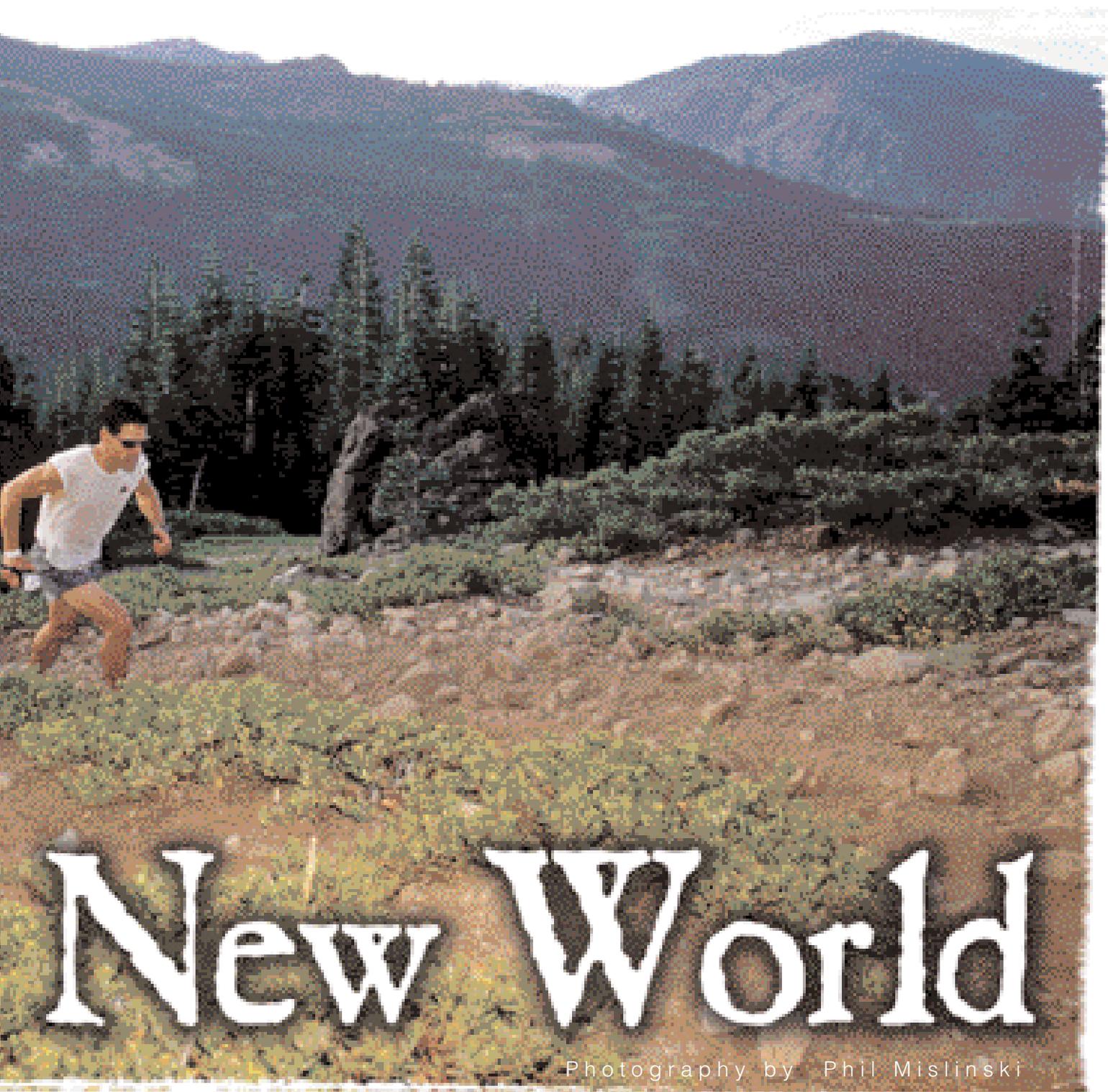
The image is a composite. On the left, a vertical strip shows a dirt path with white dashed lines, flanked by trees, possibly in a forest. On the right, a larger photograph shows a landscape with a field of low-lying green plants in the foreground, a line of dark evergreen trees in the middle ground, and mountains in the background under a clear sky.

O Brave

Life in the
California Sierra's
Ultra Culture

by Rachel Toor



New World

Photography by Phil Mislinski

Ultra runners are like the rich in the famous conversation between Hemingway and Fitzgerald: “Ultrarunners are different from the rest of us,” I might say. You could answer, “Yes, they run more miles.” And there you’d have it: they are the same, and they are vastly different.

Before spending the summer in the foothills of the northern Californian Sierra, I never thought of myself as a trail hound. Hooking up with a group of runners who think marathons are for training, who log their runs in numbers of hours rather than miles, who don’t leave the house without food, water and toilet paper, I felt like Miranda arriving at Prospero’s island: “O brave new world that has such creatures in it.”

Land of Legends

It’s a commitment to train for and run a marathon; the journey towards a 100 miler is a lifestyle. An ultramarathon is like a classical epic. An individual, Odysseus-like, sets out alone, leaving home, leaving family and friends. The journey is long and hard. There are canyons and rivers to be forged; natural elements to be endured; monsters to be battled along the way, mostly internal. There will also be temptations: the siren song of aid stations, where volunteers offer food and warmth, the ease of stopping, a comfortable seat. The bodies of those not as strong, not as tough-minded, litter the trek. But finally, finally, the runner returns home, greeted by the cheers of those left behind. She will be both changed

and more truly herself, having traveled not just over distance, but deep into the inner realms of mind and soul.

It's strange being in a place filled with epic heroes. The area around Auburn is a Mecca for endurance athletes. People move here because they want access to the trails; a Sunday morning run that starts at sunrise could easily last until late afternoon. Turn a corner and you are likely to meet folks who have many times run the Western States and other ultras, and have paced, volunteered or crewed even more frequently. (If you embark on this kind of journey it is likely that at one time or another, you will be injured. That's when you are given the opportunity to pay back the kindness of those who have helped you.) You might, for example, if you turn the right corner, run into Mo Bartley and Bryan Hacker, who live in nearby Cool.

Mo Bartley is cool. She's the kind of woman men want to date, and women want to be friends with. A 46-year-old surgical nurse, she has run Western States five times, and has competed, like her husband Hacker, on the U.S. 100K team. Bartley ran a marathon before ever doing a 5K.

Typically ultrarunners are a little longer in the tooth than road racers; patience is a virtue in endurance sports, and more often possessed by those who have been around a few blocks. Many top ultrarunners come to the sport after tiring of racing shorter distances, though that is changing and there are a number of young ultrastuds on the rise. Bartley, never one to follow the typical path, is now bucking the ultra trend and working towards shorter distances as she gets older. She won her age group at cross country nationals this year. She's been a friend, role model and mentor to many women runners. She is inclusive and expansive in her reach; she's also funny as all get-out.

Waiting at Pacer Central

On a sunny June afternoon I found myself sitting on the lawn of the Foresthill Elementary School with Bartley and Hacker. Foresthill is at mile 62 of the race that is the ultra equivalent of the Boston Marathon. Each year 400 runners are lucky enough to get into the Western States Endurance Run and nutty enough to want to do it. Here, having run a qualifying time at another race is necessary but not sufficient to gain entry: you must also be chosen through a lottery.

Each year, the day starts at 5 a.m. in Squaw Valley, a ski resort near Lake Tahoe

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that still wears proudly its Olympic rings. From the High Sierra, often still coated with snow, the trail climbs a total of 18,000 vertical feet and descends 23,000, into and out of canyons that can be ungodly hot. After 100 miles, runners finish the last 300 meters on the track of Placer High School in Auburn, CA, a small Gold Rush town about an hour northeast of Sacramento.

Western States got its start 28 years ago when Gordy Ainsleigh, a bearded mountain of a man who still lives in nearby Meadow Vista, planned to ride the Tevis Cup, a 100 mile horse race on the Western States trail. After Ainsleigh's mare came up lame, he decided, against medical advice and to the consternation of almost all, to go it on foot instead. Since Gordy's first run, where, like the top horses, he finished in under 24 hours, a whole sport of ultramarathon trail running has developed and grown. There are now over thirty North American 100 mile races, plus numerous 100K's, 50 milers, and 50K's.

“Think of it as a catered hike,” says Hacker, trying to reassure me about my decision to pace Ralph—a running buddy from North Carolina—for the last twenty miles. “It's not exactly about ‘pacing,’” he says. “Your job is just to keep your runner moving—and eating and drinking.”

Bartley was going to be pacing 29-year-old Jennifer Devine-Pfeiffer for the last twenty miles. Jen, who lives in Sacramento, was preparing for the World 100K Championship in Cleder, France, later in the summer. Hacker would pace Scott St. John, another Auburn resident.

We wait for the leaders and hang out with the volunteers and pacers. Hacker doesn't have to wait long—St. John is in the top three. Runners may be accompanied for the last 38 miles of the course by pacers. Most use two people to run the last two legs—from Foresthill to the river crossing at mile 80, and from the other side of the river to the finish. The friend who was going to run the first leg with Ralph

“There will also be temptations: the siren song of aid stations, where volunteers offer food and warmth, the ease of stopping, a comfortable seat.”



had bailed out; he decided to go it alone until 80.

As I'm waiting, having just downed a gigantic “Navajo taco,” Ralph's crew finds me. Turns out he changed his mind, and wants a pacer after all.

No problem, I say, and trot over to Pacer Central, where I ask a handsome wiry guy if he has someone to run with Ralph to the river. Nope. Everyone who volunteered has already been hooked up with a runner. “Why don't you do it?” he asks, looking me up and down.

“I can't run that far. I've never run that far.”

“Sure you can. It'll be slow.”

After some fussing I say to him, “If this kills me I'm gonna hunt you down and do you harm.” The handsome wiry guy won't tell me his name. I change into my running clothes.



“There are canyons and rivers to be forged; natural elements to be endured; monsters to be battled along the way, mostly internal.”

Running with Ralph

Ralph comes into Foresthill, slurps down a can of pineapple chunks, and we set out running just after 9 p.m., just as it is getting dark. We run on the single-track trail, under a starry sky, through manzanita bushes, pines and madrone trees. I happen to know that we are also running through poison oak, but I don't mention this.

Ralph's a good strong runner, a 2:50 marathoner and veteran of a number of ultras. He just wants to finish Western States, doesn't much care about his time. I run behind him, shining my flashlight on his feet, reminding him to eat, to drink. Sometimes we chat (I chat, Ralph grunts), sometimes we run in companionable silence. Periodically Ralph asks me how I'm doing. “Fine,” I say. “Keep moving.”

The thing about running is, it's a narcissistic kind of thing. It's all about my times, my splits, my injuries. Me, me, me. Pacing is a negation of subjectivity: it's not about me anymore.

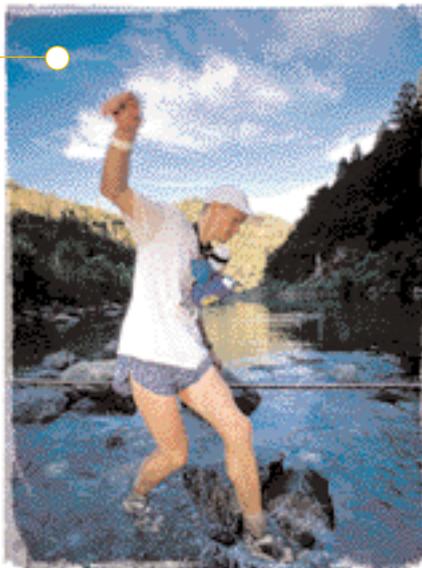
I did not want to cross the river. No sir, I did not. We reach it, at 2 a.m. The water is wide and cold. I forge in, making sure that Ralph is right behind me. When we get to the other side, I bring him hot chocolate. I am wet, I am cold, but I don't whine. Ralph needs me. This is about him.

We run through the night and run still as the sun comes up over the foothills, illuminating the tall, dusty grass, sending shards of light through the trees. We hit the track in Auburn at 10 a.m. Ralph's family and crew join us, walking with us towards the finish. I am filled with emotion. I have run 38 miles, farther than I ever have. Ralph looks at me, points, and says nothing. There is nothing he needs to say. I know. I know.

Heroes at Home

A few months later, in September 2001, I'm at Bartley and Hacker's wedding. The event has gathered many of the best ultrarunners in the neighborhood, which means some of the best in the country. Norm Klein, a legendary race director, gave a toast in which he listed the newlyweds as one of a number who had met at his races. Bartley and Hacker met at the Sunmart Texas Trail Ultra.

Rae Clark is best man. Clark, 49, still holds the American record for 100 miles,



and the record for 24 hours as well. He has a marathon PR of 2:28. He's run 128 ultras, won 30 of them. “People used to think Californians were crazy,” he says. “Now half of Western States comes from the mid-west and the east coast. The thing about ultras is that you don't run as fast, but that's not the point. It's about being out there with your friends, being able to talk because you're not getting yourself into anaerobic debt.”

Clark is an extraordinary runner. He's also a friendly guy. I met him at a tiny trail marathon in nearby Nevada City this summer. After I finished he came over, wanting to know who I was. He's like a one-man welcoming committee to the local running community.

Clark's eagerness, earnestness and enthusiasm also make him an easy target. During a group trail run this summer, he hung back to run with a new woman who had shown up, prepared neither for the pace nor the distance. Bryan Hacker had been riding his mountain bike and saw that the gap between the pack of runners and Clark as an opportunity for a little fun. Hacker dismounted, took off his bike helmet, and used it to make a track across the trail.

Sure enough, Clark finished the run and, while not wanting to upset the women, whispered to Hacker that he had seen the largest snake track of his life. Clark spent the summer warning folks on the trail about “Goliath.” Months later, he still speaks in hushed tones of Goliath.

Another Auburn resident at the wedding, Tim Twietmeyer, is—there's no other way to put it—an awe-inspiring legend. He is the only person to have finished the Western States 20 times in

under 24 hours, having won it on five occasions. What is most astonishing is that everyone says the same thing about him: “You couldn't find a nicer guy.”

Twietmeyer moved to Auburn in 1989 from Sacramento, looking for a more rural environment. Tim loves Western States, both the race and the trail. He talks about the history, that it was formerly a toll road used to keep the gold mines alive. “The lifeblood of the mines,” he says, “was delivered on that trail.” He appreciates the way the community embraces the events. “There's a pride of ownership among many of the folks who run the aid stations on the course; some of them have been doing it for fifteen, twenty years.”

Twietmeyer voices what many of us feel: “Running is the only sport where you can participate shoulder-to-shoulder with the best guys in the world. You get to be on the starting line with them. You may not finish as fast, but you're in the same race. It's not like a mediocre baseball player can just pick up and play in the majors.” It's funny to hear this from one of the best guys in the world. But Twietmeyer's modesty seems as genuine as his enthusiasm. “The Western States buckle,” he says, “whether it's for 24 hours or for 30 hours, is like membership to the ultrarunning club.”

And then, I see him, the handsome wiry guy from Pacer Central. “Who is that?” I ask and point. “It's Ray Scannell,” someone says, “he's run Western States ten times, won the 40-49 age group three times, his wife, Joanie, first ran the race in 1980.”

I go over to them and mention to Joan that the bride had told me a story about her. I turn to her husband and accuse him of having been at Pacer Central at this year's States. He tries to demur.

I accuse him of making me think I could run 38 miles. He says nothing. I accuse him of encouraging me to have what turned out to be the most profound experience of my running life. Ray Scannell just grins.

I still find it a little odd, having dinner with people who talk about race times that would make more sense in minutes rather than in hours. “She ran 20:15.” That sounds like a 5K time to me. But the joys of running on such glorious and demanding trails, in such good and undemanding company, have a lure that compels and humbles me. As a voyager swept onto an enchanted part of land, I think to myself, “How many goodly creatures are there here.” ■

Rachel Toor lives in Durham, NC where she writes to support her love of trail running.