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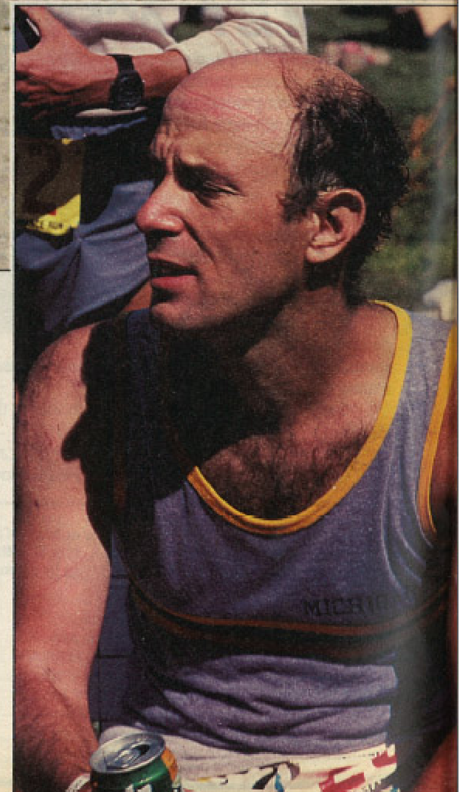
100 MILES OF TORTURE

They don't call the Western States Endurance Run an ultramarathon for nothing

The biggest challenge in the 100.2-mile Western States Endurance Run is the enormous amount of ascending and descending. The overall climb is 17,040 feet.



Ultramarathon

The Western States Endurance Run is for those who want a glimpse into their souls

Article by Peggy Wolff

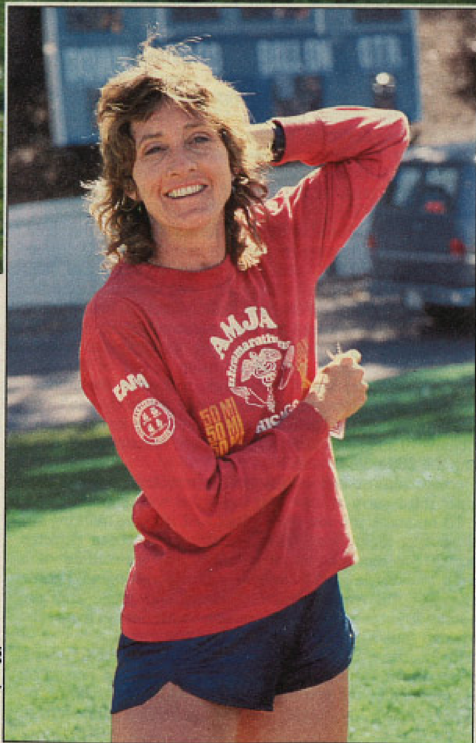
At 2:40 a.m. on the morning of the race, three alarms go off, one after the other, and Sam Gutterman is up and getting dressed. The Chicago actuary moves around the rented ski condo in Squaw Valley, Calif., silently eyeing his piles of running gear. Four pairs of running shoes, four short-sleeve and four long-sleeve T-shirts, five hats, three pairs of running shorts, mosquito repellent, hard candy, sweatbands, bandages, flashlights, gloves, water bottles, vitamins and aspirin.

Staggering around the condo, which looks like an Eddie Bauer dressing room, is Chicago psychotherapist Lynn Nutter. She is pacing aimlessly, rehearsing the course in her mind. In her dream of

Peggy Wolff, a Chicago freelance writer, served as Sam Gutterman's handler in the 1986 Western States Endurance Run.

Photo by Karina Nequin

Ultramarathoner Sam Gutterman: "I'm compulsive when I've got a commitment."



Photos by Peggy Wolff

Chicago psychotherapist Lynn Nutter: Goal oriented.

herself, she is finishing the race. She has it all planned: where to stop for rest, what and when to eat, where to change shoes and, now, how to dress for the first 30 miles. She slips on a one-piece bathing suit, then a T-shirt, which, when it was reconstructed by her mother, had the sleeves and midriff cut off and replaced with cotton mesh knit to promote cooling air circulation.

How do you dress for a race in which you start out running up a snow-covered mountain, then move on to four or five hours of 90-degree heat before reaching the first medical aid station where you can shed clothing?

In the Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run, sponsored in 1986 by a California bank, runners face a distance of 100 miles. One hundred miles of running. That's four marathons—back to back. To think that it all started 30 years ago as a trail ride—the Tevis Cup—with participants on horseback.

It is said that if you want to test your endurance, compete in Hawaii's Ironman World Triathlon but that if you want to go beyond endurance and have a

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Gutterman inquires about his standing in the race after passing Devil's Thumb, the 46-mile mark.

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glimpse of your soul, run the Western States 100. The physical and mental stresses are killers. In addition to fatigue and the risk of getting lost on the course at night, the hazards include heat stroke, dehydration, kidney failure, broken bones and altitude sickness, which can lead to swelling of the brain. For this reason there are 50 physicians, 75 nurses, 20 podiatrists and a complete team of massage therapists who staff the medical aid stations along the course.

The performance rules state that runners must submit to brief medical exams at certain checkpoints and that "medical personnel have full authority to evaluate the physical condition of runners and determine whether or not they may proceed." There seem to be differing opinions about arguing with the doctors, but the fact is, the doctors have the last say. They'll clip (eliminate) runners for not urinating, for a drop in blood pressure or for looking "green."

The Western States event is called an ultramarathon, meaning that its distance exceeds the marathon's standard 26 miles, 385 yards. The race, now in its 11th year, is held the last weekend of June. It begins at 5 a.m. on a Saturday and ends at 11 a.m. Sunday.

One does not apply to the Western States event because it's another race and you're a marathon runner—very few people will run this race without experience in ultramarathon running on trails. Participating in such regular marathons as Boston's or Chicago's does not constitute so much as an audition. The December preceding the race, runners are selected through a lottery. Out of approximately 1,000 applicants, only 415 were chosen for the 1986 race, 210 of whom finished.

Participants don't, of course, run ultramarathons nonstop. They can walk when they need to, stop for water and food, rest and even sleep. But there are cutoff times for reaching checkpoints, and if a runner exceeds one cutoff, he or she is eliminated. Racers must reach the finish line within 30 hours to be eligible for an award.

Although the Western States is one of the largest "ultras" in the country, drawing a crowd of 415 starters, it is not the only such event. There are about 190 others—cross-country runs on paved and dirt roads, 24- and 48-hour relay runs around a track (track races), even 6-day runs in which runners push themselves to their limits and total in the neighborhood of 400 to 500 miles. None are as rugged or remote or encompass as much beautiful wilderness, however, as the Western States 100.

The Western States Trail, which links Salt Lake City with Sacramento, was first used by the Indians as a route to summer villages and game in the high mountain meadows. Later, in the 19th Century, gold was discovered by U.S. senator and railroad baron Leland Stanford and others only a short distance from the trail, leading to a heavy migration of miners. The portion of the Western States Trail that runners use is essentially the goldseekers' journey through the pass. The landmarks, mining sites and towns through which the runners travel still bear the names given during the Gold Rush. They also suggest the difficulty of the course: Last Chance. Deadwood. Deep Canyon. Devil's Thumb.

Beginning in Squaw Valley, Calif., at 6,200 feet, the trail climbs straight up a ski slope to Emigrant Pass, a rock ledge that, at 8,750 feet, is still snow-capped in late June. That is a 2,550-foot climb from the valley floor in the first 4½ miles. From the pass, the trail heads west, cutting through a wall of mountains in the Sierras. Because the trail was originally intended for horses, not people, it is extremely narrow in spots. Many sections are along the edges of steep canyon dropoffs that extend, in some cases, for hundreds of feet. Most of the historic trail has been preserved and remains in

Photo by Peggy Wolff

its natural state. In the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, natural means hot, steep and rugged.

Runners finish at Placer High School in Auburn, Calif., a small town in the heart of the Mother Lode, exactly 100.2 miles away. Runners who make the trek dream of silver—a sterling silver belt buckle, proclaiming "100 Miles One Day," awarded to all who finish in 24 hours or less.

The biggest challenge, as a description of the course and a map of the trail make clear, is the enormous amount of climbing and descending. It's hard to comprehend the numbers without making some comparisons. In the Western States 100, the overall climb is 17,040 feet. The climb in elevation from sea level to the peak of Mt. Whitney—the highest point in California—is 14,494 feet. There is also a descent of 21,970 feet (about four vertical miles). The height of the highest peak in the United States, Mt. McKinley in Alaska, is 20,320 feet.

For 30 hours runners fight extremes of heat and cold, from well below freezing in the high country to 110 degrees in the canyons. They each need about 25 quarts of fluid during the event, so they must carry their own water bottles for the entire course. Without doubt, water is their biggest concern. Runners are not merely cautioned about the difficulties of keeping hydrated, they are warned that anyone whose weight drops 7 percent or more is out of the race. That 7 percent consists of body fluids, and when the fluids in the bloodstream decrease, physiologically the body can't perform—perspiration ceases, and there are other major problems. Thus, volunteer nurses weigh runners nine times along the 100-mile course.

Because almost half of the trail is traveled at night, each runner must carry at least two flashlights with enough power for 10 hours. There are glow sticks and ribbons marking the trail, but at night, when energy reserves have been depleted from 20 or more hours of running, one misreading of a ribbon marker can put a runner on an hours-long wild goose chase. For this reason, mounted search-and-rescue staff are on standby to search for runners who stray from the darkened trail.

Finally, there is a "sweeper," a well-conditioned support person who is familiar with the trail. He is the last person on the course after the starting gun fires; his job is to bring up the rear, report any injuries and remove lagging runners from the course.

Ten days before the 1986 race, Nutter and Gutterman meet at the latter's home to watch a videotape of the previous year's race on ABC-TV's "Wide World of Sports."

Nutter, 40, is stretched out on Gutterman's living room floor, relaxing from the day's training: six miles of stair-climbing. All 5 feet 8 inches of her are living proof that ultrarunning results in toning without bulk.

Svelte, trim, strong and sexy, terms normally associated with 18-year-olds who look as good out of their clothes as in them, describe the net effect of training between 60 and 70 miles a week. Gutterman, too, at 38, 5 feet 10 and 159 pounds, is in his best shape ever, the result of brutal workouts consisting of aerobics, strength training and flexibility exercises.

Nothing in Gutterman's house suggests his love for the sport—nothing, that is, except dozens of boxes of beatup running shoes ("In case I need the shoelaces"), jogging shoe refrigerator magnets and a running log in which he has re-

Photo by Frank Hanes

When not running up and down mountains, ultramarathoner Dennis Hagele is a Sara Lee Corp. executive.

corded his daily mileage for the last eight years.

This meticulousness doesn't spill over into his private life. On the scale of messy to neat, he lives on the disheveled side, and his home is crammed with hundreds of tokens of impulsive buying. He has saved everything—University of Michigan pennants, plastic drinking cups from ChicagoFest, miniature versions of musical instruments, stuffed parrots, cat-lover accessories, toys, toys, and more toys and all sorts of mathematical puzzles, which he twists and folds with such respect that it is unnerving to watch. There are hundreds of "Dr. Who" episodes on videotape and hundreds of records and compact discs, indiscriminately shelved, everything from fusion to classical to Theodore Bikel Israeli folk songs in Yiddish.

His hand is on the TV remote control, stopping and starting the race action in his quest to leave as little as possible to experimentation. Nothing can divert their attention from the screen as they note such details as how desert hats shield sun from the back of the neck, where water is scarce, the distance between aid stations and the kinds of foods available there.

On the screen, a runner drops out at 30 miles because he has blood in his urine; another has five bandaged toes and can't take another step; a third, who already had three screws holding his shoulder together from an auto accident, now has a newly separated shoulder as a result of falling on a slippery rock.

"Everyone needs to do something, so why not this?" Nutter says. Gutterman simply weighs the odds of finishing in his favor. "It's all a matter of perspective," he says. They are pursuing the same question. Do they have the grit, the character, the never-say-quit spirit it takes to run 100 miles through the mountains?

On the morning of the race Gutterman frantically flips through his handwritten notes from three days' worth of clinics and meetings in Lake Tahoe. In addition to race logistics, items covered include the points at which vital signs will be checked, how the course has changed, the adverse effects drugs can cause and the social impact on ultramarathon runners—the high divorce rate. One entire session is devoted to this topic.

To fuel the Olympian endeavor, Gutterman attacks a plate of jelly rolls dripping with frosting. Pastry, he confides, makes him feel invigorated and refreshed, so this is what he is eating before the official, prerace all-you-can-eat pancake breakfast, served between 3 and 4 a.m. Ultrarunners like Gutterman seem to be able to eat anything, including whole packages of chocolate chip cookies, and still have perfect legs.

Meanwhile, Nutter is packing food to go: cold rice balls with salt and sugar in the middle. "I'm hoping and praying this'll work out," she says, meaning that she is relying on this nourishment to help her keep up her pace.

It is 4:30 a.m., but at the site of the 1960 Winter Olympics in Squaw Valley, it looks like noon. "Runners, check in," screams the voice over the public address system. "We still have some runners who haven't checked in." There are other ultrarunners from Chicago. Dennis Hagele, a 42-year-old Sara Lee Corp. executive, is confident that he will go home with a buckle. He has trained six months for the event, running up and down the 57 flights of stairs in his downtown office building, logging about 100 miles a week outdoors and, on his two days off from running each week, lifting weights and doing

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Noel Nequin, director of the Cardiac Rehabilitation Center at Swedish Covenant Hospital, was running in his fourth Western States 100.

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stretching exercises in the steam room at the Charlie Fitness Club. He has one strategy for his first Western States: "I've broken the race down into smaller races between aid stations so all I have to do is get to the next stop." Hagele will start the race wearing polypropylene gloves because if the temperature drops, he gets frostbite on his fingers. The gloves are his security blanket; he will end up wearing them for 100 miles.

Noel Nequin, 47, director of the Cardiac Rehabilitation Center at Swedish Covenant Hospital, is here for the fourth time. Dr. Nequin has abandoned the old view of cardiac rehabilitation—that victims have to take it easy—and has prescribed running for hundreds of heart-attack sufferers, including himself.

The Western States runners look like a typical group of rugged outdoors people—lean, tanned and weathered, with squint lines near their eyes. They seemed relaxed, good-natured, and they talk with each other about other races. Although they are understandably reluctant to explain their motivations to a stranger, it is safe to say that they have much more at stake than their casual manners suggest.

A lot of attention is focused on a few people. Defending champion Jim King, a very religious man who has finished first three times, is accompanied by several dozen members of his church congregation who will scatter themselves along the entire course and read prayers to him while they cool him down and change his shoes. Another former champion, Jim Howard, a wilderness ranger who lives in a town on the trail, is here. He trains on the trail and knows each treacherous pitfall. But for Gutterman and Nutter it is their first attempt at 100 miles of trail-running. As scared as they are, they are convinced that there is nowhere else to be this morning but here, running the Western States.

All 415 runners shuffle up to the start line. Nutter feels a "communal tension" but adds that it also feels nice. "There was something solemn about it," she says, "and as we were walking up there I felt there was no need to worry, to rush." Yet the guilt and pressure have been building steadily, guilt because the training was taking time from things she thought she should be doing; pressure because she didn't think she was ready. To think that five years ago she started running to help her quit smoking. That she is entered in the toughest trail race in the country makes it clear just how goal oriented she is. "I had to bring my philosophy of myself and my life together," she says. This is the stoicism in her. Be what you wish to seem. She would count on her "type-A character kicking in" to get her all the way to the finish line in Auburn.

The normally easygoing Gutterman turns very nervous and starts pumping his arms faster and faster, then wedges himself into the middle of the pack, right behind the competitive front, where peer pressure peaks. "Frontrunners," as they are called, are the stronger, faster runners. In comparison to the runners in back who are dawdling and congregating, those at the front lean forward into the yellow ribbon stretched across the starting point.

"Wait a second. What in the world am I doing up here?" Gutterman says. "I'm not in the buckle-type category." But he isn't surrendering his position. He is scared, but he has a unique way of handling fear—

Photo by Peggy Wolff

he ignores it, letting it drain out.

Until the gun goes off, he focuses everything on his yellow sweatshirt. There are seven minutes for him to decide whether or not to take it, and it takes the entire time for him to decide. It is as if he exchanged one obsession, running, for another. Should he wear it? All he has on are a tank top and Hawaiian print shorts. Or would it get too hot? The canyons, however, are cold. He could be caught in an 80 m.p.h. wind in the canyons in his shirt and shorts.

At 5 a.m. the gun goes off, and he throws the sweatshirt to his handler.

The pack takes off. They are all on the same trail, going the same direction, just different speeds. Background or financial status don't matter now. They are all equals here. "You're going through your agenda of what you need the whole day," Nutter says, so for her the time passes quickly. "There's so much to think about, because it's your own race. You aren't doing this with anybody."

Emigrant Mountain, the first mountain pass, is 4½ miles from the start—straight up. The closest Nutter had gotten to hill training in Chicago was in south suburban Palos Hills; the closest Gutterman had gotten to hill training was on Toboggan Hill in Northbrook.

Emigrant Mountain is too steep for anyone to run the whole way up. There are places where you have to put your leg through a branch, crawl on hands and knees and look for footholes, circumstances that force 15 or 20 runners at a time into a single file. "Do that for a couple miles, and it just wears you down," Gutterman says. "If anything, it's all so polite. If you come up quickly, the person in front says, 'Let me know when you want to pass.'" He thinks about how odd it is that people aren't driven to pass. In other races, seeing somebody in front, no matter who, always pressured him to pass.

Suddenly, three-quarters of his way up the mountain, the sun comes up, the quickest sunrise Gutterman has seen. The intense oranges and yellows immediately wipe out the predawn blues. Although the snow, which has turned to mush, impedes traction, there are no real difficulties. At the summit, now about an hour into the race, the first of many long climbs is complete. This is the highest point of the entire race, and the views, which veteran runners call addictive and grandiose, offer a stretch of mountain scenery that will be unrivaled the rest of the day. There are 95 miles to go when Gutterman crosses the ridge and enters the Granite Chief Wilderness.

Gutterman has been warned about starting too fast ("You'll kill yourself, you'll pay for it," he has been told), but he immediately proceeds to ignore the advice. It is pointed out to him that he is six minutes behind 21-year-old Kathy D'Onofrio and 31-year-old Kim Moody, the two lead female runners, both experienced contenders and both back for their second try. *Why is he running so fast?*

"There are five or six people single file," Gutterman says, "and you can't pass each other at the narrow spots." So he becomes a victim of the incredible peer pressure to keep up his pace. "Look, it was tough to stop when you felt eyes boring holes in you from the rear."

This single file of runners, called a train, occurs in all the narrow spots. "I look behind," Nutter says, "and say: 'You want to go ahead? I'll move over for you.' But they say they are fine, that it is a comfortable pace."

Some runners are wearing bandannas around their necks to absorb the sweat; some use visors to shield the sun; others have caps with Arab-looking scarves covering the backs of their necks; a few pack ice in their hats. Whatever the method, the object is to cool the body down, quite a task when the outside temperature is 100 degrees. Even the well-conditioned runner has to slow the pace and hope to make up the time in the cooler portions of the run at night.

For the next four miles Gutterman traverses the wilderness until he reaches the private property at Hodgson's Cabin, the first water stop. Water is lined up in disposable cups, and runners must throw them in the trash or carry them until the next aid station. No water cups or, for that matter, fruit peels or candy wrappers or T-shirts or poly-

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The end is in sight, almost: Gutterman and pacer Mike Rodriguez after 88.9 grueling miles.

Photos by Peggy Wolff

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propylene gloves can be thrown on the ground. To dispose of anything along the way—a common practice in such events as the Chicago marathon—is against race rules. The Western States Trail is preserved by the U.S. Forest Service, and there can be no evidence of litter on the trail. Runners cannot bend the rules to suit their needs. Whatever they need they carry in "fanny packs," and whatever they carry in to the Sierra wilderness has to be carried out. Runners or their support crews violating this rule will be immediately clipped.

(The fanny pack, in all likelihood designed by an ultrarunner, resembles a backpack except that it wraps around the waist. Properly stocked, it is a take-along aid station, carrying the essentials in zippered or Velcro pockets: peanut-butter sandwiches, aspirin, mosquito repellent, sunblock, lip balm, windbreakers, dry socks, sweatbands and, of course, water bottles. Loaded, it easily weighs four pounds.)

Past Hodgson's Cabin, at 7,200 feet, Gutterman starts feeling a sense of urgency when people pass him. "It's not like it's a bloodthirsty competition, but with 90 miles to go, so much can happen." That single thought alone is incentive for him to push. From that point, there begins a slow trickle of adrenalin into his bloodstream.

The herd instinct that prevails amazes Gutterman. At 13 miles, when the front runner in his train starts to jog, everyone follows. "Then the first runner stops and walks, so everyone else stops and walks. It was done in unison, and it was fascinating. After a few minutes I realized I was mimicking the first person, whether I wanted to or not." Gutterman thinks that letting someone else set the pace will keep him from going too fast, but another train comes right up behind, and the leader wants to pass.

"It was the way she said, 'I really want to pass these people—could you move away?' when I realized that I was thinking that, too, that I was being artificially slowed down and that maybe I should be more aggressive on this course."

Exactly. This endurance contest can not only be endured, it can be raced. A 12-foot opening gives Gutterman the chance. He is off and in five seconds passes four people.

The elite California trail runners—King, Bjorg Austrheim-Smith, Doug Latimer, Jim Howard and Chuck Jones—have all passed through Red Star Ridge, 16.5 miles, when Gutterman checks in. Gutterman is 50 minutes behind leader King, who came through at 7:28 a.m. A three-time winner at Western States, King lives in nearby Nevada City, making it convenient to train on the trail, where he consistently puts in 120-mile training weeks. Chuck Jones, 11 minutes behind King, also lives in Nevada City and likewise takes advantage of the hundreds of miles of twisting foot trails and logging roads. Jones' 200-mile training weeks, averaging 32 miles a day (about 5 to 6 hours of running), were at altitudes ranging from 3,000 to 5,200 feet.

It is the stuff of fantasy to win against the California runners, but neither Gutterman nor Nutter could match the staggering weekly mileage of the experienced contenders. Nutter's training consists of up to six miles at a time on a machine that simulates stair-climbing (the reason she could pass runners on the uphills); late-night 12-mile training runs in Palos Hills; 50- to 60-mile training weeks on the lakefront path; and other ultraraces, such as the Back-to-Back 50s in Glen Ellyn (50 miles on Saturday, 50 miles on Sunday).

Gutterman hopes that the string of races he has run (the London, Lake County and Lake Geneva marathons) and one ultra (a 50-miler called the Ice Age in Wisconsin's south Kettle Moraine in which he placed 35th in a field of 261) have toughened him. When not running marathons he averages five days a week of training, he says—on weekdays, usually six to eight miles in the morning and on weekends, one intermediate run and one longer run. Intermediate meaning anywhere between 10 and 14 miles; long ranging anywhere from 18 to 29 miles.

He also has trained on the 43 flights of stairs at 2800 N. Lake Shore Dr. and kept up his alternate activities of lap-swimming and Nautilus workouts three times a week. For serious runners, the Western is more a test of stamina, strength and endurance than of skill. Gutterman knows he has the stamina; his actuarial training proved he could challenge extremes. After completing an MBA in actuarial science at the University of Michigan, he went on to get advanced actuarial degrees. Most actuaries take between 5 and 8 years to pass the required 10 exams. Gutterman took 4 years to pass the same number of exams, and then took another set of 10 to get more credentials. He has been trained in the art of patience. He didn't take commitment lightly then, and he isn't taking it lightly now.

As he will eventually discover near a place called Robinson Flat, there is always a low point. It comes 23 miles into the race—nearly one marathon's distance behind him—and he is going too fast, maybe a little bit out of control. For one brief moment, when he isn't concentrating, it happens. His first fall. He can't straighten his neck. It is twisted, and there is a lump coming out from under his ribs. Thoughts fly by about not finishing the race, about having a punctured lung, about why he is gasping for breath. "I'm just not sure . . . if I was knocked unconscious . . . I'm not sure. I couldn't straighten my neck. I remember hitting . . . maybe it was only a couple moments of being knocked out." Something is sticking up on the sides of his ribs. "I thought it might be lungs or something, maybe a piece of intestine." He manipulates his neck back and sits while passing runners kick up the dust. Six people run by. The first informs him that the next aid station is a half mile away, so he walks holding his stomach for a few hundred yards, dragging himself to the next checkpoint, Duncan Canyon, at 24.2 miles.

The nurse surveys the job before her: bloody hands and shoulders that are cut and scraped. She has no water for cleansing wounds—the water is for drinking. So while she tends to his wounds he silently questions himself. Is it a neck injury? Broken ribs? It feels better now, but how much longer can he go on? His first notions about dropping out are strong but fleeting. This isn't enough to stop him.

But what is he doing here? He asks himself this question all the time. There are reasons that make sense to him, at least at sea level.

"Just the challenge," Gutterman says. "Knowing I can do it. Knowing I'm not the finest athlete in the world, will I have the guts? I'm compulsive when I've got a commitment." Also, it will be embarrassing not to finish—he has told so many people that he is running the Western States. He wants to avoid personal failure, having to say he didn't make it. "I thought about why I did that. It was to put pressure on myself. Injury or time would be my only way out."

Roger Bannister, the first runner to break the four-minute-mile barrier, has said that some athletes have a "capacity for mental excitement" that enables them to overlook and push through their tortures. "It is this psychological factor," according to Bannister, "that sets the razor's edge between victory and defeat and determines how closely an athlete comes to the absolute limits of performance."

To be sure, Gutterman wants to be mentally and physically tested, to succeed, but by standards that are his own and not dependent on the opinion of others. His job as a consulting actuary for Price Waterhouse, crunching numbers on sophisticated math tables to decide if a business will live or die, has the customary trappings of outside pressure. On the trail, he has total responsibility for himself.

The only personal limits Gutterman saw at the outset of his running career were physiological. He didn't have the lean "body type" for speed, so he opted for distance instead. He

The all-purpose, couldn't-do-without-it "fanny pack," or take-along aid station. Loaded, it easily weighs four pounds.

started running in spring of 1978, gradually built himself up and found a group of people to run with. By the time he was ready for his first race, he didn't bother with small events. He entered America's Marathon in September of that same year.

"I was doing so much mentally—reading, working, it was all mental—but nothing physically, except commuting to work on my bike." Friends say he went in head over heels, but Gutterman doesn't think so. The next "logical step" after marathons is longer runs. "Look, you start on one track. Then you have choices. You can cut back. You can continue at the same level. You can stop. You can do more."

At 30 miles, Gutterman arrives at the first crew access point, the first point where families and friends can meet runners and bring supplies.

The first thing he asks his handler is, "Where am I?" Meaning, how is he doing against the 24-hour pace? He looks like he just went 10 rounds with Sugar Ray Leonard.

"You're 20 minutes ahead," he is told. Even though he is wearing a watch and could have determined his pace, he looks stunned. He still has a shot at the silver buckle.

Though he has run all the downhills for the first 25 miles, using his quadriceps to apply the brakes, he still didn't expect to come in so quick. It is 11:40 a.m., and he has been running for 6 hours and 40 minutes. The cutoff time at Robinson Flat, determined by a 30-hour pace, is 2:04. Even with the incident at 23 miles, he still has a comfortable margin of safety before he can be pulled for time.

Robinson Flat is the first mandatory weigh-in. Each runner wears a wrist band, identical to the hospital variety, bearing name, blood pressure and weight, recorded the day before the race. Since his biggest fear was being pulled, he stuffed himself with pancakes before the race so that he could afford a small percentage of weight loss during the first 30 miles. Now, at Robinson Flat, his weight is well within range.

The meadow is crowded with volunteers recording runner times and refilling water bottles while the runners wait five deep to get on the scales. It's weigh in first, drink later. As at subsequent aid stations, it is a chance to stop and pore over the choices—ERG (an electrolyte replacement drink with glucose), cookies, a child's inflatable pool for foot-soaking.

Time being precious, runners spend very little of it at the checkpoints. Most, including Gutterman, seize the opportunity to get some rest and nourishment and massages from their handlers. Gutterman spends about 35 minutes plopped on a chaise longue, his only break between his first and second marathons. Reminding himself that the goal is still to pursue the silver buckle, he rises and heads for the 44-mile marker, Last Chance.

An ever-growing migration of handlers is spreading over the gorgeous grassy mountain meadow. The handlers lug in chaise longues and babies in strollers, then sit and watch, binoculars in hand, for a glimpse of their runner. They keep hot coffee and tea going in the Winnebagos and vans, parked bumper to bumper on the narrow dusty road. Although Robinson Flat is only 30 miles from the start, the roads are so roundabout that it's a 3½-hour drive to get there.

Runners have to submit to the medical staff before they can meet their handlers, but when they leave the roped area, handlers rush in with support. A hose to cool off those pedigreed legs. A blended yogurt-and-fruit drink to wash down Second Wind Sustained Energy Jogger tablets. A fresh pair of top-flight running shoes. Whatever the runner needs, the runner gets.

They share food, water, solidarity, each other. The scene is shockingly reminiscent of the '60s, of the West Coast human "be-ins," only Hendrix, the Airplane and the Dead are absent. That era of mixing celebration and live experience is brought back by this running community. Like Woodstock, it, too, could have christened itself a nation.

At 12:15 p.m. Nutter arrives and is told to sit for 30 minutes because, believe it or not, she has gained weight. "They are real concerned—the medical staff—because I have a gash in my leg. They think the infection had something to do with my not voiding."

Her tissues are beginning to retain water. Unlike others who fear losing weight, her nightmare is gaining it. This happens in mountain running. The weight gain is making her feel feverish and can lead to altitude poisoning. Even though she can't lose the added weight, the medical staff lets her go. She heads for her supply bag in a roped-off area of the meadow, far from the crowd.

Packing "drop bags" is part of the prerace procedure. It is particularly helpful for runners with no handler; they can have such supplies as dry clothes, sweatbands or Atomic Balm (for irritated skin) delivered by truck to a designated checkpoint. Nutter grabs a change of shoes and shorts and is met with a big bear hug from her pacer, John Davis, an engineer from Rockwell International who has flown his own plane up from Los Angeles for the day along with fellow engineer Mike Rodriguez, who will meet Gutterman later at Pacer Central at 60 miles.

Davis has arranged to "pace" Nutter for the last 40 miles and has come to Robinson Flat to greet her. Pacers are allowed solely as a safety consideration and to give verbal and psychological support. They, too, have to be in excellent physical shape. But they can't serve as pack horses—they are specifically forbidden to carry food or water for their runner. If the pacer has a fanny pack, the runner has to have a fanny pack. The same applies to flashlights.

Now, 30 miles into the race, Davis grabs Nutter and tells her she is ahead of the 24-

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Photos by Peggy Wolff

Gutterman gets a leg massage at one of the aid stations scattered along the course.

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hour pace.

"I didn't *want* to hear that," she says, the brief encounter stunning her. "My feet hurt, and I had 70 miles to go. At that point I didn't *want* to know, not that early. I just wanted to run and do it and not feel I had a dragon on my tail."

By now runners are well into the heat of the day. They will hit Deep Canyon II (41 miles), where stillness and heat form a haven for rattlesnakes and mosquitoes, before moving on to the deserted mining village at Last Chance, 44 miles, then Devil's Thumb, a landmark at 46 miles, named for its hellish conditions.

Here handlers agonize for hours in the blazing heat, looking for shade, preparing to set up camp with the same chaise longues and picnic baskets and the card tables and cheese and crackers and cameras and towels and quilts and tubs of water they've been dragging around all day.

"Sit right down here," demands one runner's handler, and three handlers are on him, one to remove his hat and sponge down his head, another to rub him down with a dripping towel, the third to massage his feet. A chilled apple juice comes out of the cooler and is drained, and the runner is off again. One-and-a-half minutes.

During these waiting periods, there are opportunities to discuss how "your" athlete has trained and how "your runner" gains the competitive edge.

Unlike marathon runners, who don't eat before or during a race—they don't need the fat for extra "stores"—ultrarunners must restore depleted sugar. The notion that all runners are lean and hungry is erroneous. Most ultrarunners are not stringy-looking, nor do they possess excessively low body fat.

In an endurance event, the muscles that work the hardest lose their glycogen, or carbohydrate, stores. Although there may be more in other parts of the body, it is not transferable. When the glycogen level, the readily available sugar, is down, the muscle feels tired. Once the glycogen goes, the body starts burning fat and begins using the sugar in the bloodstream. No matter how much willpower and resolve are at work, a runner in this condition will eventually drain off muscle tissue. This is the "wall" of exhaustion, and the only way to recover is to wait a few days to store a new supply of muscle glycogen.

(A technique that has been shown to boost race performance but one that clearly violates race rules is called blood-doping. It is a way of increasing the oxygen supply of the blood. In it a runner "gives" a pint of blood a few days before the race, stores it and donates it back at the high altitude the day before the race, providing himself or herself more red blood cells to carry oxygen to the working muscles. Increasing blood volume doesn't come without risks, however, the most serious being heart failure or blood clots.)

At 4:45 p.m. at Deadwood, 45 miles, it is pushing 100 degrees. Gutterman is taking it easy, eating some orange pieces. About 100 yards before Deadwood, he sees that his calf is pulsing, "just shaking by itself." Muscles usually cramp, or go into spasm, when their blood supply is reduced, and Gutterman "couldn't walk for the life of me. This is what everyone warned me about, the steep switchbacks [zigzags] that seemed they would never end."

He is sitting in a lawn chair, staring at his calf, which is in spasm, shaking uncontrollably. The last series of uphills has cost him the silver buckle—he has fallen 45 minutes behind the 24-hour pace—but he doesn't seem to care. He revises his goals in a very honorable way. Just to finish will make him content.

He complains about the trail being straight uphill for 50 minutes, then wonders when it will level off. "Noel [Nequin] warned me there was no relief and that you had to keep going up, up, up for several miles at a time." The only way he can boost the blood supply to the cramped muscle is to improve his circulation by stretching and massaging the calf. The kneading and short, percussive movements of massage unfortunately evoke a near-primal scream from him. He is immobilized, barely able to stand the lightest touch of his handler's fingertips.

At the check-in table, runners signal their intention to voluntarily drop out by cutting their own wristbands. No reasons are given.

Gutterman tries eating cookies, and even though they look appetizing to him, he can't swallow them. They stick in his mouth like paste, even when he drinks water.

What's next? What happens in the next 50 miles? Will my pacer really show up? The acute awareness of Gutterman's screaming muscles forces his negative thinking to shut down. No more bad thoughts. Finally, after 30 minutes of massage, the shaking subsides. The physical battle won, he now looks for psychological relief. Although he is ahead of the 30-hour cutoff time, his inner voice kicks in, the voice that says, "It's okay not to finish." But he fights that voice by countering with, "If I don't finish, I'll have to try the race again."

It would be so easy to remain sitting, but Gutterman is up and testing his leg. With the spasm and pain gone, he promises himself a "real" rest at the next checkpoint, Michigan Bluff, 57 miles. Runners say that if you can make it to Michigan Bluff, the psychological halfway point, you can finish. Gutterman thinks about this for the next 11 miles.

Michigan Bluff may have been a one-horse town at one time, but compared to the earlier checkpoints, it is the most civilized. There is a line of mailboxes. There are hamburgers grilling. There are people living here.

Gutterman arrives at 7:05 p.m. After the obligatory weigh-in, his 19-minute break consists of an egg-salad sandwich, a lemonade and a pear. A hot-water bottle filled with ice cools down his calf. His handler begs aspirin from a local handler who is gracious enough to donate half of what she has left. (The local handlers have an appreciable advantage in that they can store large amounts of ice along with the funnels and scoops for getting the cubes into cold packs.)

It is 8:20, and sunset is approaching by the time Nutter is climbing the steep hill leading to Michigan Bluff. She has been running for more than 15 hours and is still better than two hours ahead of the 30-hour cutoff. She is exhausted and looks forward to taking more of a rest and to getting something to eat.

The nurses peel off her sticky shoes and socks and work gently over her feet, massaging the bony ridges, flexing her toes, kneading up her leg while she sinks into relaxation.

Suddenly, her pacer John Davis is there admonishing her to "get going. You've got to get up now and go. You're on this mark." Then he is off, which confuses Nutter because the plan has been to run together beginning at Michigan Bluff. But while he is there, she sees him being ordered around by an older man, a handler for a friend of hers. This man, whom she would not identify, "laid out the plans, which he thought was his job as a handler." This moment is the beginning of a bad psychological break. Nutter has been looking forward to seeing someone she knows, someone to give her the warmth and comfort and encouragement she needs.

The man lays her down on a lawn chair and says: "You have to wear this shirt. Put it on two miles before the end of the race. You've got to come running across the finish line in this shirt." He wants her to wear the shirt with his company's name on it so his wife can take the finish-line photograph showing he was her sponsor. But the man isn't

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The race's oldest participant, Ed Fishman (then 63), broke his nose in a fall and stuffed leaves in it to stop the bleeding.

The euphoria and exhaustion of victory: Gutterman approaches the finish line in Auburn, Calif.

Photos by Peggy Wolff

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her sponsor; she has none—and serving the needs of commerce is the farthest thing from her mind now. All she wants is moleskin for her blisters, which she keeps in her drop bag along with Vaseline, flashlights, batteries and powder.

"Wait! Give me my bag! My batteries are in there! That's what I need." But it does no good; the man will not look for her bag. "I was so geared down," Nutter says. "I had it so planned out. I kept asking for the bag, for my salve, my candy, my aspirin, but he said, 'No, you've got to keep going.'"

Forced out of the chair by the man, she takes off down the trail. No moleskin, no flashlight, no candy, no jacket. Nothing is coming together for her. The foulup regarding Davis and the incident with the older man pull the plug on her enthusiasm, and the negative thoughts start building. Her mind then drifts off, and she loses the trail. She has wandered a mile and a half from it.

She starts yelling, "Are there any runners around here? Any runners?" No voices come back to her. She mentally sorts through the list of things that didn't come together, and then the realization strikes her: Where is my pacer? I am doing this by myself! Of course, I'm doing this by myself. That's what this is all about. It's what I came out here to do. When she starts convincing herself that it is no one else's responsibility for her to get through, and that, yes, she is here alone, she calms down enough to find her way back to the trail. There Davis finds her. The only thing she remembers is coming out of the panic and feeling relieved to see him. She is tired, so tired, and she has been crying. On one of the loops she tenses up so much that she has to pick up her own thigh and put it down one step ahead. Once again on the trail, there are more uphills and downhills to confront.

She has been fighting with herself for an hour. Should she turn in? Should she keep going? The rocky downhills are killing her. Davis, concerned about the sweeper, chatters on about the constellations and Greek mythology, hoping small talk will egg her on, but Nutter is numb to the conversation.

It is so terrible to decide, but once she does, she is relieved, feeling she can't postpone her inclination to quit any longer. It is around midnight when the mounted rangers come up behind her, and she asks them to carry her in. She is so exhausted that she falls asleep while they're slinging her up on the horse. She has come 72 miles and still would have had more than a marathon to go. She has been shivering the last 20 miles and is rundown, depleted and dehydrated, feeling feverish. She has stopped drinking altogether. The medical staff at the crash tent coaxes her to take in enough fluids, and she rehydrates orally.

The next station is the Rucky Chucky River Crossing, 78 miles. Gutterman is crossing the river on foot, exhausted, with a pair of dry shoes hanging around his neck. There is no way around—only through. One hand grabs a guide rope that stretches between the two shores, the other hand holds his fanny pack high above the current. Rodriguez, his pacer, is behind him.

It is 3:42 a.m. Normally it would be pitch black in the canyon, but for race day a generator has been brought in for lighting.

Gutterman has been running since 5 a.m. the previous day. For 22 hours he has carried his own water. For 6½ hours he has run in total darkness. Aside from pushing down an egg-salad sandwich and a cheese sandwich, which are forced on him by the nurses at Forest Hill, he has eaten almost nothing. (At the previous checkpoint, 65 miles, while Gutterman was refueling to regain the seven pounds of lost weight, the lead runner, Chuck Jones, at 9:37 p.m., was 35 miles ahead, crossing the finish line.)

Back at Rucky Chucky, everyone is on his or her own. Gutterman's right foot, totally submerged, searches for a depression in the rock to push from. Then his left foot does the same. The water, says the Placer County Mounted Search and Rescue Squad, is about 56 degrees. Crossing the river means he has come 78 miles and that roughly one more marathon remains. Because of the damage the trail has suffered from heavy storms, there are rock slides and uncovered mine-shaft holes, dangerous terrain that has to be traversed with a flashlight at night. Sunrise is still a few hours away.

"Woodruff, No. 471," a registered nurse shouts into her radio. "Completely dehydrated. He's on the California Loop. About nine miles from here." Dehydration is Woodruff's "fallout"; it knocks him out of the race. The nurse sends the search-and-rescue horses, but No. 471 is too weak to get on the horse. "Get him to an ambulance. Send paramedics with a stretcher and an IV."

Other runners suffering from exhaustion and dehydration are stuffed into sleeping bags and forced to drink liquids. If they don't rehydrate orally but require intravenous fluids, they are finished.

Rucky Chucky may resemble a vast wildflowered alpine meadow by day, but at this godawful hour of the night it looks like 1944 Germany—a peripheral airfield near the Ruhr. There are sophisticated radio communications, a rescue helicopter on standby and mounted search-and-rescue personnel, but out on the trail there is still no absolute assurance that aid will arrive in time if a runner is incapacitated.

Although Gutterman seems confident and unintimidated by the trail, he fears his downfall will be time. It will take his last shreds of strength to cross the final 22 miles. To see the finish line in Auburn, Calif., by the 11 a.m. cutoff time, he'll have to run for seven straight hours.

Gutterman, Rodriguez relates, is quiet and reserved at this point. "Somewhere between 78 miles and where the sun came up at 85 you could see him move more slowly. If he were to stop, he would have cramped, and it would have been all over. So I fed him potatoes, and we talked about camping, his work, my work, our marriages, how we both suffered. Just to keep his mind off the race." Together they are a smooth duet. A kind of shorthand language develops between them, evolving into a familiar private pattern.

At 85 miles, when night turns to day, the transition to get back into running—Gutterman has been walking a lot—comes without his knowing it. He regains his confidence, probably because he can see his footing. Nothing but sheer determination is driving him. Sheer faith and determination are driving him to run through the pain of the ordeal. "You've got to get out of here in 15 minutes, or you'll be cut off." These words to himself drive him, give him some margin.

"It hit me that I might be pulled, so I picked up," Gutterman says. "I started jogging everything—the flats, the downhills, all except the steep uphills, which I walked." Two

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miles before Hwy. 49, at 93 miles, Don Adolf, Nequin's pacer, trots up and reports that Nequin is just behind.

Gutterman doesn't want Nequin to finish in front of him, and the feeling swells up, subsides, then swells up again, dividing his feelings between finishing with a friend or ahead of a friend. Nequin is 17 minutes behind, but Gutterman doesn't realize his lead is that great, so he converts his feelings into speed and accelerates.

Nequin changes shoes at Hwy. 49 so he can expend the least amount of effort to make the 30-hour cutoff time. The shoes he changes into, shoes he has trained in, have the toes cut out. He knows from past years that there are no more rocks on the trail, and he doesn't want to be slowed by painful toenails and blisters.

Rodriguez wants Gutterman to run the rest of the way to Auburn, and he has all kinds of tricks and encouragement to keep him going, such as pointing out the families who have come out to greet runners several miles ahead of the finish. Though Gutterman is weary, he is aware that only a few people have passed him since sunrise. He looks at his watch much more often, but it isn't until 97 miles that he realizes he can walk to Auburn. It is at 99.7 miles, entering the stadium, when Rodriguez says, "This is your mile. Do what you want." At last he is ready for the homecoming scene he has been looking for all night long. He could have passed three people, but he wants to walk into the stadium and then break into a run. And that's what he does.

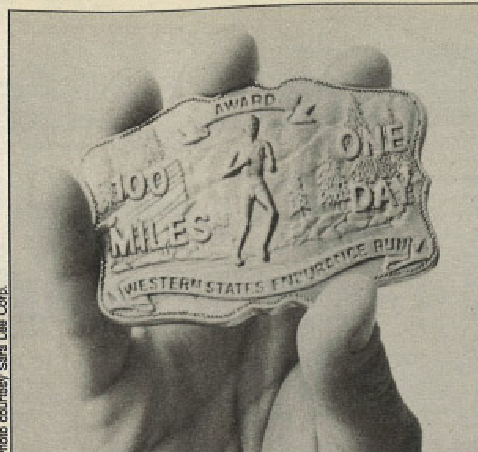

Photo courtesy Sara Lee Corp.

Western States runners dream of silver—a sterling-silver belt buckle that is awarded to all who finish in 24 hours or less.

It is 10:07, exactly 53 minutes before the 30-hour cutoff, when Sam Gutterman, with Rodriguez trailing, can feel, in a way that he never has before, the simultaneous euphoria and exhaustion of victory. He is so happy, so content to have put everything on this one throw of the dice and won everything he needed to win, including that last little push to beat his friend Nequin to the finish line.

As difficult as it is to collect his feelings, it isn't the mere metal alone—the bronze buckle for finishing under 30 hours—that rewards him. He has achieved more, he says, whether it is victory or defeat, than if he had stayed home to risk neither.

In the 1987 race, Lynn Nutter began the race with a stress fracture and race-walked as far as she could—44 miles.

Noel Nequin, suffering from heat exhaustion from the 110-degree temperature, found Nutter at 44 miles and suggested that they both call it quits.

Sam Gutterman was not accepted by the lottery.

Dennis Hagele, who finished in 23:38 in 1986, was not accepted by the lottery but went anyway and paced runner Don Adolf for the last 38 miles. ■