to keep going: 1 mile down hill versus 2 or 3 back up then another 3 or 4 down to the checkpoint. They headed back up leaving me. I conceded to follow. I decided to take a toilet break and as I was on the side of the road a pair of eyes peered back at me from the bushes. I finished my business and fairly bolted up the hill after the others!

Almost on cue, my Garmin battery went flat. A bit like me. I trudged up the hill alone and very tired. My race plan was in tatters. I started to withdraw into my survival mode. I didn't realise that I had stopped drinking and clearly hadn't had enough to eat for hours now. More lights were coming down this wrong road, further confusing me. We stopped and the maps came out again. Fred Ecks produced a handheld GPS. Yep, this is definitely wrong, he said. I was almost relieved to be sure now that we were heading back to the right course. Larry and Beth appeared, also on this wrong road. Oh Andy, Beth said sympathetically, recognising my dejected, sorry state. I was pleased to see them but sorry that they had followed the misguided procession. We weren't far from the intersection so once we reached the downhill again I ran with them. Larry had succumbed to an old vision impairment that only struck him at night during ultras: he suffered double vision. This significantly slowed him down so I tried to help light his way as Beth guided him, by running alongside.

My mental state deteriorated rapidly and I found myself leaving them with the sole purpose of just getting to Grouse. The tents and lights came into view and I shuffled in and collapsed into a chair. Someone grabbed my bottles and refilled them while I had some welcome hot potato soup. A crew lady draped a blanket over my legs and I found myself sliding down onto the cold rocky ground and pulling the blanket over me. Next thing I felt several arms lifting me and steering me into the warm tent and onto the cot. My world was closing in rapidly and I needed to lie down.

And so I found myself huddled on a cot in the predawn hours. It could have so easily ended right here. (1hr 7mins at Grouse.)

## Day 2 **Grouse Gulch to Sherman** (13.4miles, 5hrs 48mins)

There were cheers and applause as I shuffled out of the aid station. I noticed a mummy-like body encased in a sleeping bag in the back of a pick-up truck. I recognised Whit deep asleep. He was given a start off the wait-list merely 15 minutes before the race start. I had heard that he had dropped here at Grouse. I shook his feet and asked if he wanted to come with me. He grunted and rolled over back to sleep, done. I found the path off the road and settled into a steady pace. I still had no energy but was resolved that this was as good as it would get. The dawn light revealed Hardrockers spread out across the mountain. I passed a few and eventually crested the final pitch up onto American-Grouse Pass (13,020ft). I found I was stopping to pee way too often. On one of these occasions as a runner (Chad, who apparently is a doctor) went past he commented that that was a good sign. I said it would be except I was going too frequently. I took a salt cap and hoped that would help.

The sun wasn't reaching into American Basin yet but I could still see runners all the way across to Handies. How intimidating the imposing silhouette of the mountain was. The snow banks were icy and treacherous. I slipped and slid down into the basin and worked my way across toward the next climb. I had retreated within myself, operating on autopilot, focussed on just moving forward. As I approached a couple on an icy snow bank deep in the basin, I was surprised to see it was Larry and Beth. Larry's poor night vision had really slowed him down. I continued past them, confident that they would catch up as Larry's eyes improved with the daylight.

As I started the long switchbacks up to Handies I spotted a mountain goat on the trail moving slowly in front of a runner and his pacer. He was in no hurry and just ambled up the trail. With renewed resolve I put my head down and slogged away up Handies Peak, 14,048 ft. The higher I got, the sicker I felt. This was the pattern for the rest of my run. Each climb I would get progressively worse towards the summit. I accepted this and pushed through it, hoping to feel better on the descents and in the valleys. I never expected this to be easy. But then I never expected it to be *this* hard, either.

The summit of Handies seems to take forever to reach. You can see it from afar and then as you approach the contour obscures the flat summit. Drawing deep breathes in a slow steady rhythm I cranked out the final steps knowing that now I had conquered the highest part of the course. As I looked around I could have been on top of the world. Craggy snow-capped mountains unfolded before me all the way to the horizon. I felt like I *was* on top of the world. There was no lingering. I was now bathed in full sunlight but it was still cold. The goat stood on a big ice cornice at the end of the summit, watching runners descend. I bade him adieu and peeled off down the steep slippery gravel path. I have little fear of steep gravel but with little energy just slid and trotted down as best I could. I caught and passed a few more runners. Normally this would boost my confidence but I was in survival mode. Down in the valley I refilled my bottle from a snow fed stream and stripped off a few layers. The lower I went the better I felt, the more I could run. I repassed Chad and then several others and pulled away.



I love the trail here through the forest below the tree line. Twisting and turning through the conifers on the soft dirt. Despite my nausea I felt at one with the trail and wished it could all feel this good. The running drained my energy and by the time I reached the road at Burrows Park I was walking again. I refilled a bottle from the water drop and used the toilets. The runners I had passed coming down filed past again. From Burrows to Sherman is the longest 3 miles of road on the planet. Jeeps and little 4 wheelers kept streaming past, shrouding us in dust. The morning sun beat down and the flies would settle if you stopped moving. Around each bend I looked for the change in road surface that Charlie had said would signal the trail head. On and on the gravel road wound. I should be running but was weary and settled for a jog/walk routine, repassing some runners.

Finally there were chalk arrows and a rock cairn and we were back on real trail. If you could call it that. We wound steeply down through the trees and ruins of old buildings until we hit the road that lead into the Sherman aid station. I jogged tentatively in and sat down resolutely in a chair. My drop-bag gear was spread neatly before me on a table. My bottles were whisked away and filled. I removed one of my shoes for the first time. I was developing a nasty hotspot on the edge of my right heel. In fact the skin was puckering into a prune-like fold from being wet for 30 odd hours. I cleaned and dried it and put some tape across it as a token gesture. I put on a clean dry sock and hoped it wouldn't get much worse. Time to go. I stuffed some food into my pockets and was offered an icy-pole to go. The volunteer rattled off the choice of flavours, which included root-beer.

Ooh, I'd like one of those. When he returned he was apologetic that all the root-beer had gone. Never mind: raspberry instead, mmmm yum.

### **Sherman to Pole Creek to Maggies (9.1miles, 4hrs 18min; 8min; 4.3miles, 1hr 58min)**

Larry had come into Sherman while I was still there. He was much stronger on the climbs so I headed out, knowing he would catch up again soon. This was all unfamiliar territory. After a series of long switch-backs through the woods I emerged high into the valley. After a river crossing that soaked my sore heel again I climbed steeply only to recross the river just above the waterfall. I remembered the warning that if you slipped here you would likely go over the waterfall. I was tired so concentrated on my foot placement. No problems. Except my heel was getting really painful. Eventually the climbing reached the top of the Continental Divide at Cataract-Pole Divide Pass 12,200ft, climb number eight. The trail crossed more creeks and skirted ponds. Mud. It was unavoidable. The trail was hard to pick up in a few places after crossing the creeks. I remembered chatting with Charlie Thorn, Co-Course Director, as he straightened old marking flags in his front yard in Silverton before a marking day: with a glint in his eye he remarked that he thought Hardrock was getting too easy and he was putting out less markers each year. He and his partner in crime, John Cappis were responsible for this remarkable course and seemed to take pride in maintaining the difficulty factor. I don't think there is any danger of anyone accusing them of creating a course that is too easy!

In the high open country I could see Larry catching me. I stopped to look for flags and half waited as he closed in quickly. He was moving strongly. I welcomed the chance to have some company, to keep me moving. Beth had stopped at Sherman but would be at Cunningham later that night. Larry and I walked and talked for a while. He stopped and sat down for a snack and I leant on my poles and tried to choke down a breakfast burrito that had gone cold and hard in my pocket. I was getting hungry but food was sticking in my throat. I tried to wash it down, with little success. We set off again and were soon passed by Steve Pero and another runner. Steve looked strong and I envied his energy. We were all walking but some faster than others. I told Larry not to wait for me. He needed to cover as much ground in daylight as he could. He forged ahead and I wallowed in my altitude induced nausea again. On this high open treeless plain I could see for miles. I watched the others disappearing into the distance, almost like I was going backwards. Occasionally I would see a small, brightly coloured Skittle in the mud on the trail. Every time I saw one of these I knew Kelly Korevec was still on course ahead of me as these were his trademark ultra fuel. I wondered how all my other new Hardrock friends were doing. Hopefully better than me.

Pole Creek aid station was like an oasis in the middle of nowhere. Like Kroger's Kitchen, it is a packed-in aid station. After a short but draining climb up to the aid station perched high on a shelf, the tarp and a table of food were a blessing. Larry left just as I arrived so I had the crew all to myself. They rustled up some miso soup with noodles. This was the best food I had for the whole race. I was so grateful. As I was leaving Jack Jewel came in. We had been trading places for the last few miles and I had passed him a short time before, standing knee deep in a stream, dousing water over his head. He collapsed in the

shade of the tarp and looked clearly distressed by the heat. (I was greatly relieved the next morning to see him accepting his finishers certificate.) There were so many ways that Hardrock could defeat you.

The route to Maggies from Pole Creek stays on the high plains with a nasty climb towards the end before plummeting into Maggies Gulch and the aid station. My breathing was getting laboured. Getting enough air in was hard work. My sinuses were clogging up due to the thin dry air and prolonged dehydration. I was tired beyond belief. My senses were dulled by fatigue. I picked my way across the puddles and creeks trying to keep my painful right heel as dry as possible. I approached a wide, shallow creek and stepped tentatively onto a large sloping rock trying to keep my heel out of the water. Smack! My foot slipped right out from under me. I landed face-first on the rock. Icy water poured down my neck, filling my pack. I lay there dazed. I sat up; everything seemed to work. The icy cold water had permeated all my clothes. I felt my face. Feels OK. I clambered up and out, dripping wet. From there on I plunged straight into every creek ignoring my right heel.

Once again, I struggled on the climb to Maggie-Pole pass (12,530ft). Each climb was harder than the last. The accumulative effect was wearing me down. Just three more big climbs and I knew them all. I dreaded the last climb out of Cunningham. I had done it twice and knew it would be brutal after two days and 90 miles. But I had to get there first. The sun was getting low in the sky and I was pushing hard to get as far as I could in daylight. I was counting down the miles. Sometimes it felt like I wasn't making any progress. Sometimes I wasn't. Finally I crested the saddle and the rolling valley opened up before me. I broke into a trot and gradually Maggie Gulch aid station came into view. I managed some running over the tussocks and wild-flowers but it was nothing pretty. I was in pure survival mode.

It was cold at the checkpoint so I put my long-sleeve shirt back on while I polished off a cup of mashed potato and then some orange pieces. I chatted briefly with the crew here but was eager to get going. I could see a few runners who had just left and the sun was getting low in the sky. Time to go. (10 minutes at Maggies.)

### **Maggies Gulch to Cunningham Gulch (6.1miles, 3hrs 2mins)**

Knowing there were two climbs in this section played on my mind. Each climb was plunging me deeper into my reserves. Rarely now did I feel free of the nausea. There were runners in front of me to keep me focussed and give me something to chase. If that's what you can call it. I was moving from one marker to the next. The climb out of Maggies is steep and long. I pushed hard on my poles, driving my self upwards. I passed a couple of runners and as the trail turned steep and nasty towards the peak I dug deep and pushed across the top. The sinking sun motivated me and I ran down the hill and across the open fields. I could see runners far ahead as specks and set about chasing them. The impending darkness was closing in on me physically and mentally. Going into a second night without sleep was a huge weight on my mind. Dig deep and push hard. That's all I could do. I was finding reserves I never knew I had. The mountains kept

asking the questions and I kept fumbling through the answers. No way was I giving up without a fight. I would pass runners who looked like the living dead, stumbling along. I was determined not to end like that. Focus. Focus on the next step. Focus on the next flag. Basic stuff. Stripped down to its rawest elements. This was pure trail running. This is what I came here for.

Once over Buffalo Boy Ridge (13,060ft) I could see the next climb ahead over Green Mountain pass in the early evening light. Down into the basin, across the road and cross country towards the saddle. The next climb over the pass (12,980ft) was short but steep. Once across I ran down the other side. One more big climb. I could do this. I had plenty of time. I just had to keep moving. I passed a couple more runners on the long steady descent through the valley. I was hoping to make the sharp final steep descent into Cunningham before it got really dark. At the top of the long cliff I passed a group of people with at least one runner amongst them. The initial steep shale and gravel caused me to slip and slide but I was in control. I ran the steep switch backs in fading light, aware of the sheer drop if I missed a step. Half way down I ran into Larry sitting by the trail digging through his pack. I stopped to pull out my light as well. I asked how his vision was. Not good. I asked if he wanted me to stay with him. He assured me he would be alright and we could see the aid station below, so I reluctantly pressed on. I slowed in the darkness, realising I had little to gain and much to lose with a fall here. The path was narrow, steep and slippery. I could see the lights of runners climbing the other side of the valley on the final leg. The aid station was broadly lit and was a welcome sight. I used the toilets here before shuffling into the last aid station.

Charlie greeted me. I was impressed to see the Co-course Director working an aid station. He took my bottles and asked what I wanted. Water in one and coke in the other, please. Water and 'what'? Coke. 'What?' Coke? 'Can you spell that?' C-O-K-E. 'Oh coke!' My Aussie accent had defeated him. I had some soup. Beth was there and I reassured her that Larry was close behind me but having trouble with his eyes again. I felt better knowing she was there to pace him in. Theresa was also there, she had been planning to pace John Prohira as she had last year. I asked how he was going. He had dropped at Ouray with gut problems. Bummer. As a Hardrock competitor you felt for every runner who fell short but when it was one of your friends it cut deeper. She asked if I wanted her to pace me in. I wasn't sure. I hadn't really considered a pacer. I had never used a pacer before. Then I thought of the cold dark mountain I had to climb and my deteriorating state and Theresa there all dressed up and nowhere to go and it made perfect sense. Yes. Please. Come with me. The longer I stood there the colder I got. I could feel myself starting to shut down. I had to get moving. I finished my soup, rifled through my drop bag and dumped anything I thought I wouldn't need. I pulled on my overpants for the first time, aware that the cold was draining me. We checked out and someone directed us down to the Cunningham Creek crossing through bamboo flaming torches. (16 minutes at Cunningham, it felt like a lot less.)

## **Cunningham to Silverton** (9.2miles, 4hrs 43mins)

The creek was freezing. Once across we had trouble picking up a marker. There were lights dotting the trail as far up as we could see. The mountain was speckled with bobbing flashlights. The cold of the creek quickly alerted me that I had forgotten to grab a warm shirt. I asked Theresa to wait and I waded *back* through the icy water and trudged back into the aid station. I found my bag again and put on the extra layer. I was still carrying a good waterproof jacket if it got really nasty up top but at least now I was warm. Through the creek one last time and we began our climb. The wet nylon overpants clung to my legs like cling wrap. I let Teresa go in front which spared me some of the burden of navigation. Not that there was much option once we found the path and started up. The steep, narrow switch-backs seemed to never end. We set a steady pace but I thought I would never get there. We stopped occasionally while I caught my breath. I would lean over my poles and suck in big breathes of the thin, dry, cold night air. The talking caused me to breath harder. But it was a welcome distraction. Once again the altitude brought on the malaise that had plagued me. I peeled off the nylon pants as the climb warmed me up. The narrow trail opened into Dives Basin signalling the approaching summit. I looked up and the stars beckoned but I still couldn't see the ridge in the darkness. We went from marker to marker until it levelled out and we worked our way across Little Giant Traverse. This seriously steep section offered no fear to me in my totally depleted state. My whole world consisted of a few feet of trail just in front of me. Teresa kept me moving. She chatted when I was up to it and fell silent when the climbing was stealing my breath. Thankyou Teresa. The last climb 12,970 ft was done. I was heading for the finish. Nothing could stop me now.

As we cleared the saddle there were lights dotting the trail below us. I took the lead, hoping I could dig deep and find some downhill running somewhere in my legs. The first part was a steep scree slope and I used my usual controlled slide to scoot across and down. I started to run the narrow track contouring down the valley above Little Giant Mine. The icy snowbanks slowed me down but we were making good time. I knew this section well and could sense the finish within reach. By the time we cleared the singletrack I had used up all the calories I had taken on board at Cunningham and I was down to a walk again. But unlike the previous descents my nausea didn't pass. I tried the coke but even that sent my stomach into spasms. I tried some orange. No good. OK, looks like we will be walking it in. Every time I tried to run the nausea would overwhelm me and I would stop and lean on my poles, sucking in air. Teresa was patient and ran when I could and walked when I couldn't. I was grateful for the company. We heard voices and despite the walking managed to still pass people.

The road seemed to go on forever. If I wasn't familiar with this section I would have been worried we were off the route. Finally, the sharp turn back down to the Arrastra River crossing. Straight through. I managed some jogging along the pipeline track. By the time we reached the forest trail past the beaver ponds I was back down to a walk. A solo runner jogged past and I recognised him later as the guy buried under the blankets at Grouse Aid station. Great recovery. The small creeks were swollen with the days snow melt but nothing would stop me now. Glimpses of lights through the trees showed

Silverton was palpably close. I started thinking about my finish and I warned Teresa that I might get a little emotional.

We popped out of the trees onto the ski hill. The lights of the township spread out below us. There was a runner with a pacer just in front of us. With the town now clearly within reach we broke into a run again. I realised it would require a big effort to pass this guy. I didn't want to spoil his finish by doubling up so we slowed to a walk well behind. As we crossed the bridge into town he was right in front of us so we ran past. It was purely adrenaline now. I reached into my pack and pulled out my Australian flag. I was going to



Photo by Teresa Sukiennicki

really savour this moment. I threaded the flag onto my trekking pole and it unfurled over my shoulder proudly. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. In the darkness the street lights became a blur as I ran through this timeless tunnel feeling no pain at all. The anticipation was building. The culmination of so much effort. The fulfilment of my long held dream. We turned into Reese Street. I could see the lights of the finish. I could see the gym. I could hear clapping and cheering. Teresa peeled off to the side as I rounded the last corner. My senses were reeling as I held the flag high and ran towards the Hardrock. Tears welled up with the realisation that this was it: I was finishing Hardrock. I collapsed against the rock and kissed the cold hard smooth rock face. I embraced it. I was overcome with emotion. I stood slowly and moved to the side near collapsing. Dale gave me a moment to compose and then hung a medal around my neck. Tears were flowing freely. I was so proud. I hugged him. I grabbed my flag and climbed high onto the rock and held it triumphantly overhead. I had done it. I was finally a Hardrocker. 44hrs34mins.



I couldn't be prouder.

Photo by Teresa Sukiennicki

Obsession. It's not listed in the essential criteria on the entry application for Hardrock but it should be. Obsession; if you are not obsessed with Hardrock before starting the journey you will be by the end. It gets in your blood and like a disease there is no stopping it. But it doesn't guarantee you a finish. Nothing does. Hardrock plays no favourites.

Determination. That is your best bet and your best friend. Determination and a resolve to cover 100 miles across 12 mountain passes and some of the most spectacular and treacherous scenery you could ever imagine. All this in under 48 hours. They say that when you die your life flashes before your eyes. At Hardrock a lifetime of emotions flashes across your mind in the time it takes to cover the course. Hardrock changed me. I look at things differently. It has changed my perspective. You can't run Hardrock and not be affected by it. You take a little bit of the mountains home with you. And you leave a little part of yourself out there. It is not just a race. It is an event. It is run and surrounded by amazing people who become part of a big family, the Hardrock community. It engenders a real sense of camaraderie. It *is* Wild and Tough as the motto claims. But it is more than that. It is an adventure that allows you to explore your very limits and spend a little time immersed in trail running legend. I am grateful to have been granted a chance to participate and humbled by the total experience. Hardrock has been indelibly etched into my psyche. It is something hard to explain. But the name says it all, and no more need be said: Hardrock.