

The Inca Trail to Manchu Picchu Marathon

By Don Eovino

Dead Woman's Pass, I made it and for the first time since I started this race I finally believed I might really finish it. I was at 13,799 feet, at the top of the pass, seven miles into the 27.5 mile Inca Trail Marathon to Machu Picchu.

Since awakening at my campsite at Laqtapata, the base of Inca Ruins at the Urabamba River at 3 a.m., I have braved 45 degree temperatures, high altitude, shortness of breath, profuse sweating, sore throat, blinding headaches, and a gnawing feeling that I bit off more than I could chew, and I was doomed to FAILURE!

But how could I quit? I was seven miles into the trail, and had climbed from 8,000 feet, which had taken me 3 1/2 hours, and who was going to help me out, or offer me aid, or carry me down? I was sweating on the inside and freezing on the outside. My running tops were soaking wet, I was numb and facing hypothermia.

The race started with 28 eclectic souls, all of whom were ultrarunners from all over the globe. One, a lawyer from Singapore who trots 60 mile runs each month, a crew of women from California, several of whom had done the 100 mile Death Valley Ultra, many crazy Brits from England, a friend from West Virginia who talked me into this, and assorted runners, all of whom were in better condition, more fit, and younger than I was.

I was the least trained, most overweight, and almost oldest of the group. This was going to be my first Ultra!

How does one train for an event of 27.5 miles over three mountain passes at 13,000 feet in the Andes Mountains of Peru? I had run several 15 milers from Kapiolani Park to Hawaii Kai and back, ran Diamond Head Road many times, even bounced up and down the 100 steps of Diamond Head Crater, but some of these trails had 1,400 downhill steps.

My last training was a double Tantalus run of 20 miles three weeks before this event. I didn't realize I wouldn't be able to recover in that amount of time!

We arrived in Cusco, the ancient Inca Capital of Peru, five days earlier, at 12,000 feet elevation. Acclimatization would take three days which included two days of running at 12,000 feet and chewing and drinking copious quantities of Coca leaves and Coca tea.

I figured I came here to run, and run I did. Two days before the race we ran an eight mile stretch from the flats of Pampa with stunning views of glacier-covered mountains in the distance and descended into ancient salt flats at the bottom of the valley.

The next day we ran along the river from the end of the villages at Wallabamba, the last civilized Inca Town, up and down the river passing porters and trekkers coming and going to and from Machu Picchu.

After a restless sleep in my tent beside the rushing river, I awoke at 3 a.m. to spectacular starry skies, clouded by my cold moist breath as I gasped for air prior to my 4:30 a.m. start.

I had packed for survival: strobe headlamp, hand flashlight, first aid kit, Vaseline, a couple of power bars, 10 power gels, a thermal Mylar survival blanket, chafing lotion, aspirin, Vitamin C and Ibuprofen, duct tape, extra socks, moleskin for blisters, a 70-ounce Camelback hydration system, two extra running tops, sunglasses and a hat.

Most of the elite runners took off with their two shoes, a shirt, shorts, and sunglasses. I felt like I was lugging a 100 pound pack.

Trekking up the mountain (I didn't really run until I was two thirds of the way through) I could hear the crushing sound of the

river as it polished the granite face of the cliffs beside me.

I couldn't see the water and attempted to stay on the trail with the help of my fellow runners whose firefly lighting ignited the path we were gingerly following. We kept bumping into guides, porters, and mules descending the trail. It was quite disconcerting at one time to find myself with my heels over the edge, pushing five fat-bellied rider less mules away from me in the dark. As I teeter tottered on the edge, I was determined to win the battle of push and shove over the abyss below me.

My mantra was: "Just one more step" and if it wasn't for the incredible scenes awakening the dawn in front of me, I would have lost my will to continue. Even the darkness was exhilarating as the stars were twinkling, and it was eerily quiet, save for the muffled sounds of the river. As I climbed higher and higher, the sun started to illuminate the valley and plains around me.

Half way up, I crossed a wooden bridge into a small village named Wayllabamba. Roosters signaled the start of the dawn and campers were awaking to fresh brewed campsite coffee.

This trail was a real challenge. At the top of Dead Woman's pass I gathered myself and smartly delayed any further progress till I changed shirts, ate some power gel (which had solidified at this temperature), replenished my body heat as the sun was now rising, burning off the chill. The last 1,000 feet of climbing felt like I was attempting Mt. Everest. After half an hour, I was fully recovered and I carried on.

I reached a much appreciated aid station on the way to the second pass at Runkuraqay Ruins, at 13,100 feet. The trail was created for the fast Inca runners 500 years ago of solid granite steps. The steps are still in good order as they were engineered expertly by the stone cutters of the day.

I was thrilled to be at this point and imagined myself a Chasqui warrior, and Indian runner who could run 100 miles a day to deliver messages to the King on these very same trails.

I had climbed from lush valleys, through dense jungle to medieval cold forests to pristine passes of crystal clear skies which gave meaning to the phrase "As far as the eyes can see".

It was as difficult descending as it was climbing, as the Inca's didn't believe in switch-backs, and my legs were already shot through the acclimatization process. I didn't really run as much as I power walked. This trail is attempted over a three-day period, but we were going to do it in one!

The third pass came at another set of ruins at Phuyupatamarca (11,399 feet). Having now completed 20 miles, my goal of finishing in 10 hours now seemed achievable.

This section was surprisingly tedious as the trail plunged downhill. Imagine climbing down uneven stone steps numbering 1,400. They seemed never ending. My spirits picked up as the sun shone brightly, wild parrots screeched above me in the trees, and in the distance I could see the archeological terraces cut into the hillside at Inti Pata. I knew I was close to the finish line.

With no energy left, and burning all of my reserves, I came to the final opening in the trail where the Inca's had built the Sun Gate, the Inti Punku, the last point of protection as the trail narrows and the introduction of the ruins of Machu Picchu await you.

With the end in sight, my adrenalin gave me enough of a boost to race the last kilometer where I hoped to be greeted by my faithful wife and a few patient friends. I did finish in 10 hours and 6 minutes (not the last one either). I was filled by a glow of achievement brought on by my endorphin rush and experiencing and seeing one of the great wonders of the world.