

# 51 the Hard Way

*The First Effort to Run 50 Marathons in 50 States in 50 Days Was a Low-Key Feat, Done on the Cheap.*

BY DUNCAN LARKIN

“Perseverance is not a long race; it is many short races one after the other.” —Walter Elliot

On August 15, 2006, North Face, the outdoor apparel company, issued a press release officially kicking off an event called the “Endurance 50.” The company announced that on September 17, its sponsored athlete, ultramarathoner Dean Karnazes, would begin running 50 marathons in 50 states in 50 days. The feat was well received by the press, making major headlines across the lifestyle pages of countless newspapers and Web sites across the world. Could Karnazes—himself no stranger to running stunts—pull off this Herculean endurance feat? Would he be able to, in his words, “test the limits of human endurance”? Could he pass this ultimate test? Would he make it? The buzz had begun.

What most people didn’t know, what didn’t make it into a press release, what got almost no buzz in the running community, was that on this very day, a quiet 26-year-old was running his 47th consecutive marathon in as many days in as many states to raise awareness for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. His name was Sam Thompson, and he ran 51 marathons in 50 days in 50 states.

► Sam Thompson on a training run in the woods near his new home in Seattle, Washington.



Johnny Valencia

He did it first; this is his story.

The seeds of perseverance that blossomed into Sam Thompson's 51-in-50-in-50 feat were planted, oddly enough, in his broken tibia. Sam grew up in the small town of Vicksburg, Mississippi, the younger of two children. His father was an engineer and his mother was a French teacher, and Sam enjoyed a typical American childhood. He first took to running by playing soccer, where he discovered that he had cardiovascular endurance. His talent eventually drew him off the soccer field in high school and into cross-country. He was hooked and enjoyed the freedom of running. But the shorter high school events weren't enough for Sam, so he competed in triathlons and duathlons on the side. He excelled in these sports, winning the 1997 Mississippi Duathlon Championships and sought to repeat his victory in 1998.

And then it all fell apart.

In January 1998, Sam's junior year of high school, he was involved in a near-fatal car crash that resulted in the fracturing of his left tibia in two places and his pelvis in two places. As he lay in the hospital, the doctors informed him that the breaks were severe. They told him he would be lucky to walk without a limp and would never run again.

Fortunately, Sam's brother, Daniel, was finishing medical school at the University of Mississippi in nearby Jackson and put Sam's X-rays into the hands of a trauma surgeon who disagreed with the original diagnosis. This surgeon could do something about the injury: insert a large titanium rod into Sam's tibia, from his knee to his ankle.

Just a month after the surgery, Sam was out of his wheelchair, walking with crutches. Desiring to compete again, he entered a local 5K and completed the course on crutches, hobbling faster than most walking entrants.

He was back.

A couple months after the race, Sam was running again. And a year later, he achieved his goal, winning the 1998 Mississippi Duathlon Championship for the second year in a row.

## COLLEGE COURSES NOT LONG ENOUGH

Not surprisingly, Sam was recruited by many local colleges and decided to attend Rhodes College, a small liberal arts school in Memphis, Tennessee. But he turned down repeated offers to run on Rhodes's track and cross-country teams because the distances were too short—Sam had discovered the marathon.

There was something magical about the marathon to him—the lure of its length, the peace that comes with hours of solitude, the chance to compete and win through dogged perseverance instead of brute strength. The marathon fit his personality, and so he spent his college years training for it, running with Rhodes

College's track and cross-country team members on their long-run days. He quickly became known in their circle as a running madman. Sam phrased their sentiments this way: "On a college campus, track guys have the reputation of being crazy because they are always running. Well, I had the reputation of being crazy with the group of guys who are supposed to be crazy."

Sam ran his first marathon in 2000 in 3:28. Considering his level of training and dedication in the lead-up to it, he considered the result, "not great." He continued to train for the marathon, building a solid running base while spending his junior year in France—a lukewarm, isolating experience immersed in France's often xenophobic culture, a period where he only "studied and ran."

Sam returned home for his senior year and reaped the fruits of his intense running abroad, gradually improving his marathon times and moving into 50Ks. But his year of solitude did more than just drive him to run faster. Upon his return to the States, he vowed that he would hike the entire length of the Appalachian Trail (over 2,000 miles).

But money got in the way.

After graduating from Rhodes College burdened with debt and working as a manager at a Memphis Abercrombie and Fitch, Sam realized that he couldn't afford to spend six months hiking. But he figured that if he ran the course and cut the time in half, he could make ends meet financially.

So he did.

He started by parking his car in Atlanta and buying a one-way plane ticket to Maine, entering the plane carrying nothing but a light backpack and wearing nothing but running shorts, a singlet, and a pair of running shoes. After 99 days (79 running and 20 zero days here and there), during which he did not eat one hot meal, subsisting mostly on iodine-treated stream water and PowerBars—which he forswears to this day—Sam made it all the way back to his car in Atlanta. When he was running, he averaged 37 miles a day. Out on the trail, completely alone, Sam found strength and peace; he contemplated and prayed. A devout Christian, he found himself "closer to God" on the trail. It was from this deep contemplation during his 2,000-mile running odyssey that he first got the idea to run 51 marathons in 50 days in 50 states. Along with the opportunity to see more of what he calls "the cool countryside" of rural America, he thought that since he was covering close to a marathon's distance a day on the Appalachian Trail, he should be physically able to achieve this new goal. Sam also decided that this running journey should raise awareness for some nonprofit cause—a crusade of sorts.

## WHEREVER THE IMPULSE LEADS

Sam is an impulsive person, prone to instantly acting on his ideas. He biked from Canada to Mexico one summer during college on a whim. So it is curious that his idea to run 51 in 50 in 50 sat dormant for three years.

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It took a hurricane to flush it out. The cause came to the Gulf Coast, wreaking a swath of destruction. Sam was at his parents' house, back from a brief sojourn in Dallas, on that fateful August weekend in 2005. He gazed at only a few of the horrid images at the Superdome before he picked up the phone and called a friend who knew about his 51 in 50 in 50 idea. "This is it. This is the cause," he said.

But with much of the region in shambles, Sam decided to postpone the marathon adventure until he could contribute in a more direct way. Accordingly, he joined the pastor of his local church, the First Presbyterian Church in Vicksburg, and drove to Louisiana with him in a pickup truck loaded with supplies.

His original plan was to help for a week, run the marathon crusade, and then return to the region. But this plan changed when he was asked by his pastor to check up on Presbyterian churches in the Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi, region. During this journey, he came across an abandoned church that had been submerged in 6 feet of water.

Sam decided to stay there and began clearing the debris alone. At that time, the church's pastor, an 80-year-old retired Navy chaplain, arrived. He was overcome with tears and thanked Sam for his efforts. Sam asked what he needed. The chaplain replied, "Strong backs and help." Sam later described his reaction to the chaplain's desperate plea as a "strong tug at my heart," and so he postponed his marathon crusade, staying at the wrecked church for several months, helping rebuild it as well as leading other volunteer construction efforts in the area.



Johnny Valencia

▲ Sam in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, volunteering after Hurricane Katrina, before his 51 in 50 in 50.

At the end of June 2006, Sam said good-bye to the members of the church and drove to Leadville, Colorado. It was time to put on his running shoes.

His plan to run 51 in 50 in 50 involved starting with as many scheduled marathons as possible. He later recalled that he printed the marathon schedule for July and August from [www.marathonguide.com](http://www.marathonguide.com), putting red pins on all the scheduled marathons in July and August. Where he couldn't run a scheduled race, Sam ran USATF-certified courses alone with a GPS.

Probably the most interesting fact about Sam's performance was how it began. Sam's first marathon, the Leadville Trail Marathon—a demanding course that starts at 10,000 feet and climbs to 13,000 feet—was July 1. Sam had arrived in town just days before. He had no fanfare—no signs or camera crews, no technical gear, no PR handlers. He had no sponsor or uniform. His singlet couldn't be simpler, just a white T-shirt making a desperate statement with peeling, iron-on letters: "I need a sponsor!"

## THE LEGS REMEMBER HOW TO RUN

Because he had been working long days volunteering in the Gulf Coast before his first marathon, Sam had conducted almost no training to prepare for the challenges of repeat marathoning. He was counting on the base of years of strong running to get him through the experience. Sam described his haphazard training this way: "I was hanging Sheetrock, building roofs, assembling cabinets, and maybe ran five or 10 miles a day after all that." Sam also hoped to "use the first 20 marathons to get through the next 30," meaning that he hoped to get into shape during the progression of the 51 in 50 in 50. His gradually improving times indicate the soundness of this plan. His first marathon was his slowest at 5:50 and his second-to-last marathon was his fastest at 3:29.

Sam did have something else worth mentioning when he embarked on his first marathon: a viral infection. He started the race with a sore throat and a fever but still managed to finish it and drive to his second marathon in Casper, Wyoming. Amazingly, he recovered from his illness over the course of his next few marathons.

Sam repeatedly acknowledged that he would not have been able to run this crusade without his support team. The team comprised three people at all times. His mother, Diane, and his fiancée, Kirsten, accompanied him the entire trip. His college friend, Andres, was there the first 14 days and was then replaced by Kirsten's dad, Eric, and then by Sam's father, Ed. Other than the marathon Sam ran in Hawaii and Alaska, they used a rented Dodge Durango for the entire journey across the country. Sleep was minimal. Once Sam completed a marathon, he would "crumple up" in the back of the Durango. Some nights, the crew made it to a hotel, and other nights they slept uncomfortably in a parking lot. Sam averaged about four hours of sleep a night.

Each team member took on a distinct role. Kirsten closely monitored Sam's food intake. A registered dietician, she made sure that Sam ate 4,000 to 5,000 calories a day—all healthy food composed of fruits, vegetables, pasta, and whole-wheat sandwiches. A week into this diet, Kirsten noticed that Sam was run down, finishing his marathons with no energy and going into his next marathons struggling. She increased his caloric intake to 6,000 to 7,000 calories a day, reducing the restriction on food choices. Sam began to thrive on doughnuts, pastries, and Starbucks Frappuccinos. This change made a huge difference, restoring Sam's energy and helping him bounce back quickly. Kirsten also nursed Sam; she massaged his legs for at least 20 minutes after every marathon and helped prepare Sam's ice baths. (Sam later recalled that his ice baths were a vital element of his recovery. He indicated that days without an ice bath were painfully noticeable.)

Sam's college friend, Andres, was the team's PR man; his job was to get the word out, calling local radio stations and newspapers ahead of time. Sam's parents and Kirsten's parents drove. Everyone had the responsibility to hand him his replacement bottles of water and Gatorade, giving him bananas and GU packets during his marathons, and encouraging him along the way.

## FINALLY! A SPONSOR

Sam rotated three pairs of shoes. He ran mostly in ASICs and Mizunos until he finally got his sponsorship. It happened on the Napa Valley Marathon course on day seven at two o'clock in the morning. Sam had to run this marathon early because he was catching a flight to Alaska later that morning. Halfway through



▲ From left to right, in Cincinnati, after a Flying Pig Marathon re-creation: Kirsten's dad, Eric Sellereit; Flying Pig; Sam; Kirsten; and Sam's mother, Diane.

the marathon, a small car came up alongside Sam. Two women stuck their heads out of the windows and began cheering loudly for him. They passed him, honking and yelling, eventually disappearing into the distance. A few miles down the road, they came back again, doing the same thing, and then driving off again. It happened one more time after that. Confused, Sam wasn't sure if he was hallucinating. The mysterious women in the car were waiting for him at the finish line: they were representatives from North Face and had heard about his 51 in 50 in 50. They had come to check him out and, in Sam's words, "make sure [he] wasn't some lying nutcase on the Internet." Unfortunately, Sam was running late to catch his flight, so he didn't have time to talk with them at length. They handed him their business card and some North Face gear and said good-bye. A week later, Sam gave them a call and was offered a sponsorship. He didn't have to buy a pair of shoes after that.

Four days after the Napa Valley Marathon, Sam encountered what he described as his greatest challenge of the 51 in 50 in 50: running a marathon in Phoenix in July. According to the thermometer on the team's Durango, the temperature reached 116 degrees Fahrenheit during the middle of Sam's run. He likened that painful experience to "running in an oven."

Sam described the remaining marathons as "pretty much uneventful." As he zigzagged across the country, pounding food and liquids, doing sporadic interviews, cramming in sleep in the back of the Durango, he ran marathons ranging from 3:30 to 4:40 (8:00 pace to 10:40 pace per mile). Then he ran his 39th marathon in Washington, D.C., in 4:59. He had a good reason for running that one slower than the rest: it was his second marathon that day. Since that day in front of the TV when he picked Hurricane Katrina as the cause, Sam knew that he wanted to run a special, extra marathon in Washington, D.C. He felt that the nation's capital would be the "perfect place to encourage a positive message, to promote national solidarity" for the cause. By running two marathons in a day (separated by a mere three hours) and then continuing to run a marathon a day after that, Sam was able to run 51 in 50 in 50.

► Sam in Washington, D.C., on the Mall in the middle of his marathon there (the second marathon that day after running in Frederick, Maryland, starting at midnight).



Amy Clendinning



▲ Sam and Kirsten (center) with their parents on the last day of Sam's 51-in-50-in-50 feat in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, where it all began and ended.

Sam completed his journey on August 19, running his final marathon in Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi. He finished it not far from the church he had helped rebuild; he had come full circle. What started as an idea on a trail, what turned into one man's quiet quest aided by three people selflessly driving all over the country, ended with an outpouring of support across the country. Sam's feat eventually received national press. He appeared on CNN's *Morning Edition* and the *Today Show*. Afterward, his church's Hurricane Katrina response fund received unprecedented donations as well as numerous volunteers from all over the nation.

Sam's crusade was a success. Like other difficult challenges in his life, he had persevered, showing that a sport normally associated with the pursuit of individual goals could be a force for good.

He had helped his neighbors in an unconventional way: he ran marathons for a cause.



*Postscript: In our September/October issue, SportsIllustrated.com writer and marathoner Cory McCartney will take us on a run with Sam and Dean Karnazes during Sam's 51-in-50-in-50 attempt.*

*Then, in our November/December issue, Dean will take readers with him on his solo run from New York City to St. Louis, following the completion of his 50-in-50-in-50 experience.*