

Napa runners finish WS100 in first tries



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The weeks leading up to the Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run were worrisome for both John Diana and David Smith.

Diana, a Napa orthopedist, wondered if an Achilles tendon injury would keep him from even attempting the prestigious ultramarathon from Squaw Valley to Auburn for the first time.

Smith, the chief financial officer at a St. Helena winery who was entered in his first WS100 only because Diana had given him one of the three highly coveted entries he had won in a raffle after volunteering at an aid station at last year's race, would have competed with a heavy heart had his friend not be able to join him.

On top of that, the Napa resident wanted to make sure he wouldn't meet the same fate as the runner he had paced in last year's WS100, Angwin's Chris Pratt, who had had to drop out of the grueling race with just three miles left.

But both men drove home happy as could be last Sunday after completing the race within the 30-hour cutoff — Smith in 25 hours, 33 minutes, 38 seconds, and Diana in 29 hours, 27 minutes.

Neither had the energy to pick up his brass belt buckle award afterward, having friends do it in their place. At the long post-race ceremony, 296 buckles were handed out individually -- 109 others had started the race but not been able to finish it.

Smith said one of his crew members, Lauren Wood of Santa Rosa, picked up his award.

"I may have not remembered to even get it had Lauren not said 'Hey, we have to get your belt buckle.' It was more the achievement that I savored," Smith said Wednesday. "It really hit me a couple of days later, that 100 miles is a long way."

Diana, 45, said he was having trouble just standing up after running 100.2 miles, which finished with a trip amid applause around the Placer High School track.

“I was pretty convinced I couldn’t do 100.3 miles. I had to be helped to the car,” Diana said Thursday. “I could walk independently the next day, but it’s been hard to walk since.”

Smith, 48, said he started at a 30-hour pace and gradually accelerated throughout the race.

“It started heating up after the first 20 miles,” he recalled. “When I got to the first canyon, Duncan Canyon, it was very warm but not as hot as some of my training runs. I did a lot of heat training, in Auburn and on warm days out at Lake Sonoma. I always trained in a black sweatshirt and heavy, warm clothing as they tell you to do, and it paid off.”

Smith had never run more than 62 miles at once, but said he felt fine even after he was joined at mile 62 by pacer Rich Condor at the Foresthill aid station.

“I felt even better through mile 78. When it started to cool down at night, I picked up my pace and had no stomach issues. I weighed in at all the aid stations and they let me pass. We were passing people left and right,” he said. “The only bad spell I had was from mile 78 through 84, and I don’t know why. Either I got cold or it was my nutrition and I got weak. But my pacer figured it out pretty quickly and got me fueled up at the next aid station, and then from there we were fine.

“The only difficult thing at night is there is a little bit of a depth-perception issue. You think you’re stepping on ground, but you may be stepping in a hole. Otherwise, it was great. I’ve run at night several times, and paced my pacer in a couple of races.”

Smith gives credit to pacer Condor

Smith gave plenty of credit to Condor, a former Napa resident who lives in Suisun. An accomplished ultramarathoner who won the 2011 Headlands Hundred 100-mile race in Marin County by eight minutes in 20:06, he’ll be doing the Tahoe Rim Trail 100 on July 19 with Smith — depending on Smith’s recovery rate — pacing or crewing for him.

Smith also credited crew members Wood, Jonathan Brayton of Petaluma, and Adrian Brock of Napa, who all work in the Napa Valley.

“One cannot get through this race without these people at the aid stations, the way they pull you through, and the right pacer,” he said. “When I look back on the experience, I think of these people and what an incredible job they did. I just ran. If it wasn’t for my pacer talking to me throughout the night, I wouldn’t have made it. Chris said I gave him relentless motivation last year, and my pacer did that. He kept on me. He made sure he monitored me.

“Someone has to do an article on the art of pacing. Someone running 40 miles, which is not easy to do, has to manage themselves while monitoring their runner. It’s like taking

care of a baby. Rich was up with me 3 in the morning, took me to the start line to get breakfast, and got me weighed and checked in. He didn't miss a beat. He knew when I was fading and he would pick up my spirits, make sure I was fit, sticking to my tempo, hitting my targets on time. He told me before the race 'Get to mile 62 healthy, and I'll get you home.' The time goes very fast out there, the night passes very quickly. Every 10 or 15 minutes, all of a sudden Rich would ask 'Where are you, Smith? Where are you in your head? Are you feeling OK?' I'd say 'I'm doing well, sticking to the rhythm.' He'd say 'OK, you need to pick it up a little.'"

There wasn't much small talk or storytelling during the race.

"I'm more of a focused runner, and I didn't need to go there because I wasn't really hurting that badly," Smith said. "I love the movement, the challenge, the workout, and I had a goal to run 100 miles."

When they got to No Hands Bridge, where he and Pratt had had to stop in 2013, Smith had no worries.

"The three or four miles from Highway 49 to the bridge is a very runnable part. You're only six miles from the finish and you know you're going to finish. We did a very fast pace, passed a bunch of runners and were having a really good time."

When they finished, he got his blood and blood pressure checked, ate, tracked where Diana was, and watched him finish.

Smith was amazed that Diana completed the race.

"He did a non-traditional workout and still finished a 100-mile race," he said. "I don't know how that's possible. I trained the perfect amount and finished the race, but it was a tough race. I know he suffered out there, but he gutted out that race somehow."

Diana said his Achilles tendon injury set him back about 2 1/2 months.

"An orthotist made me a brace I could run in and I trained with that and alternated that with a lot of non-impact pool running, working out on an elliptical machine, and an anti-gravity treadmill called an Alter-G at **Napa Valley Care Center**," he explained.

"I like to do trail running, and the classic training for this thing is 60 to 90 miles during heavy weeks. But I just couldn't because anytime I ran two days in a row, even with the brace, my Achilles would swell up and I couldn't even push off or do a toe raise. Other ultra-runners would tell me 'You need to have your Achilles good enough at the time of the run more than all those miles, or else you're done. Even after working out on the Alter-G, my Achilles would swell up.'"

He had to do plenty of soul searching.

"I told myself I couldn't give the ticket to somebody else, so I might as well do this alternative training and see how it goes. I did everything else I could, including heat

training in a sauna. I did a training weekend on the Western States Trail five weeks before the race because I was healed up enough for that, but then I couldn't do a toe raise after three days of that. I was back to where I was before. So I went back to my alternative workouts and kept my fingers crossed that I'd be healed up enough by the race."

Diana changes running style to overcome injury

Diana managed to finish the race by running slightly lopsided, to minimize the pressure on his Achilles tendon.

"I struck on my heel on the right side, where normally I would strike on my midfoot. So the stress was more on my knee than my Achilles, and I was able to keep at a reasonable pace," he said.

"It was a very humbling and emotional experience for me because two days before the race, I wasn't sure I could do it. Two weeks before the race, I couldn't run 100 yards. It worked well except that I developed this massive heel blister at the beginning that had to be treated several times."

Diana was also happy to finish considering that, ultramarathon-wise, he had only completed one 50-miler and one 50K coming in, and three marathons.

"This race meant a lot to me after winning those tickets a year ago, because this race is so hard to get into. There's only a five-percent chance of getting in through the lottery. I could not have made it for sure without my friends, family and pacers."

His first pacer was Mike Deus, who works as a nurse in Napa and whose children have starred at Napa High in swimming and water polo. Deus had paced Diana during his 50-mile race. His second pacer was Haewon Park, an emergency room physician from Indiana he worked with there before moving to Napa in 2004.

"She had talked me into doing a half-marathon after 15 years of not running, and we did it two years in a row," Smith said of Park. "Then she got me into my first marathon for my 40th birthday, the Chicago Marathon, in 2009 and that's when I started training seriously. She did a great job pacing me and so did Mike. They knew how to keep me doing what I could handle, in addition to keeping my mind from wandering by telling me stories and keeping me talking and coherent."

His wife, Theresa, and children Andrew, 12, and Grace, 8, hugged him at Foresthill before he set out with Condor.

One of his crewmembers, JC Alvarez, came all the way from Winterhaven, Florida.

"Crew members have to stay up all night, too, making sure you have a change of socks, certain foods that work better for you, a new pair of shoes. I couldn't have dug deep without their support. I'd seen their bright, shiny faces at 3 a.m. or 6 a.m. saying 'You can do it.'"