

SPECIAL AGENT'S 135-MILE ULTRAMARATHON TO BENEFIT DS FOUNDATION

by Stanley Dambroski, DS Public Affairs



Posted May 27, 2010 - "I don't know which is tougher: running 100 miles or learning Chinese," says DS Special Agent Gregg Geerdes.

Geerdes has experience with both. He is studying at the National Foreign Affairs Training Center, nearing the end of yearlong language training in Chinese to prepare for a two-year assignment in Taiwan. As if learning Chinese isn't enough of a challenge, he is also preparing to run "the world's toughest footrace," the Badwater Ultramarathon, July 12-14 to benefit the DS Foundation, which provides charitable contributions to members of the Diplomatic Security Service and colleagues in the law enforcement and foreign affairs communities.

The marathon, a race of 26 miles and 385 yards, is a grueling challenge. The original marathon, as legend has it, was about 25 miles, the distance run by Pheidippides from Marathon to Athens to announce the Greek victory over the Persians at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC; immediately after announcing, "We have won," Pheidippides dropped dead. The distance of the modern marathon was standardized at 26 miles and 385 yards, the length of the course as run in the 1908 Olympics from Windsor Castle to the royal box at the Olympic stadium in London.

An ultramarathon is longer than a marathon, usually 50 or 100 miles. The Badwater Ultramarathon, “the world’s toughest footrace,” covers a course of 135 miles. The course route begins in the desert, in Badwater, Death Valley (at 282 feet below sea level the lowest point in North America), climbs over three mountain ranges, and ends at Whitney Portal on Mount Whitney, an elevation of 8,360 feet.

In case that sounds too easy, the race must be completed within a 60-hour time limit. Runners who complete the race in less than 48 hours receive the coveted Badwater belt buckle. “The tradition of giving belt buckles for completing 100-plus miles in a given time goes back to when 100-mile races were run by horses,” says Geerdes.

Runners must endure extreme weather conditions—air temperatures of 130 degrees Fahrenheit and surface temperatures of 180 degrees in Death Valley.

To compete in the Badwater Ultramarathon, runners must pass through a selection process and meet such qualifying standards as having run two 100-mile races within the past year. This year’s race has 86 runners, who come from 13 countries and 18 U.S. states.



Special Agent Gregg Geerdes has run some ultramarathons, but he is now gearing up to run the 135-mile Badwater Ultramarathon to benefit the DS Foundation. He is pictured here running the Oil Creek 100 in Titusville, Pennsylvania in October 2009; he finished 8th.
Photo Courtesy of Gregg Geerdes

A Long, Winding History of Running

Geerdes has been a runner since he was in junior high school, but his running career hasn't followed a steady course. He ran during high school and into college. But in his first year of college, a doctor forbade him to run because his knees were so damaged. For the next 12 years, Geerdes usually ran only when he was required to during his service in the Marine Corps.

He did run his first ultramarathon, however, even before he had resumed a regular running routine. This was the JFK 50 Mile, in 1997, which he ran "on a whim" with a group of fellow Marines. He didn't run his next ultramarathon until the fall of 1999, and he ran another in the winter of 2000. Then in the spring of 2000, a lung infection caused him shortness of breath and dizziness even with such minor exertion as walking up a flight of stairs. "A doctor told me that my lungs looked like I had been working in the coal mines my entire life."

It was at this point that Geerdes resumed a regular schedule of running. "I decided to buy a treadmill with the goal of being able to run one mile and rebuild my lungs. It took a month for me to be able to continuously run one mile at a 10-minute pace. It was a long road getting back to health." His road to recovery led to a second JFK 50 Mile in the autumn of 2001. "I improved my time from the JFK in 1997 by over an hour." He has run regularly since then, averaging 10 to 30 miles weekly and increasing mileage only when training for a race.

Training for Badwater

Despite having run ultramarathons and completing several 100-mile races, "training for Badwater is a different animal," Geerdes says. He identifies three major challenges presented by Badwater. One is the distance. "I have completed several 100-mile races; after finishing each one, I didn't feel like running another mile, let alone 35 more miles. That extra 35 miles will be brutal."



View of Badwater basin from above. The famed race begins in the basin and traverses two mountain ranges before concluding with the steepest climb, 12 miles up the side of Mt. Whitney to conclude the 135 miles. Shutterstock.com photo

A second challenge is posed by the extreme heat. Geerdes' previous assignment before language training was a one-year tour in Iraq as a High Threat Protection Special Agent. Running in the heat there gives him some idea of what he will experience in Death Valley.

"The one thing that is a given is that it is going to be hot. I've run in 125 degrees while in Iraq, but not all day long. Dehydration and heat exhaustion are serious risks at Badwater. The heat not only robs your body of water, but makes fluid absorption and food consumption very difficult."

The third challenge is the terrain, notably climbing Mount Whitney: "There are three major climbs during the race, the last one up Mount Whitney [elevation 8,360 feet], a 12-mile climb after you've already run 123 miles."

Geerdes' training now includes daily runs of one or two hours and a weekend run of four to seven hours. About four to six weeks before the race, he will begin heat acclimatization. "That will include running in a jacket when it is 90 degrees, and exercising in a sauna."



The grueling race takes runners through brutal heat and harsh landscapes. AP/WideWorld photo

His Reason for Running Badwater

You might wonder why someone would voluntarily submit himself to a challenge of such proportions. Geerdes explains, "I've been interested in running Badwater for years, knowing that it will be a complete test of my mental and physical abilities."

And his reason for designating the DS Foundation as his charity? Geerdes has worked with DS since 2000, first as a contractor and then becoming a Special Agent in May 2006. As a Special Agent, Geerdes has served in the Washington Field Office and the U.S. Embassy in Iraq.

"While I was in Iraq, I experienced firsthand the daily challenges DS faces protecting those on the front line of

diplomacy. Every day, DS personnel and our contractors make sacrifices even to the point of giving their lives. Quite often in our drive to protect others, we forget about protecting those we love and cherish the most: our families and our brothers and sisters in arms. The DS Foundation helps provide that support.”

When summer arrives, Geerdes will complete his Chinese course, pack up for Taiwan, and sell his home. Then he will fly to Arizona to acclimatize for a few days, drive to Death Valley to run Badwater, take one week leave with his family, and then travel to Taiwan to serve as the Assistant Regional Security Officer. “It will be a very busy month.”

For more information about the DS Foundation and Special Agent Geerdes’ run, you can visit <http://dsfoundation.org/howtodonate/gregggeerdeschallenge.html>