

Back to Badwater

Lisa Smith-Batchen's Badwater Double

By Raymond Britt

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Why?

It was about reaching a lifelong goal, about completing unfinished business on the course, about celebrating a new lease on life, and about helping others.

It was also about making the impossible possible, navigating between hope and despair, transitioning from dejection to elation, overcoming unexpected obstacles, surviving bad patches and finishing in an inexplicable blaze of speed.

At 10 a.m. on July 24, 2006, veteran elite ultramarathoner Lisa Smith-Batchen stood at the start line of the Badwater endurance run, billed as the toughest foot race in the world. She'd been there before.

But on this day, 135 miles was far short of Smith-Batchen's goal. Her plan was to finish the race, then continue past the line to summit Mount Whitney, at 14,491 feet the tallest peak in the continental U.S. After that, she would then retrace her steps back to the Badwater 135 start line.

Smith-Batchen called it the Badwater Double. 300 miles. Give or take a few.

A Killer Resume

Smith-Batchen, now 45 years old with a home in Idaho, is an elite ultradistance athlete, a marathoner, an Ironman triathlete, and an EcoChallenge adventure racing veteran. In her 1995 Badwater debut, she finished as second woman overall in 41 hours and 24 minutes.

In 1997 and 1998 she won the women's division of Badwater. And she is also the only American woman ever to win the women's division of the grueling Marathon des Sables. She's done it all.

But that was a lifetime ago. Smith-Batchen's success, while it made her one of the strongest and fittest athletes on the planet, was unable to prevent the increasing grasp of an invisible force.

In the Grip

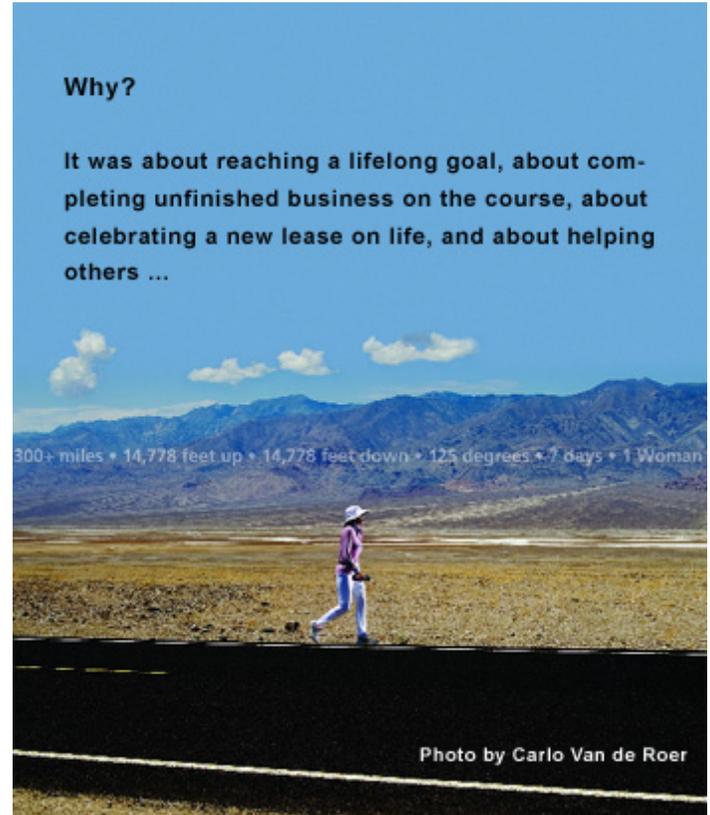
You can run, but you can't hide from depression. It catches you by surprise, then overtakes you. Smith-Batchen got to the point where hundreds of training hours and thousands of miles of steps were not enough to outrun the battles inside. The mind and body that once completed 100-mile runs with ease were forced to surrender. Abruptly.

She courageously sought help, but she also disappeared from racing. "It wasn't even that I couldn't race," she said. "There were a couple of years where I didn't do much of anything at all." A champion, rendered effectively immobile, though temporarily.



With recovery came rejuvenation and a renewed interest in getting back to her full-time job and raising a family with two young children. Smith-Batchen put her running career aside for a while to deal with depression, and just did what was right for her, a step at a time.

Over time, those steps multiplied. Her love for long runs around her home near Jackson Hole, Wyoming, soon added a new kind of competitive desire: to run for a charity she believes in. And soon, as the fire returned, so did the desire to do something most people would consider completely impossible. The





Lisa often trained while pushing and pulling her two children through the hills near her home in Jackson Hole, WY.

Badwater Double. Smith-Batchen's comeback.

The Point of the Journey

"This is my Mount Everest," she explained shortly after setting her sights on the Double in early 2006. "When I'm old and gray, I want to feel like I did it all. This is it."

Smith-Batchen had attempted the Double once before, but a crisis broke her spirit during the attempt. She longed to return and erase that memory. Now it was time. But things would be different.

Her approach to running had changed dramatically since depression entered the picture. "Now, it's about seeing racing from a new perspective, being driven for the right reasons, the sights, the sounds, the spirit of running. It's not racing anymore . . . it's about the experience."

Inspired by her cousin Joe, who died of AIDS nearly to the day she ran Badwater for the first time, Smith-Batchen would be running to raise money for orphaned children who have AIDS. She started the Double with \$140,000 in contributions expected at the end of her journey.

So she had several reasons for attempting the unimaginable. All she had to do now was start.

Smile: It's 125 degrees in the Shade

Minutes before the start at the 2006 Badwater 135 Ultramarathon, the mood was upbeat among the small community of athletes. Runners posed for photos with each other and with their crews. Among those at the start were former winner Pam Reed, who had joined Smith-Batchen for training earlier in the year, and Dean Karnazes.

"I ran with Lisa at her first Badwater 135," Karnazes reflected. "She's obviously matured a lot, but has the same twinkle in her eye. Her speed may be decreasing, but her spirit is enduring. That's the best word I can come up with: enduring." She was going to need it.

As the clock reached 10, at 282 feet below sea level in one of the harshest weather climates in the world, optimistic runners began their journey toward Mount Whitney, 135 miles away. Each runner knew there would be good times and rough ones on the course. The trick would be knowing how to handle it. Before the race, Smith-Batchen already had her racing plan in mind.

"This year I know so much more about what I'm getting into," she said. "My goals are just to put one foot in front of the other and not worry about time or the miles I have covered. I will deal with it one step at a time, and I will deal with each obstacle as it comes."

The first 41 miles of the race are relatively flat, but run in scorching heat that exceeded 125 degrees. Only ultramarathoners can truly comprehend the following statement: These 41 miles are the easy part of the course.

Before the race, Smith-Batchen laid out her early expectations. "Stovepipe Wells — mile 41 — is the first big landmark. I will not stop until getting there." What sort of training had she done to give her such confidence?

Ultramarathon Training for the Working Mom

The kind of training any working mother of two would do, when she is facing a multi-day endurance effort: whenever the time was available, hour after hour of running, walking, hill training, pulling a tire for resistance, and the like.

No time during the day? Start training at as early as 3 a.m. or as late as 10 p.m., which Smith-Batchen did every Friday night leading towards the Double. She would sometimes run/powerwalk 30 miles in those middle-of-the-night sessions.

What about quality time with the kids? Smith-Batchen happily incorporated her kids in two-hour hill training runs — pushing one child in a baby jogger, and pulling the other in a cart — running through beautiful scenery in Idaho and Wyoming. The kids reportedly loved these outings, often asking her, "Are we going running soon?"

Smooth Sailing

Despite several months of training only when time and life allowed, Smith-Batchen had declared herself better prepared than before any other Badwater. So it was no surprise when she arrived in Stovepipe Wells Monday evening with a relaxed smile, looking as if she had simply walked around the block.

She took a seat as her crew offered nutrition, fluids, and began conducting an interview with a reporter. With a pitch-

black evening fast approaching, Smith-Batchen changed clothes, donned a bright reflector vest, and headed toward her next major destination: Keeler, after mile 102 or so.

"I want to smash through Keeler," she'd confided before the race. Karnazes explained why that mindset is important:

"When you reach Keeler, it can get very depressing. You've gone 100 miles and you're destroyed already, then you see a very long 20 miles to Lone Pine in front of you. After that you know there's another 13 to climb. If you're not mentally prepared, all you can do is hunker down into survival mode, putting one foot in front of another, to keep going."

Continuing forward in the dark, the miles ticked by through the evening and into early morning. Smith-Batchen reached an interim checkpoint at Townes Pass at mile 63, where the first major climb of the course commences. In the past, Townes Pass had been a place of grace for her, one of spiritual renewal that helped spur her forward. This time, for some reason, she didn't have that feeling. Something else was up. She trudged forward.

Meltdown

"I expect obstacles and pain," Smith-Batchen said before the race. "And I'll be ready for them." Ready or not, they came hard and heavy at her as she got deeper into the course. She began having gastrointestinal problems that seemingly could not be controlled. By mile 90, she was unable to hydrate or eat effectively. The gas was running low. She was getting sicker and sicker. Just short of Keeler, in the middle of the night, she was in trouble.

News filtered back from the course, and it was not encouraging. "Latest reports from crew members have Lisa at Keeler on Tuesday, July 26th, at 2 a.m.," crew member Colleen Woods reported. "This is approximately seven miles since the last update at 7 p.m.. The good news is that Lisa has got some shut-eye in that time, but the truth of the matter is that Lisa is suffering."

The race doctor, Lisa Bliss, stopped by and found Smith-Batchen had over a 101-degree fever. Dr. Bliss suggested Smith-Batchen might have a 24-hour bug, but that knowledge was of little comfort with so far still to travel. How to get through the pain and suffering? "I closed my eyes and prayed for a new body," Smith-Batchen said later. "I needed it, fast."

Deliverance

One of the more remarkable experiences on a race course is the dramatic deliverance from the depths of discomfort to the rebirth of spirit, endurance and performance. There's nothing like breaking through the pain barrier, and finding a better and stronger runner on the other side.

And that's just what happened for Smith-Batchen. Waking from the nap in the back of the crew van, she greeted the dawn of a new day, figuratively and literally. Smith-Batchen, whose spirit was additionally boosted by the arrival of her endurance mentor Marshall Ulrich, awoke ready to do what she had planned all along: blast through Keeler. She stepped back onto the asphalt with a smile, eager to go.

The resurgence of strength and spirit helped her drive forward toward the finish without reservation or concern. Across the long, lonely miles to Lone Pine, and on the ascent toward the finish on Mount Whitney, the energy and enthusiasm continued unabated.

Approaching the end in 2006 was significantly different than in past races where she was driven at all costs to finish as fast as possible. "I knew I was on 48-hour pace — the pace where you earn a buckle — but I knew I had much further to go," she said. "I paced myself to preserve my body for Mount Whitney and beyond." Smith-Batchen's crew surrounded her on the final picturesque steps toward the finish line, and then it was over.

After 49 hours, Smith-Batchen crossed the finish line at more than 8,000 feet above sea level, 135 miles into her Badwater Double journey.

135 miles down. 165 miles to go.

Hugs, smiles, tears, photographs and a medical check followed. The doctor who had visited Smith-Batchen at her sickest point on the course was stunned in her excellent condition at the finish. "I've never felt better at the end of Badwater," Smith-Batchen recalled. "I was emotionally charged up, maybe a little overheated, but ready to go." It was indeed as if she had the new body she requested before Keeler.



Lisa rests up after the first 135 miles, before heading up to the top of the mountain.

And she would need it, because she still had 165 miles to go, beginning with the summit of Mount Whitney. The "easy" part was over; the work was ready to begin.



Shivering uncontrollably, Lisa turned back at 12,000 feet on Mt. Whitney. But by the next morning, she was ready to try again.

finally headed toward Mount Whitney. Carrying the burden of endlessly stiff legs and sleep deprivation, they moved on. But, unfortunately, not all the way to the summit.

Except for a small detail: You don't just get to hop on a hiking trail to climb Whitney. You need a permit. And for all the details Smith-Batchen's crew had under control for the entire journey, securing the right permit had slipped through the cracks. So while she and her team were ready to continue in daylight just a few hours after finishing Badwater, they would have to cool their heels and wait for the red tape to be sorted out.

Know the feeling after stopping a long distance race, and your legs and muscles just cramp up, especially as the hours go by? Now imagine that feeling, after covering 135 miles over the course of two days. That's what Smith-Batchen had to deal with.

When the permit arrived late in the day, she and Marshall changed into colder weather climbing gear and

It's Over

By the time Smith-Batchen reached 12,000 feet in the cold, dark night, she was shivering uncontrollably in sub-freezing air. The stunning midnight sky could not offset the extreme cold, nausea and ringing ears she was experiencing. A veteran mountaineer who knew the signs, Ulrich insisted they abort the summit attempt. With severe disappointment, Smith-Batchen followed Ulrich's retreat to the base of the mountain.

"It's over," she thought.

A car met Smith-Batchen and Ulrich and drove them to the nearby home of crew members Ben and Denis Jones. This was not anticipated. Smith-Batchen expected to be on the mountain, not in a living room. Now everything was up for grabs.

Her mind scrambled for workable scenarios. She called her husband, Jay, with an idea: "Maybe I can create a different Double — return to the Badwater finish line, and run to the start, forgetting the summit. Would that be enough?"

Her mentor, Ulrich, was not about to let her off the hook. "If you want a true Double," he said, "you have to summit. But it's your choice." He knew that would fire Smith-Batchen's competitive instincts. Another crew member put it more directly. "You don't need to have the summit," Bob Sitler counseled, "but you do need to have your dream." And a true Double had been her dream for years.

The Power of the Dream

So, in short order, Smith-Batchen decided the team must return to try again. She was ready to go at 9 a.m. Thursday morning, 71 hours into her journey. But first there was the pesky issue of acquiring a new daily permit to climb Whitney again. The hours again ticked by as Smith-Batchen and the team waited.

The permit arrived mid-day, and by 1:20 p.m. Smith-Batchen and Ulrich began the ascent again, feeling confident. But this time, heavy weather at the top threatened a summit visit. Climbers ahead of them had run into a rough storm and were retreating before reaching the top.

Ulrich was sure that it would blow over, and his mountaineering instincts were correct. After some more patience, Smith-Batchen and Ulrich reached the summit by early evening, the only ones to make it there all day.

They sat there alone on the summit for an exquisite sunset and moonrise. "Had we gone earlier, we wouldn't have had that spectacular moment," said Smith-Batchen. "Every obstacle before that led us to a perfect summit."

Back on track, she and Ulrich returned to the base of Mount Whitney by 3 a.m. On that early Friday morning, after 89 hours of mostly continuous forward motion, with more than 165 miles under her belt, Smith-Batchen was feeling "perfect in every sense." The summit was behind her. "I knew I was going to make it," she said.

Only 135 miles to go.

And the Stars Looked Down

Day became night. Then night became day, as Smith-Batchen continued her quest deep into Saturday, after more than five-and-a-half days on course. Continuing to display unexpected power, she smashed through the invisible wall of Keeler yet again. Just 100 miles to go.

As Smith-Batchen and her crew pressed on into Townes Pass late Saturday night with 63 miles left, the night sky was nothing short of stunning. Two comets appeared out of nowhere, crossing each other's path. Sister Julie then pointed out the strikingly brilliant stars.

"Each one of those stars represents one of the children with AIDS you are helping to save with your Double," she said. The tears poured out, and hugs were shared. It was indeed a key moment of the journey. And one that gave Smith-Batchen more faith than ever that she would see the finish line soon.

Breakdown, Dead Ahead

But early 24 hours later, a final obstacle presented itself: the limits of human endurance.

At 2 a.m. Monday morning, with only 17 miles to go, Smith-Batchen's pace had slowed to the point of almost going backwards. She was staggering in the pitch black road, desperate for sleep.

"I was so so sleepy and so so emotional," she remembered later. Completely spent — as nearly seven days and 283 traversed miles can make you — she broke down. She simply sat down in the middle of the road, in the darkest dark of the desert night, and cried. They were tears of pain, tears of frustration, tears of missing her kids, tears that would not stop.

"It was so hard for me at that time, I felt really alone, really sad," Smith-Batchen later recalled. So she just sat there.

It was the worst she had felt on the journey since the first approach to Keeler, days earlier. At that time she asked for and seemingly received a "new body." Or at least one that could run. She needed the same miracle again.

Everything was hurting: strained quads, bruised feet, and a deeply fatigued mind. Smith-Batchen slowly stood up, put both arms out, and exclaimed to the heavens: "Get me to the finish line, let me have what I need!"

There are times on the course when it just comes down to a final push. All you need at that point is to want it bad enough. All you need is the spirit to drive through the struggle. And once



Back where it all began - just one week and 310 miles later.

you decide to fight for the final steps to the finish, you have succeeded.

Standing there with arms outstretched, Smith-Batchen found that final push, she wanted it bad enough, and she became driven like never before. She swears that suddenly she found the strength to run 6-minute miles and the nimbleness to do bounding drills on the road.

What she found in those final miles was dignity, grace and glory. The sun rose on her seventh morning of the journey with only 8 miles to go. Then 4. Then 1. Then . . .

There it was. The "282 Feet Below Sea Level" sign. The place it all began nearly one week earlier was within walking distance. "In those final steps, I was thinking: thank you, thank you . . . look back at all of those obstacles, challenges, hoops . . . they were all meant for a greater purpose to get to where you want to be."

And with that, she was done. A full 310 miles, actually, when you factor in the distance from the first Mount Whitney summit attempt.

The Badwater Double.

One Last Time: Why?

Smith-Batchen explained it best afterwards. "I am in such a different place now. I was missing the ability to open myself

to pain, suffering and find life at the other end. To break through it and deliver for everyone — myself, my family, my devoted crew, and the AIDS orphans. I'm proud of myself, honestly. With every obstacle, we never failed."

Then she laid it on the line. "Why? Candidly, because I always knew I could. There are a handful of people who can do this, and I am one of them. And I'm proud that doing this helped so many others. That's what I was put here to do."

Raymond Britt is a Chicago-based business executive, writer and photographer who has completed 45 marathons and 27 Ironman triathlons since he began running in 1994.

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