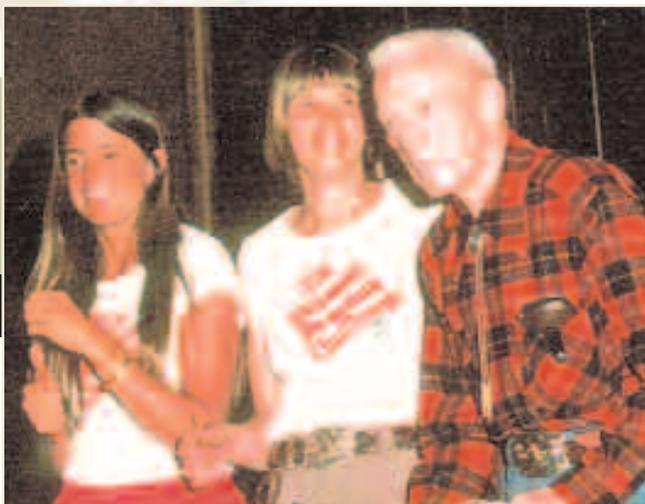


# hit the trails



Phil Gardner

## On the Trail...

### WITH THE WOMEN OF WESTERN STATES

You can't spit around here without hitting a living legend. Not in Squaw Valley, not on the last weekend of June. The Western States Endurance Run 100-mile trail race attracts the cream of the ultrarunning crop and here they are, milling around, wearing advertisements for their sponsors and their game faces. There are also those others, the regular runners, who have made it—by qualifying, by winning the entrance lottery—to the show. They wear shirts from other races; no one bothers with anything less than a 50K. This is serious business.

Easy to spot among the crowd is the man who started the whole thing. Gordon Ainsleigh towers above most, shaking hands with the men who approach him and giving women rib-crushing hugs. Ainsleigh wears his celebrity like a pair of retired running shoes.

Most here know the story: 30 years ago Ainsleigh was planning to ride the Tevis Cup 100-mile horse race and, when his mare came up lame, decided to run the whole thing. It started not only this race, but spawned the whole phenomenon of 100-mile trail races.

What most don't know, even around here, is that while Ainsleigh started the run, there is an unacknowledged debt that ultrarunners owe to the horses who have for the last 50 years trod the Western States trail, and to two women who nurtured and raised the race.

On the Thursday before the 2004 Western States, a pack of runners, their families, and crew join Mo Livermore, Shannon Weil, and Tony Rossmann on a pre-race trek up the steep three miles to Emigrant Pass, continuing a tradition begun two decades ago. At the top, Rossmann, an early member of the Western States board, leads a verse of "America the Beautiful" and gives a brief history of the trail, used by miners, and of Wendell Robie, the man who rediscovered it in 1931. Livermore and Weil give thanks. Not only to Robie, but to his right-hand woman, Betty Veal, who between the Tevis Cup and Western States has given nearly a half century of service to those who compete in these two endurance

events. As Weil describes Betty Veal's contribution, Livermore makes sure that everyone has signed a get-well card for her: Veal was in the hospital and heart-sick to be missing the race. She passed away a few months later.

The two women pause to remember those in the Western States community who have passed away, a mourning of family members linked not by blood but by a connection to this place. Livermore reminds those assembled, "You're so lucky to be on this trail, so lucky to be out here." She connects, in softly spoken words, the runners to travelers throughout history, reminding all of us of the pioneer past of the West.

Livermore's silver belt buckle, announcing her triumph in covering the 100 miles of the race in under 24 hours, catches the morning sun. This year neither Livermore nor Weil are running the race. They are behind the scenes, helping to direct the race they have nurtured for 25 years.

After Ainsleigh ran that first year with the horses, he lit a fire in the imagination and in the competitive spirit of other runners. But like many trailblazers, he wasn't much interested in the details of creating an event. Wendell Robie, the horseman, saw the writing on the wall and knew that, at age 82, he wasn't the guy to do it either.

Robie called a young woman he knew. Through the force of his personality and the generous nature of her soul, he enlisted her as a helper. She had a sense of order, a sense of humor, and an astonishing, profound—for a 25-year-old—sense of the need for safety. Mo Livermore (then Sproul) had ridden the Tevis Cup for the first time in 1972, and she'd learned the deep lesson of endurance riding: To finish is to win.

In 1977 not much was known about the human physiological tolls of running 100 miles on a tough, hilly trail. So Livermore consulted with Dr. Robert Lind, an emergency room physician, who has been in charge of the medical portion of the race ever since. They borrowed from the horses. On the Tevis course there were three "vet checks," mandatory health points to make sure the horses were sound to continue; Livermore added aid and medical attention for the runners. Just as endurance riders used "drop bags," Livermore and six volunteers toted runners' stuff to various points on the course. "People came with suitcases," she recalls.

That year Shannon Weil was riding the Tevis and spent a number of miles alongside Andy Gonzales, one of the 14 runners. She watched him closely, observing both him and the phenomenon that was springing up around the event and remembers saying to herself: “This run is gonna be a hit, and I’m gonna make sure it is.”

In the fall Weil joined Livermore and Robie to establish a board of governors to deal with the multitude of organizational details. After seeing a small ad placed in *Runner’s World*, people began calling from around the country wanting to know more about a 100-mile trail race. “We were the only voice of support,” Weil recalls. “We had to tell them, ‘you’re not crazy,’ because everyone else—their families and friends—thought they were.”

The modern race began the next year—with 63 runners, five of them women, and no horses. The board included a couple of runner doctors, who had ideas about hydration and nutrition; competitors were required, like the endurance horses, to check in. Local nurses volunteered to take starting weights, pulses, and blood pressures, initially amazed at how low runners’ pulses were. Instead of resenting the mandatory physical check, runners loved it. “They felt cared for,” says Helen Beck,

who has been, for the past 25 years, the medical captain at the start.

Weil recalls the early days as well: “We had people from as far away as San Francisco.” Now among those who won the lottery to score one of the 369 numbers are runners from South Korea and South Africa, Italy, Australia, Norway, Sweden, Tanzania, and three from Nepal, as well as from all over North America. They will be provided for by more than 1300 volunteers.

But perhaps no volunteers provide more than Livermore and Weil, the mothers of the race. They have worked to create something bigger than themselves. They continually dismiss efforts to laud their contributions and instead turn the conversation back to what a special place it is—the country that the Western States course passes through.

Weil says, “I believe that there’s a light that goes down this trail. When people go down the trail they take that light and love in their hearts and store it there all year long.” Those fortunate enough to experience the light must pause—ought to pause—for a moment of appreciation for the keepers of that flame.



Hughes Photograph

**Mo Livermore and Shannon Weil with the man who rediscovered the Western States trail, Wendall Robie (above left); Livermore competing in the 1981 Western States (above).**

## The Wonderland Project

([www.lenticularpictures.com](http://www.lenticularpictures.com); \$25)

Made in the same spirit as mountain climbing and skiing films, *The Wonderland Project* is the result of a film crew heading into the wilderness to document extreme athletes testing their limits.

The stars of the film, friends and ultramarathoners Zac West and Skye Thompson, prepared for two years to run the Wonderland Trail in a single day. Circling the base of Mt. Rainier, the Wonderland is 94 miles of ups and downs—22,000 feet of climbing and 22,000 of descending—across varying terrain.

While an ultrarun doesn’t offer the explosive excitement of skiers on a virgin slope, or climbers attacking a new route, the pace does allow for unique reflection from the participants on what they are doing—as well as some beautiful scenic shots of Mt. Rainier’s surrounding wilderness. Pre- and post-run sound bites are spread throughout the film, as well as revealing interviews with both men at each of their pit stops.

The result is an interesting look at the psyches of runners who have invested years toward one purpose. Standing at the trailhead, West and Thompson chat nervously with family and friends, much as any runner would before a race. Excitement, nervousness, and expectation all mix together as they wait for noon to begin running.

West and Thompson began their adventure with the goal of breaking the established record of 27:56 for the loop, hoping to crack 24 hours. Yet throughout the run another goal was predominant: finishing together. “The partnership might indeed be the reason that we succeed,” West said beforehand.

As the run unfolds, the importance of their friendship, and of accomplishing their goals together, becomes a major theme—particularly as one of them begins to struggle while the other gets stronger. By the end, some of the goals remain unattained; however, each man has learned something valuable about himself—and shared it with the viewer.

—Marc Chaloufour

—Rachel Toor

