

Hard Road To the Beach

The Dipsea Race Separates the Animals from the Runners.

by David Kleinberg

From Mill Valley to Stinson Beach over plush Mount Tamalpais in northern California, with climbs from sea level to 800 feet, back to sea level, up to 1400 feet, down to sea level, over the short distance of 6.8 miles, the Dipsea probably is one of the toughest shorter races in America.

I had raced once—San Francisco's Bay-to-Breakers—and I wanted to race again in the mountains of Marin County, which, as a life-long family sanctum for hiking and picnics, I've always viewed romantically. And I suspect, in this case, my first-gear basketball muscles actually gave me the luxury of a lazy preparation.

By other runners' standards, my training period might have seemed meager. After two hours of basketball eight days before Dipsea (four games to 16 baskets. I went into five straight days of early morning 90-

minute runs in the windy, hilly Twin Peaks area at the top of San Francisco. That was it. Three days later, legs well-rested, I showed up in the town square of Mill Valley.

In many respects, the Dipsea proved to be a much different race than I expected. Aside from the rugged terrain, the race in recent years (this was the 68th Dipsea) had become congested and had gained a reputation as an event exhibiting as much civility as that displayed by 10 kids chasing a foul ball.

One runner told me how in an earlier Dipsea he had come across a fallen runner who was lying in pain with a separated shoulder. "I jumped over him and went right on," he admitted without shame. It seemed the appropriate response for the race.

But race sponsors didn't like the idea of runners crossing the finishing line looking like survivors of an infantry beach landing, and so this year, the starting time was moved up to nine and the starts were well-staggered to prevent congestion.

Under such conditions—and depart in on my own between the gun for the Super Joggers and the Turtles—I found myself leaving Mill Valley alone, except for a small

brown dog who sprinted after a car at a pace about 50 times quicker than mine.

The nicest thing about the Dipsea is that it never deceives you. The trail begins with 671 steps, all of which I counted, although it was difficult because they are constructed with the treads too long for one stride and too short for a two-step stride.

Above the stairs and beyond perhaps the most physically difficult part of the race, I turned onto the dirt road leading through the Flying Y Ranch, alone and enjoying the sweet smell of the mountain, so alone at this point in fact that I was slightly concerned that I had taken a wrong turn. A young child, playing on the steps while her thin, long-haired mother fed the horses, assured me I was on the right path.

The first of the Turtles, a contingent of women, were soon catching me, and eventually we were a long line, like ants on the way to a wheat field. But even in company, we were still in solitude, so much different than the festive Bay-to-Breakers. Because so much energy in Dipsea was directed toward accelerating uphill, there seemed



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little left for conversation.

But the madness of the race did not really present itself until we crossed, at an elevation of 800 feet, the Panoramic Highway, the main road to the top of Mount Tamalpais, and started the sharp descent into Muir Woods.

Swept away in this mass disregard for personal safety, I cascaded to the bottom, landed feet first, and ran into Muir Woods, welcoming the coolness and shade of the surrounding ferns and canopy of famed redwoods, even if it meant the beginning of the long, final ascent to 1400 feet.

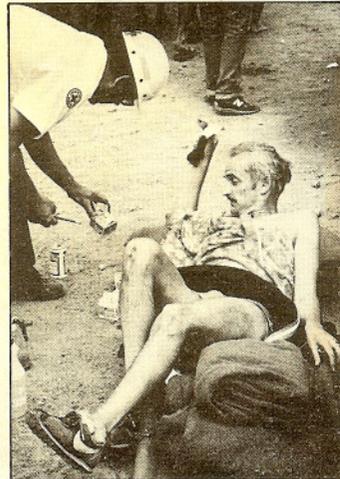
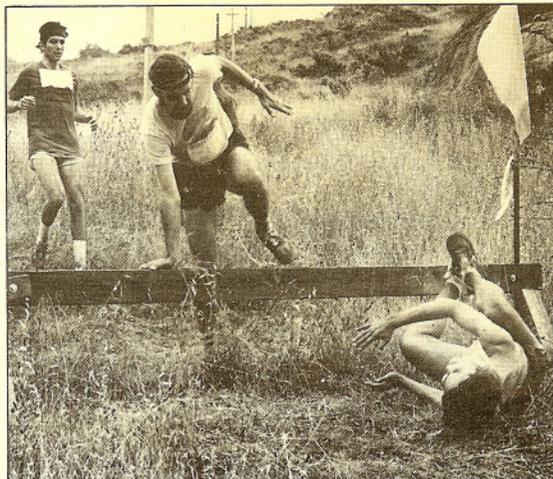
It was early on this route that I was faced with the most surprising aspect of the race. Though there was plenty of room to move, many of the runners walked up the steep incline, which to me, as slow as I am, seemed unconscionable.

However, the walkers could walk faster than I could run and they could rest while walking. But to me, it was the "Dipsea Race," not the "Dipsea Walk." If it's a run, you run, but my self-righteous advocacy for purism found few believers.

We reached the summit—pretentiously labeled Cardiac Hill—at 4.3 miles into the race. We had 2½ miles to go, almost all downhill. My legs were prepared for that long stretch of uphill, but what bothered me was I expected that much effort to have earned me a rest.

The final 2½ miles, however, were so steep, with hundreds of steps and chuckholes marking the way into the aptly named Steep Ravine trail, that I was required to remain unendingly

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alert and at full power with a new set of downhill muscles.

But even in this highly uncontrolled section, the politeness of the faster-moving pacesetters remained consistent despite the reputation of this race. When they went by, I heard the well-mannered call of "Left," followed by "Thank you."

Crossing Steep Ravine, I moved into the open, white-brown rolling hills a mile from the finish. For the first time, I was able to allow the feeling of triumph to float to my head along with the now fresh, cool ocean air.

Minutes later I returned to civilization, hitting the tarmac at the junction of Highway 1 and the Panoramic Highway, a quarter mile to go. My legs were black with dirt and my ribs hurt. I could breathe but the space in my chest seemed constricted to the size of an orange.

But I was thinking kick, not pain. No matter how slow one runs a race, it is possible to give the illusion of champion by saving at least one percent for the finish, so when I heard a spectator shout, "200 Yards!" I turned it on. However, he was a poor judge of distances, for after I turned a corner, feeling ready to float into blackness, I still had 200 yards to go.

I braked back to my normal 10-minute mile pace and 40 yards from the finish began my second kick, crossing the finish line in a respectable 1:40.

Darryl Beardall, a 41-year-old railway worker from Santa Rosa, Calif., had made it to the finish line 52 minutes faster to win the race. He was one of 792 people ahead of me.

Wearing my seven-year-old tattered, cut-off Levis (with holes in all four pockets), I came in first, according to my wife's assessment, as the shabbiest dressed runner in the race.

On to Boston. □