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RUNNING; A Will to Suffer Draws Runners to the Desert

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By KIRK JOHNSON
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Lisa R. Smith leads what she calls a "very ordinary life." Here is a glimpse: in the past four months, she ran 150 miles across the Sahara Desert in temperatures of up to 130 degrees, was stung by a scorpion along the way, but kept going and staggered across the finish line with a fever of 103. She slogged 400 miles through the Montana wilderness on a weeklong "adventure race" that included white-water kayaking, snowshoeing on glaciers and riding 100 miles on a mountain bike. And she raced 50 miles along the spine of Long Island in 6 hours 43 minutes in a super-marathon, where she won and set a course record.

Now, she says, it is time for something really difficult. Death Valley is calling.

For athletes like Smith -- part of a tiny band of little-known super endurance runners who stake their claims on the frontiers of human physical possibility -- the Death Valley ultra-marathon called Badwater is the evil dark star and siren song temptress of a sport that most people barely even know about, let alone fantasize about doing themselves.

The race, which will begin on Thursday, starts at the lowest point in the continental United States, 282 feet below sea level, in high summer -- the time of year that gives Death Valley towns like Furnace Creek their names and reputations. It stretches across the desert for 135 miles, climbing

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more than 8,600 vertical feet to the base of Mount Whitney, whose peak is the highest point in the lower 48 states.

For an added treat, 40- to 50-mile-an-hour headwinds are not uncommon. The course literature says runners should be prepared for a 100- degree variation in temperature, from 130 or more at the beginning to freezing or below at the end.

"It's the hardest race in the world," said Smith, a 37-year-old massage therapist and sports trainer who is running Badwater for the third time. "Something about this race just gives you a power that you have to find within yourself. Once you've done it, nothing seems that difficult anymore."

Super-distance running is predicated on the notion that just about everything in life, including the plain vanilla 26.2-mile regular marathon, is too easy. The sport, which offers little in the way of celebrity or prize money -- partly because finishing at all is considered nearly as prestigious as winning -- has a long history as a kind of eccentric cousin to regular track and field. The sport's roots, historians say, extend to the late 1800's and what was called pedestrianism, in which amateur and professional athletes competed in sometimes weeklong running marathons around a track, or city-to-city races of 500 miles or more.

What has happened, however, is that old-fashioned running has merged, in both style and substance, with harder-edged sports like mountain bike racing and rock-climbing. Harsh settings and promotional literature that relies on words like "extreme" have become part of ultra-running's package.

"It used to be a big deal to finish a marathon," said Ted Corbitt, who is credited with helping revive interest in ultra-marathoning in the 1960's and 1970's. "But there's been an evolution. People wanted more challenges, and they're willing to suffer."

For Smith, the Badwater race -- formally known as Hi-Tec Badwater for the shoe-company that created it in 1987, and which still sponsors it -- has added meaning for her. Of the expected field of 31 American and foreign competitors, there are only three women, and two of them trained together here in this same small northern New Jersey town. Smith and Julie S. Teiger -- a 44-year-old mother of four -- met in an aerobics class at the Bernardsville Y.M.C.A. The third woman is Anita Allen, 44, of Miami.

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"We were soul mates," Teiger said of Smith. "Our arm swings would be in sync when we ran, and our breathing would be quite similar."

Smith worked as a coach and trainer with Teiger, who now lives in Utah, and this year persuaded her friend -- through what Teiger described as a full-court press of will and optimism and contagious spiritual strength -- to test herself against foot racing's worst. The two women arranged to reunite last weekend in Las Vegas, Nev., in preparation for the five-hour drive together to Badwater's starting place.

"I am scared; I am really scared," Teiger said in a telephone interview late last week from her home in Park City. "But I am going on trust in Lisa, because she said I can do it."

Smith should know what to expect. She has lived it, finishing twice -- although last year she had walk part of it backward, up the steep final grade to Mount Whitney -- because her ankles and quadriceps were simply not working properly after 125 miles or so.

But the terms Smith used to describe that journey, sitting at the table in her apartment in this suburb about 35 miles west of Manhattan, were spiritual. Badwater, she said, is about magic and the forces of the world that come alive after so many hours pushing and prodding at the limits of mind and body. Nearly everyone hallucinates, for example. One runner last year swore he had run across the Golden Gate Bridge at one point, and recalled every detail. Smith saw goats fly over head last year. She heard Indian chants, and babies crying. You know you have arrived at Badwater's heart, she said, when the visions start.

"It's the most incredibly spiritual place," she said. "It makes you want to live in the moment, experience the moment, live with it, take it, suck it all in."

Teiger said that on her friend's advice, she will go to Badwater with a spiritual agenda in place to try to shape her own marathon-inspired visions. Inspired by her Mormon upbringing, she plans to think about the pioneer women who settled the West and who had to face challenges far beyond the calculated environment of a road race, however arduous.

"They had miserable shoes, no water, carrying a baby on the hip, maybe burying a baby on the way," Teiger said. "And here we are with our fancy shoes and a car that follows us, carrying water -- we've

got it made."

Smith, who crossed the finish line in just over 37 hours at Badwater last year to finish third -- about eight hours behind the winner -- is hoping to break 34 hours this time, and part of her strategy, in keeping with the harsh spirit of the race, perhaps, is to do it without sleep. The first year, Smith slept for two hours. Last year, she caught a 45-minute nap, and only then because her mother, Dorothy Smith, who was part of her crew, insisted.

This year, the inviting, air-conditioned camper that beckoned for Smith's rest stops has been replaced by a van, and Dorothy Smith will not be there to worry. Lisa said it was just too hard for both of them.

"It was hard on me to see how hard it was on her watching me," she said of her mother. "You know you're going to suffer out there, you're definitely going to suffer, but for me it's suffering that I know I'll get through and I'll work through. For her, it was the kind of suffering like, 'Oh my God, she's going to die.' "

Dorothy Smith, who lives near Chicago, where Lisa grew up and lived before moving to New Jersey about 12 years ago, agreed that it was trying for a mother's soul to watch a daughter run Badwater. But as bad as it was, she said, it was just as dazzling to see Lisa return to life when it was over, like a desert flower.

"We drove down the mountain, went to dinner, and I think she was about recovered," Dorothy Smith said. "I went to bed before she did."

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