

“Did you pack a light?”

A pacer's report of the 2011 HRH  
by Misti Hurricane

Pacing an ultrarunner is sometimes a series of dilemmas: questions to be asked or not asked; observations to be made out loud or kept to one's self; truths to be told plain, or to be sweetened up first. At the Chapman aid station of the 2011 Hardrock Hundred, the question that I intentionally chose *not* to ask was: “Did you pack a light?”

Chris Gerber was 84 miles into this beast of a race. He had picked me up to pace him at the Grouse aid station. Given the Bridal Veil Falls re-route outside of Telluride, we had been running together for 42.5 miles. Miles that had included, among many other things: a kick-@ss electrical storm at the top of Engineer Pass; a treacherous run down the swampy, snot-slick tundra that comprises the Ouray side of that pass when it's raining; an in-the-dark water fall crossing so sketchy that I asked Chris to hold my hand; a rhythmic and relentless—but almost-interminable—march up the Camp Bird Road; three prematurely-taken “summit” videos on the numerous shoulders of Oscar's Pass; three snow-bound pitches of Virginius in the darkest and coldest hours just before dawn; and delicate, tender-footed “runs” into both Ouray and Telluride because of the cumulative effect of 23,441' of drop on Chris's quads by the Telluride aid station. We'd had an eventful 16.75 hours together, and Chris had been on his feet—either pushing along with the course, or pushing back at it—for close to 30.

Chris's brother, Andy, had been crewing Chris since the start of the race. In the CCW direction, Chapman is the last “crew-able” aid station on the course, so this was the last time Chris and I would see Andy, or any of our belongings, until the finish. Whatever we wanted for the last 19.1 miles, we had to bring with us now.

I paced Chris in the 2010 Hardrock too. That was my first Hardrock experience, and I learned three thus-far-unforgettable lessons: 1) expect the incomprehensible; 2) never go anywhere on the course without GoreTex; and 3) never leave an aid station without sunglasses. If you read my pacer's report from 2010 you'll know I learned these lessons first-hand. Going into the 2011 race I added another item to my Hardrock always-do list: 4) never go anywhere on the course without a light.

We kicked it into Chapman A/S at 11:40 AM on Saturday morning. Chris was gunning for a 36:00:00 finish, which gave us just under 6.5 hours to cover the final 19.1 miles and finish by 6:00 PM. This was do-able. It would require us to move slightly faster than Chris had been averaging since the start, but I knew that we could. It was daylight again, (without Andy) we couldn't do any time-consuming gear changes or re-pack our packs, and Chris was getting his quads back.

We both changed our shoes at Chapman. I packed my pack and I listened to Chris and Andy pack his. I was doing the math in my head: sunset is 8:35 PM. By sunset, anywhere up-course of the final crossing of Mineral Creek, I might not be *needing* a light (that comes 30 minutes later), but I would be wanting one. So there was a 2:35

difference between our intended finish time and the time that I, at least, was going to start thinking about my flashlight.

2:35 is a fair amount of time, even in most hundred mile races. Chris is an exceptionally competent mountain runner who knows the Hardrock course thoroughly. I was not concerned—at all—about going off course. Chris was also in good spirits, adequately fed, and adequately hydrated. His electrolytes were sufficiently balanced, as far as I could tell. He was tired, but also alert, coherent, and sensible per all the signs that I look for in him. In short, Chris was well *in* control of all that factors that were his *to* control.

But in my (admittedly limited) Hardrock experience, 2:35 seems the equivalent of an eye-blink. It's about 5% of the race's time limit. It is also innumerable events over which a runner has little or no control: an electrical storm that doesn't move through fast enough; a fog white-out on the summit of a pass; a creek that flash floods moments before a runner needs to cross it. It is a bad ankle sprain or back bruise from an unintended fall. It is a single bout of serious altitude sickness. My guess is that there are many runners who unexpectedly lose 2:35 to the HRH course every single year the race is run. I did not *think* that we would lose any time on our journey from Chapman to the finish, but I sure knew that we could.

Under normal circumstances, the question, "Did you pack a light," is not only routine between Chris and I, but also somewhat of a joke. Chris has a reputation for belated returns from long runs. It is *predictable* that he will return late from long runs in interesting places. Unless we leave at the crack of dawn on a day near the summer solstice, I don't go for long runs with Chris Gerber without packing a light.

But we were 80 miles into one of the hardest ultramarathons on the planet. We had left normal circumstances somewhere back around Sherman. Here at Chapman, the tiny voice inside me said, there's little room for innocent questions, lots of room for misinterpretation, and nothing at all is routine. Here at Chapman, with nine hours of daylight left to burn, "Did you pack a light?" is a mine field. Buried in it is, "We might not make it" and "I don't think you can do this" and "There's no way you can run a 36:00" and "You *better* pack a light." At Chapman in the CCW direction, the line between a pacer's good judgment and a lack of confidence is a fine one indeed. So I ask *myself* the question, but I don't ask Chris. I drew the angel card (see my 2010 pacer's report) **Respect** prior to the start of the race this year; Chris drew the angel card **Faith**. I left Chapman with a light; I am pretty sure that Chris left without one.

My Fenix P3D tucked safely in the bottom of my pack, I didn't give sunset or darkness another thought. Until about half-way up the climb to Grant-Swamp Pass. When Chris, out of the blue, and in a tone laced with amusement and something else that I can't accurately describe, broke the silence enveloping our upward march with this:

"Those guys back at the aid station...they were packing lights."

If he had had more energy, he might have chuckled a little, to point out their silliness, perhaps. The part that Chris did not say, but that I heard in his voice (for why else would he be saying it?), was: "And what...*what* do you think of *that*?"

The pace of everything, including conversation, tends to diminish above 12,000 feet. The pauses between questions and answers get fat and slow. So when he made his comment, which was really a question, I had a bit of time to think. I will probably never know what was on his mind on the way up Grant-Swamp because I doubt I will ever ask. But my interpretation, in that moment, was that he and I were poised on an edge. Some circle in the space between us was either about to nicely close, or about to begin to unravel. Because really, how does a pacer respond effectively to a comment like that? How do I meet my runner where he's at without abandoning my own judgment? How do I affirm his strength and my confidence while acknowledging our fragility? How do I balance faith and respect?

"Well those guys," I said (and then stopped to inhale), "those guys think that they are on a 38-hour pace. "(This was true.) "If all goes well, those guys think they are gonna finish a half-hour before sunset."

"Oh," says Chris.

Silence. A silence fat and slow and pregnant—once again—with the question that I would not speak aloud at Chapman and that Chris would not speak aloud now: And what about **you**, my pacer...Did **you** pack a light?

"I have a light," I say.

Again, silence.

"I have the same light that has been in my pack since Grouse. I never took it out. I don't go anywhere on this course, no matter what time it is, without my GoreTex, my sunglasses, and my light."

"Ah," says Chris.

And be it my imagination or my hypoxia, I feel the circle gently close. And I give thanks, briefly and silently, for the sheer immensity that surrounds us: these mountains, this course, the whole all-consuming experience. We are both so small out here, in the best of all possible ways. No matter what we bring, or don't bring, in our hearts and in our running packs, there is more than enough room for all of it.

We resume the thing that feels like silence, but includes the sounds of our well-matched footfalls and our carefully measured breaths. Higher and higher as the oxygen -- once again -- transitions from adequate to ephemeral. Chris has been counting down the major climbs since he picked me up. The four that we faced hiking out of Grouse have reduced to two. I learned last year not to think about the fact that, for Chris, this was his seventh enormous climb of the race (eleventh, if you count the ones less than 1000 ft.). To acknowledge that makes me just want to stare at him, all dismay and disbelief, like he is some freak of nature who is built from different stuff than I am. It makes me want to ask: How the f\*ck are you still moving? How are you even still *standing*? How are you even still *awake*? But having a pacer who can't believe that you are still conscious doesn't

seem all that helpful, so I keep that thought stream out of my awareness and agree, when Chris voices our current countdown, that yes, we've got less than two climbs left. It is daylight. It is not too hot; it is not too cold. With our feet on the ground, we have a view that usually belongs only to the birds. There are mountains everywhere I look, and it is beautiful. So instead of asking Chris why he hasn't simply fallen over yet, I tell him a simple truth: that there is nowhere else I'd rather be.

If I were a superstitious pacer, I'd think a statement like that was tempting fate. Especially at Hardrock. But one of the miracles that I have felt manifest at Hardrock is that it seems to be an entire community built around that simple truth: there's nowhere else I'd rather be. Every volunteer, every pacer, every spectator, friend and family member exudes that energy and it's palpable. It's in the air; it's on the trail; it's in the fruit smoothies at Sherman and the race director's smile at every runner's finish. I am pretty sure if I had asked Roch and Fred and the rest of the support crew up on Virginus Pass, they would have said there's no place they'd rather be than feeding me heaven-sent pierogies just before dawn and telling me to get my runner on down to Mendota saddle.

Either ascending or descending Oscar's Pass, Chris had pointed to something off in the distance and identified it as Grant-Swamp Pass. At that time, I could not see anything where he was pointing that looked like the lush green shoulders of the passes we had been climbing all night and all day, so I figured I was misunderstanding, and let it go. But now that we were actually here, I asked once again where we were going. Chris (again, I now realize) pointed out the final pitch up ahead in the distance—a yellowish-brown gash in a wall of grey—and this time I see clearly at what he is pointing. Remember lesson one?

“Chris, that thing is *vertical*. That thing is a *cliff*. That can *not* be the course.”

Expect the incomprehensible.

“That's the course,” he says.

We both know that I don't climb anything technical.

“It looks technical” I say.

“It's not,” he says. In the tone that tells me any further clarification will be a waste of his energy, at a time when he does not have any energy to waste. End of discussion. We march toward the brownish-yellow gash. Lesson one. Bring it. Bring it on.

Up and up. Thankfully, the slope of the yellow gash appears to attenuate as we approach it. Somewhere along the way Chris revises his finish time to 36:30. Nothing has happened to us, but the course takes time away much more easily than it gives it up.

We wrestle with the wall of ball-bearing scree that is the final pitch of Grant-Swamp Pass under partly cloudy skies. During what felt like the final five minutes of our cat-clawing ascent, the clouds coalesced into steel gray masses. We crest the pass and I follow Chris west along the top. He drops behind a rock formation, and as he is doing so, turns back

toward me and silently hands me a small rock. I've learned, with him, to wait before I ask questions. I follow him around a corner and see the plaque. We pause briefly to each place a rock on the Joel Zucker memorial. The sky has further darkened. Going down this time, we set off on another slope of ball bearings. Within the first three minutes of our descent it is raining. Within the first five, it is pouring. And hailing. With thunder, and lightning.

Chris has had a few too-close calls with lightning; understandably, he is wary of it. We were a long, long way from the safety of the trees. So we did the most sensible thing we could, given the terrain: we ran. We ran the way that feels more like flying than running because it is fueled by adrenaline not glucose. Scurrying down and down and down—me, a little hunched over like some sort of ground animal, thinking somehow that if I was shorter, the lightning wouldn't get me. Eyes on the ground, face shielded from the hail by the brim of my hat, I looked up periodically only to make sure that Chris, ahead of me, was still alive and running too. Down and down and down, toward and past Island Lake. Through the alpine tundra, across the grassy meadows, into the switchbacks with their willows and flowers, and finally, finally into the woods of the Ice Lake trail. We ran without stopping, without even slowing, and without ever looking back. We could have swum through the log jam at Ice Lake stream and come out drier than we were going in. Everything in our world was saturated. We took shelter for a few minutes under a big rock hoping the storm—and its lightning—would move through and give us clear passage on the completely exposed meadows of the Kamm Traverse. The storm moved, but not through. The rain got worse.

Chris was cold. The risk of staying put at the rock was hypothermia. The risk of moving forward was lightning on the traverse. Hypothermia, if we remained still, was a near certainty. We chose instead to gamble: again, we ran.

The problem with the meadow section of the Kamm Traverse is that it is basically flat. The trail offers all the exposure of the upper slopes, with none of the psychological security of dropping elevation fast and getting out of lightning's way. I tightened the hunch I had mastered over the last 30 minutes and recruited my inner hobbit, willing myself to be no taller than the flowers and the grass. Chris was running ahead of me, and I willed him to run like a hobbit as well. This was mildly entertaining at the time, given that he is 6'2" and was wearing HOKAs. His feet alone were bigger than the hobbits I was trying to manifest.

We checked in and out of the KT aid station without even breaking stride. The KT volunteers looked at us with what I think was disbelief. We were soaking wet and scoured by hail, and we were not even going to stop. What we needed most was something they couldn't offer. We needed to move.

The San Juans have some of the most severe topography over which I have ever run. Almost everything is either going up or going down. There are not many places for rain water to gather and seep slowly into the ground. When rain falls in the San Juans, I think it tends to do what we do. It tends to run. When a lot of rain falls in the San Juans, it tends to flood. It turns out a lot of rain fell on our way down from Grant-Swamp Pass.

The easy part: the sun was out by the time we hit the south fork of Mineral Creek. The harder part: there was a lot of Mineral Creek to hit. Waters that had been mid-calf deep four days ago when we crossed it on a training run were now a crotch-high raging torrent. We teamed up with another runner whom we found standing, in dismay, on the creek's bank, and began bushwhacking upstream. After almost half an hour of willow whacking, marsh slogging and gully scrambling, we had crossed the creek at an upstream narrows and were back on the trail. Give :30 to the Hardrock course. We had not slowed down; we had not made any mistakes. We had made many decisions that had saved us time rather than lost it. We made time on the descent that we might not have made were we not so darn scared. Yet now we were looking at a finish time of 37:00.

The climb between the KT aid station and the Putnam aid station, comprising the Porcupine-Cataract saddle and Cataract Ridge, is more like a stepladder for a giant than a single climb. The sun on the way up was strong enough to turn the environment inside my rain jacket into a portable sauna. I could almost see steam coming out of my armpits; it was heavenly. Weather-wise, we had a repeat of our Grant-Swamp ascent: bright sun and partly cloudy skies. Cataract Ridge, like all the high points of this race, is spectacular. I crested the pass and stood for a few minutes, taking video of the 360-degree view and feeling poignantly a bittersweet combination of bone-deep relief that the last climb was behind us and a tug of hungry longing in my chest about the same. Perhaps because it is the climbs that so define my HRH experiences, my heart said goodbye to the course this year from the summit of that ridge. The finish line, from my vantage point up there on the top of the world, seemed almost trivial.

The finish line, however, was not trivial to my runner. Chris is skilled and fast on the descents; I am not. Rather than "pace" him on downhill sections, especially if he is feeling anything close to good, I simply try to hang on. As far as he was concerned, with Porcupine and Cataract behind us, there were no longer any obstacles of merit between him and his intended finish time. He had been planning, all night and day, to leave something in the tank for this final descent. My suspicion was that he had. Recall that we had already raced our way down from Grant-Swamp Pass as fast as conditions would allow. His hitherto complaining quads had apparently gone radio silent once the lightning started, testament to adrenaline's role as an analgesic. We scampered down into Putnam Basin with slightly less urgency, but ran in and out of that aid station almost as fast as we ran through KT. I had time to grab a chocolate chip cookie, but not eat it. Chris jogged through, chatting with our friend, Mark (who was working the A/S), about how he had :40 left to finish in 36:00, and 1:40 left to finish in 37:00. Chris was joking about the 36-hour finish, but almost flippantly confident about a 37-hour one. And then Mark, with a single comment, dashed any hope I *might* have had for a relaxed final 6.5 miles:

"Buddy, you better get your butt outta here. It takes longer than you think. Julian made this last stretch in 1:18. 1:40 is gonna be tough."

I knew, in an instant, that that was all Chris needed to hear. Come hell or high water, we were going to be at that rock, in front of that tent, before 7:00 PM.

We got the hell part first. Not more than five steps outside of Putnam we were regaled with the worst hailstorm of the day. White pellets—they looked more like Styrofoam than ice—piled up at our feet. It was raining, too, so we were once again drenched. Obstacle-hiding puddles and mud slicks formed on the trail almost instantly.

Then came the high water. Within a mile, we were following the trail but running in a creek. By two miles, the creek was deep and brown, obscuring all the rocks underneath it, leaving us to run blind not only because we couldn't see through the falling rain and hail, but also because the water was higher than our ankles and we couldn't see our own feet. On the talus sections, the rocks were wet and slippery, rendering the smooth surfaces too slick to step on and leaving us to use the sharp, angular edges that a runner might typically avoid. The possibility of moving quickly and easily on this descent was carried away on the current swirling at our ankles.

I never looked at my watch again once we left Putnam. In that kind of rain, I would have had to stop to read the watch face anyway, and there was no way Chris was stopping. The descent from Putnam, which was playful and brief in our recent training run, seemed to go on forever. I kept straining my eyes, trying to spy the open expanse that would signal the bed of Mineral Creek, and feeling acutely the passage of every minute that must have been bringing us closer even though it did not feel like it. And was it bringing us closer fast enough?

We did, of course, finally get to Mineral Creek. The waters were waist-high and powerful, and what I remember most was being convinced, mid-way through the crossing, that the current had carried away my running shorts. I couldn't see them on me and I couldn't feel them on me. Reaching down to check for them would require letting go of the rope, and that was out of the question. I was pretty convinced I was going to climb out on the far side—in front of the photographer standing on the bank—naked from the waist down. Instead, I just climbed out wringing wet...as I had been for hours. Chris checked his watch, said we had about 3 miles to go, and also said we'd make it. Again, in the pouring down rain, we ran.

There is this weird phenomenon that I have noticed at the end of hundred mile races: the finish line is almost as incomprehensible from mile 97 as it is from the starting line. In theory, 3 miles to go on relatively flat terrain is reason to celebrate. Chris had this race in the bag. He probably had his 37:00 finish in the bag. But in those final miles into town, though we may have been celebratory deep down inside, mostly we were tired. A tired so deep that it overpowers elation until the finish line is right there--until you can reach out and touch it. It is almost as if the body-mind has been running so long that it doesn't really believe it will ever get to stop. I know darn well that once we cross the highway after Mineral Creek, we are "almost done." I know that my beloved Christ of the Mines is really close to the finish line, that Charlie's house is even closer, and that the house my friend Pete was renting was even closer than that. Yet when we ran past these landmarks we were all business. We were home free, but it felt like some small, resistant part of each of our souls was holding out, was refusing to relax, wasn't going to even take a taste of "being done" until we could see the finish flags and the rock at the end of them.

I am not sure which came into view first: the flags or the neon yellow rain slickers that each of Chris's kids was wearing as they waited for our approach. His son, Michael, from a distance, looked like a frenetic bumble bee: this bright flash of yellow tracing big circles between the middle of the road and the sidelines. Regardless, it was Michael's yellow raincoat and our friend Spunky Catalina's uproar of support that finally gave my eyes permission to fill with tears. Not tears of sadness, and not yet even tears of joy. Just the pushing forth, through my eyes, of the simple letting go of it all.

In the finish chute I looked up at the finish clock. Not because it mattered what the numbers said, but because those numbers meant that we were really home. What the numbers did say was that Chris Gerber kissed the rock at 36:55. Once again, I gave thanks for our smallness. Those 5 minutes—all but meaningless in the vastness we had traversed together—were just about our size, and I was grateful for each and every one of them.

In 2010, two-thirds of the way through my pacing stretch of 42 miles, the Hardrock course brought me to my knees. In 2011, for 62.5 miles, with the help of my rain jacket, my sunglasses and my flashlight, I held onto myself. My spirit kneeled many times along the way, but it was not from overwhelm. This year I did not even kneel in surrender, though at some future moment along this devilish, larger-than-life blessing of a race course, I am sure I will. This year my spirit bowed in simple appreciation for all that this glorious race course is, for all that my runner is when he steps foot on it, and for all that I am when I am a part of it. In 2011, my spirit took to its knees out of respect.