

My Most Unforgettable Pacing

And the special friendship that ensued.

BY ZEKE ZUCKER

The conditions for the 2006 Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run were rather grim. After a particularly snowy winter there was still plenty of the white stuff around, making for challenging movement through the “mashed potatoes” for most of the first 30 miles. Added to this was the soaring temperature, which pushed up perilously close to the record of 80 degrees at the Squaw Valley start and 101 degrees at the 62-mile pacer-pickup point on Main Street in Foresthill.

Jim Campiformio from Connecticut, a good friend and fellow ultramarathoner I had known for many years, had asked me to be his pacer at Western States. Until I could legally begin to pace him at the 62-mile mark, I was assisting his sister Rosemary with crewing support at designated, authorized aid stations. After having met him at several locations throughout the day, we were waiting for Jim to appear at mile 55, Michigan Bluff, in the very warm evening hours. By now he was way behind his intended sub-24-hour pace and barely clinging on to a finish within the 30-hour cutoff. Rosemary and I knew that it wasn't going well for him.

At about 8:00 P.M., he dragged his tired, dusty body into the aid station and stepped on the scales. Weighing is required at certain aid stations to determine whether a runner's weight has changed enough to warrant medical attention. It turned out he was simply going through the motions because he had already made up his mind that this was as far as he was going. He came back to our exquisite presentation of shoes, socks, gels, and such, only to plunk himself down in the waiting lawn chair. Now he was hot, tired, and sore and was facing 45 more miles of sweltering trail with absolutely no guarantee that he would even finish under the 30-hour limit. He had completed this run a few years before in 28 hours, and since he obviously wasn't going to make the under-24-hour cutoff for the silver buckle he coveted, his decision to pack it in came as no surprise.

Yes, I agreed with his decision, but where did that leave me? Of course, my primary goal was to get him to the finish in less than a full day. That, however, was now really out of the question, which disappointed all three of us. Secondly,

I was looking forward to getting in about 10 great trail hours in preparation for my own 100 at Vermont in a month. So there I was, champing at the bit to get running after crewing Jim since 5:00 in the morning, but I had lost my reason for being there.

A change of plans

While Jim was recuperating a bit, and after what seemed like an eternity, I finally got up the nerve to ask the burning question: could Jim and Rosemary possibly drop me off at the Foresthill Middle School, the major intersection and pacer join-up point, on the way back to their motel? I was hoping that my services could be put to good use with another runner desiring to have a pacer. Much to my delight, they agreed to the drop-off, and I zipped away to fetch our vehicle from the nearby parking area.

I drove back down as close as the barricades would allow and walked back to help load up Jim and his gear. While I was absent they were approached by an old acquaintance from back in Virginia where Jim had been a five-time participant at the Bull Run Run 50-Miler. She had also spent her day leapfrogging along backcountry roads supporting a good friend. Bunny had come rushing up to the two of them, frantically seeking assistance. She asked: “Jim, do you know anyone who can run with our friend Gary Knippling? He’s way behind schedule



© Keith Knippling

▲ Some members of the Virginia Happy Trails Running Club at Emigrant Pass before race day. Gary is second from the left and his son, Keith, is second from the right.

and really needs a pacer.” Rosemary and the now somewhat-rested and more-composed Jim looked at each other and then back at Bunny. Almost in unison they said, “As a matter of fact, we do.”

Little did I know that I was about to meet one of the nicest gents on the face of the earth and that we would get to know each other very well. Jim quickly introduced me to Bunny and gave me the lowdown on who Gary was and what they all had in mind for me to do. They informed me that Gary was a principal member of the Virginia Happy Trails Running Club (VHTRC) and that several fellow club members were running while others were providing support. Rosemary and I hopped, and Jim struggled, into our vehicle in the gathering darkness and began the five-plus-mile drive to Foresthill. I was sad for Jim but tickled that I would be able to run and at the same time, I hoped, help get Bunny’s friend out of a jam.

Preparing to pace

By the time we got to the school it was dark, and I went through the ritual of preparing my own gear for the pending journey. Western States is the only 100 I know of that provides the pacer with a bib identical to that of the runner. The only difference is a yellow background instead of the standard black on white. Wearing such a bib certainly makes the pacer feel more a part of the event.

Pacing is something that is done (legally) only at the ultras, normally for the 100K or 100-mile events, though I’ve seen it done occasionally at 50-mile races. The primary purpose is to provide a clear-headed and rested companion for a weary runner in the last major segment of one of the long-haul races. Safety is a primary concern since an exhausted runner alone on a trail in the middle of the night could easily trip or simply fall off the trail and suffer from exposure or worse. Most 100s prohibit muling, meaning that the pacer is not allowed to carry food, liquid, clothing, or other gear for the runner. The pacer’s purpose is to provide spiritual, mental, and moral support to the runner. I’ve experienced for myself and observed in other such duos that an amazing bond can develop between the pacer and the runner. A runner is most likely to be exhausted late in the race and, simply to survive the ordeal, becomes ever more dependent on the pacer to take over what would normally be relatively simple mental functions, most notably decision-making. I created the following succinct pacer job description: *the pacer serves as the runner’s mind and decision maker so that the runner need only concentrate on one thing, moving forward toward the finish line, one step at a time.*

It was still quite warm and summer-like, and I got to know some of the Happy Trails support team in the large, paved parking lot at the school as I pinned on my bib and we all began to wait for Gary. He had no headlamp because he had thought it would still be daylight when he got to Foresthill, so he was slogging along in the dark.

It was here that I finally learned (in Paul Harvey's words) "the rest of the story!" Sixty-two-year-old Gary and his 30-year-old son, Keith, were both attempting the Grand Slam of Ultrarunning. To complete the Slam, runners must finish four designated 100s in the same summer. The first of these is Western States, but things were looking just a bit shaky at the moment. The soft cutoff at Foresthill is 10:30 P.M., meaning that this is the time someone should be out of the station in order to have a reasonable chance of finishing in under 30 hours. The hard, no-nonsense cutoff is 11:30 P.M. The reason for the disparity is that there are some user-friendly sections of almost level trail in the last 20 miles, which could allow a runner who is feeling strong to catch back up to the timeline. During my downtime awaiting his arrival, I took out my little card with the sub-24-hour splits I had calculated for Jim and quickly replaced the numbers with the published cutoff times for the rest of the aid stations we were preparing to visit. My focus shifted from what was needed to help Jim achieve his sub-24-hour goal to the present situation, where my task was to do my utmost to simply get Gary through the last 38 miles before the 30-hour cutoff at 11:00 A.M.

The first face to face

We were all clock-watching, and it was now after 10:00 P.M. Occasionally a runner came in out of the dark from the direction of Michigan Bluff, but thus far no Gary. Then, just before 10:15, we heard a voice. His running mates immediately knew it was Gary, but of course, I didn't know his voice as I had never met the man. He slowly plodded into the glow of the parking lot lighting and Bunny got right in his face. "This is Zeke, and he's going to be your pacer, and you're not going to say no!" Gary gave a glassy-eyed glance at me and mumbled a soft hello and an equally soft "OK." As it turned out, Gary had never had a pacer before, but being in a world of hurt, his need for assistance was obvious even to him. One of the Happy Trails crew, Alex, told Gary to lie down for 10 minutes, to which Gary willingly agreed. They lay him down on his back with a folded blanket under his head and he was gone in an instant. In the meantime, I was obviously watching the minutes tick by and realized that I was facing a challenging task, which was getting even more so by the minute. Precisely 10 minutes later, Alex shook Gary and said, "It's time to wake up." I was amazed that Gary came around so quickly as Bunny and the others scurried about to get him ready to resume the trip, which included giving him his headlamp. One thing that struck me as somewhat odd was that Gary wasn't taking in any food or drink at this opportune time, but I really didn't give it any more thought.

Pacer and patee; the team is officially formed

We double-checked our headlamps, said our so-longs, and headed out into the night. We were now officially paired up and slowly proceeding down Main Street

together. The time was 10:38; we were eight minutes in the hole! In a way we already seemed like old friends, but ultrarunners are easy to meet and we had both been doing this stuff for lots of years. It turned out that we were both 62 and had each logged more than a dozen of these 100-milers. I was pleasantly surprised that Gary was moving so well, but we were on a slight downgrade and on smooth pavement. A quarter mile later we turned sharp left, onto California Street, which stopped being a street about a hundred yards in and suddenly became a trail. As we gradually started descending, the trail surface became primarily exposed ledge rock with sections of loose broken pieces, which made the footing somewhat challenging, especially since we were now solely dependent on our headlamps to illuminate the way.

Gary and I were still in the process of getting comfortable running together and had been doing so for about a half hour when he dropped the bomb on me. In a fairly quiet voice, Gary told me that he hadn't been able to hold down either food or liquid for several hours. Now my daunting task had become something on the order of very difficult, if not downright impossible. I know that when an engine runs out of fuel it stops, and the fuel level in Gary's engine was no doubt getting down close to empty. I knew I had to figure out something, but it wasn't coming easily to me. We—mostly I—continued chatting and after about another half hour passed, I had a brainstorm. In the back of my mind I recalled that while running several of my own 100s, I would get to the point in the later stages of a race where nothing agreed with my stomach. Consuming even a favorite-flavor energy gel became an ordeal as it would trigger the gag reflex. You can't afford to lose your lunch, as they say, because it would mean emptying the system of precious fluids, calories, and electrolytes. There was one particular time in my running a 100, however, when I recall a crew member was able to find something that I could handle, some nice cold applesauce and a couple of fresh strawberries. I remembered that incident and therefore asked Gary to just think about what might taste good to him right now: no need to say anything, but simply think about it while you're running. I knew that this was much wiser than my tossing out random food ideas, which could be counterproductive because such suggestions might even make him ill simply at the thought.

We continued wending our way downhill toward the American River, with Gary periodically coming to an abrupt halt to drink from his bottle. I normally take sips from my bottle on the move, but Gary preferred the all-stop method. He would really slug it down, which made me cringe, and sure enough, it would come right back up to greet him. Each time he just reholstered his bottle and we resumed our journey. Even at the aid stations, when he tried drinking Coke or Sprite, the same thing happened. Heading down toward the river, just when we both thought there wouldn't be any more uphills for a while, we would run smack into a steep one. Gary has a delightful sense of humor, even when he's hurting,

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and told me that these were called PUDs, or pointless ups and downs. Of course, after some 70 miles, just about everything in a 100 seems a bit pointless.

The first surprise utterance

At long last we got down into what's called Sandy Bottom, a stretch much like a seashore beach with soft, fairly level footing. A bit of light up ahead penetrated the otherwise totally dark surroundings and I figured it had to be Ford's Bar Aid Station at about mile 73. The only sound was of our feet swishing through the sand and the rustling of our clothing and water belts until Gary broke the silence with a single word . . . *beer*.

I was taken by surprise, to say the least, but quickly realized that this was Gary's delayed response to my suggestion of almost an hour earlier. He said that a nice, cold beer would really taste good now. Keep in mind that we were in a wilderness part of California in the middle of the night and there certainly weren't any convenience or package stores within miles, and he would like a beer. Now, an essential part of my job as a pacer was to remain ever upbeat and optimistic, but this was really testing my patience. Though I was tempted, I could not say to Gary: "Don't be stupid. Where in the blazes do you expect me to find you a beer?" Instead, I maintained my best pacer self-control and simply acknowledged that a beer sounded good to him.

Eventually we came into the station, which consisted of a folding table, a Coleman lantern, two dedicated gentlemen, an Igloo cooler of water, and a hodgepodge assortment of food, including cookies, chips, and M&M's. I diverted my attention from Gary, who had arrived seconds before I did, and decided to go through the motions. I knew darn well what the answer would be but had to at least give it a try. I asked one of the volunteers if he maybe had any beer. There was a slight pause and I waited for the laugh or snide reply to my very foolish—make that dumb—question. To my total astonishment, the guy said, "Yes, would you like some?" I thought I was dreaming, but I reacted quickly and said, "Yes, please, could you put some in a cup for me?" He did and handed it to me and I turned toward Gary. "Hey, Gary: beer." He was as incredulous as I had been but smiled and carefully took the cup from my hands. Gary slowly put it to his lips and very gingerly started sipping the contents. He took his sweet old time about it, as if purposely trying to taunt me, but finished off the half cup. This was a critical moment of truth, and we both then waited for the expected unwanted outcome. But lo and behold, the beer stayed down. I know I was elated and Gary was pretty happy about it himself. I thought to myself, *This is the first step toward refilling the tank.*

Side note: After the race I learned that Ford's Bar station is always manned by friends of Gordy Ainsleigh. Gordy was the first guy, back in 1974, to run the Western States 100 on foot. He had been planning on doing the 100-mile Tevis



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▲ A beer from Gordy Ainsleigh's private stash saved the day for Gary around mile 73.

Cup Ride, but his horse came up lame the day before so Gordy decided he would run it on foot instead. He keeps running it every year and apparently loves his beer as much as his running, and it was Gordy's beer that was shared with our Gary.

And yet another

I didn't want to rock the boat, so we quietly rejoiced in the consumption of a limited amount of the cold suds and headed out of the station and on into the night. Gary actually appeared to have a little more bounce in his step, and doggone it, so did I, even though I hadn't partaken of the brew. The stretch to the next aid station was only about five miles so it wasn't really very long until we began to see the bright lights of the Rucky Chucky Aid Station up ahead. I admit that I was still not believing the whole beer caper when Gary hit me with another one. In the very same quiet voice, he uttered another attention-getting word . . . *milk*.

OK, I'm saying to myself, *this guy is truly nuts and he's just playing games to upset me, and it's working*. Still to myself, I thought, *There was no way on earth that we're going to find any milk out here*. But I'm Mr. Positive and I said to Gary, "We'll ask up at the next aid station." The Rucky Chucky is where all runners must cross the American River without the benefit of a bridge. As we approached the station, its lights got brighter and the hum of the generators grew louder. When we finally entered the encampment, which looked like a MASH unit, it was ablaze with floodlights, which gave a feeling of midday.

Somewhat reluctantly, I sidled up to one of the aid-station canopies to pose my ridiculous question. I asked the nearest volunteer, a kindly woman, if she perhaps had any milk. I was truly pessimistic and prepared for the disappointing, “Sorry, no we don’t,” but was shocked by a glorious “Yes.” She said she had some half-and-half. Momentarily stunned by my second major victory, I quickly recovered and asked if she could put some in a cup with some water to cut it down a little. So I called to Gary, who was simply standing still and by himself, clearly beginning to show some adverse effects of the 78 miles he had already traveled.

“Gary.”

“Yuh?”

“Milk.”

“Really?”

I know that Gary was equally stunned, but he carefully took it from my hand, planted his feet, and began sipping. Of course, I was thinking that I was now in trouble because Gary thought I could do just about anything. What, pray tell, insane request would he now be likely to make? The watered-down half-and-half went down, and Gary turned to me with a smile because it apparently was going to stay where he had just put it. I then made certain that he had a full water bottle, just in case, and we headed over to the riverside landing.

Getting to the other side

Crossing the river is an interesting procedure. Most years the water is at a low and slow enough state that the flow can be partially restricted with a control dam, and runners can wade across through waist-deep water. Even so, they use a sturdy cable for insurance support. This is attached to a large tree on one side and a beefy truck bumper on the other. The tired runners then slowly cross through the moving water, over a lumpy, rock-strewn bottom, with at least one hand on the cable. Because there is the distinct possibility that an individual could lose that grip, there are always at least a couple of wetsuit-clad volunteers at the ready to prevent anyone from getting swept down the river.

This year, however, with a particularly heavy snow melt in the Sierras, the river was roaring too energetically and couldn’t be slowed enough to be deemed safe. Therefore, the race officials put a five-person life raft into service, tethering it on that same big cable. Runners and pacers don life jackets and step into the raft. A very strong-armed rower then stroked us across the river in quick order. The beauty of this method was that no one got wet feet, thus eliminating the need to change shoes.

The reader may recall that we were about eight minutes behind the timeline when the two of us started our journey together back at Foresthill. Well, as we moved along through subsequent aid stations, we were gradually moving ahead



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▲ Western States 100 volunteers use rafts to ferry runners across the raging American River at the Rucky Chucky crossing.

of that dreaded 30-hour-cutoff pace. Gary was amazed at both my knowledge of the trails and that I was able to tell him how we were doing relative to the station cutoff times. I had trained on the course in the spring of 2001 and completed the event that June. Then I had paced other runners two times and was therefore quite familiar with the last 38 miles. Calculating how we stood versus the clock was actually rather easy. I had the cutoff figures on my little card, I knew the time of day from my own watch, and my mind was still clear as I had run only 16 miles to this point. Of course, in his state Gary probably didn't know what year it was. We were gradually making up time as we moved along, because our per-mile pace was consistently improving. The Grim Reaper was inexorably stalking us, but by the time we reached the river we were 46 minutes ahead of the cutoff. When we got to the other side, we had tacked a couple of additional minutes onto the cushion.

I recalled from previous visits to the area that there was a two-mile, somewhat boring, ever-irritating climb up out of the canyon, but we were now on a roll and quite unfazed by the current ascent. As we approached the top and the Green Gate Aid Station, I was quite amused by the choice of theme. Christmas lights, giant illuminated candy canes, and a big inflatable reindeer somehow seemed out of place on a warm June night, but this was California and a 100-miler, so nothing was really to be unexpected. I love to sing and was in a pretty good mood due to our recent turn of good luck and just naturally broke out in song. "Sleigh bells ring, are you listenin'; in the lane, snow is glistenin' . . ." The aid station people were

obviously tired because they sort of looked at me in a strange way, but there were a couple of smiles and it was lots of fun for me, though Gary was understandably oblivious. No, I hadn't forgotten about my mission, so I got really bold and asked the nearest volunteer if she had any milk. No half-and-half this time, because she said, "Sure, let me get you some." She gave me about a half cup of cold milk, explaining that they kept it on hand for their coffee. Gary somewhat cavalierly tossed it on down and we headed into the dark to take care of the last 20 miles.

Moving along somewhat smartly but exchanging greetings

Our routine now consisted of walking any uphill, jogging the flats, and doing something resembling jogging on the downhill stretches. We were continuing to put time in the bank, and our collective confidence was growing. Knowing, however, how close it had been and still could be to crashing and burning, I kept wearing my pacer/protector hat and actually had to rein Gary in occasionally. I told him that we were really in pretty good shape and shouldn't get greedy. Later, when reflecting on the run, Gary said that when he started getting frisky (jogging the uphill), "Zeke would reel me back in."

By the time we got to Auburn Lake Trails at 85 miles, the sun was starting to come up and the chirping of crickets gave way to the early morning twittering of the birds. In the gray light of dawn, Gary entered the aid station ahead of me and was greeted by a cheerful attendant who asked if he would like some hot chicken broth. In my motherly and attentive way I was all ears, anxiously awaiting Gary's reply. To my great relief Gary said, "Sure, I think I'd like to try some." He did, I watched, it went down and stayed down, and I was psyched. Now, in addition to the previous eclectic mix of bizarre fluids, Gary was actually consuming something with salt and meaningful nutritional value.

We adjusted our attire in anticipation of another warm day and were cheered by the fact that we were down low enough in a canyon to be shielded from the direct rays of the early-morning sun, knowing well that it was going to be another scorcher. With only 15 miles to go, we were feeling just a bit of confidence but both knew that in the late miles of a 100, anything can happen.

I haven't mentioned anything at all about Gary's gregarious nature, but I swear he knows just about every ultrarunner everywhere, and everyone knows him. Just before Auburn Lake we caught up with Scott Crabb, who has been a runner for nearly 40 years. With Gary feeling a whole lot more cordial, he greeted Scott warmly and exchanged some chatty pleasantries. Gary actually stopped for a few moments to say hello, which made me a bit nervous. Then, just after Auburn Lake, we caught up with an old friend and fellow running club member, Sophie Speidel, and her pacer Gretchen. With ever an eye for a pretty lady, Gary came

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to a screeching halt and started up a casual conversation. I was a bit perplexed, concerned, and relieved all at the same time. He was obviously feeling much better but seemed to have suddenly forgotten that we were on a mission. I let him chat for what seemed like a long while but which was probably only about a minute and then timidly interrupted to remind him that we really should be on our way. Gary got quite apologetic and a bit flustered, bidding farewell to the ladies, and thanked me for the reminder, at which point we resumed our odyssey.

At the Highway 49 station the aroma of bacon frying on a camp stove drew us in, and I slapped together a bacon and egg sandwich for myself but restricted Gary's intake to liquids. Tempting fate was strictly out of the picture. No sooner had we departed the station than Gary spotted yet another buddy. We caught up with Prasad Gerard, but by now Gary had gotten my message and simply exchanged greetings as we moved on by his club mate. At this point we now had about a 75-minute cushion, but I knew that it was going to get hot again and anyone who has run 93-plus miles has probably used up most of his or her resistance. The last thing I wanted to see was a flameout with only a few miles left to the finish line. Just before No Hands Bridge at mile 96.8, we passed none other than Gordy Ainsleigh, the beer guy. All of a sudden I realized that we hadn't deprived Gordy of some of his precious beer because he had been through that station before us: lucky for us that he wasn't in the mood, or condition, to consume all of his suds.

The home stretch

No Hands Bridge is an easily recognized landmark on the trail and means that the finish is near. It's an old railroad bridge built in the style of an ancient Roman viaduct and now, too decrepit to support a freight engine, it safely supports 100-mile runners and their trusty pacers at a point on the course where you can almost smell the barn.

We pressed on, taking occasional sips of water, chatting sporadically, and negotiating even more frustrating uphill, which, in Gary's PUD vernacular, get exponentially more pointless in the last miles. After a really long uphill trail slog, during which the sun finally found us, we reached Robie Point, finding ourselves on the streets of the City of Auburn. The very last mile is not fun, as it includes a steep uphill, which is severely irritating until you reach the glorious high-point turn with a half mile to go. This is when the intensely weary and exhausted runner gets the first real sense that finishing the beast is not just possible but maybe even probable. I had been with Gary for less than 38 miles but was feeling just a bit tired myself from the running, the tension of caring for him, and the concern about succeeding. We motored down the last hill toward the Auburn High School football stadium (actually, what seemed fast to us was no doubt a snail's pace to the fascinated onlookers), through the open chain-link gate, and onto the red

Tartan track with just over 100 yards to go. Gary was nearly in tears and my eyes were brimming as well. The grand finish line bridge was located at the 50-yard line on the opposite side of the field, and we relished that last turn around the end of the track and those last glorious yards. I made it a point to drop back about 10 yards to let Gary finish by himself. Despite the incredible bond that had formed between the two of us over the course of 11 intense hours, I knew that my job of pacing was complete. This was his race and not mine.

Gary crossed the line in exactly 28 hours and 32 minutes, nearly an hour and a half ahead of the cutoff time. We did it! I shuffled in to join the well-wishers and the two of us shared the embrace of absolute friendship. In the photo we can be seen relaxing and sharing the delight of accomplishing a very special goal. Gary supplied the title: “Two sexagenarians vigorously attempting to retain their youth.”

While Gary was plodding along with me, his son, Keith, was registering his own 69th-place finish in 25:46:08. During the hours that Gary and I ran together, I had learned much more about Gary and Keith’s training and preparations for attempting the Grand Slam. It was truly extensive, and they felt that they were ready to meet the challenge. What they hadn’t anticipated, however, were the difficult conditions of the first event. So now Gary had just dodged the proverbial bullet, for he had come ever so close to tripping up in the very first leg of the Slam. Some 13 of the 29 hopeful slammers dropped out at Western States due to the inhospitable conditions in Northern California on Western States weekend.



© Sophie Speidel

▲ After a memorable final 38 miles, Gary and me (left) at the finish line of the 2006 Western States 100.



Courtesy of Zeke Zucker

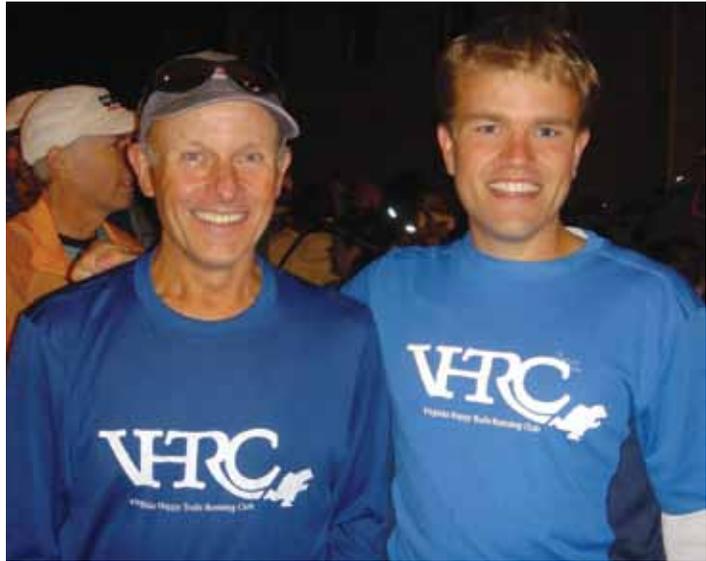
▲ Gary (second from left) and me (second from right) just before the start of the Vermont 100 three weeks after Western States.

The combination of excessive heat and miles of tough going in deep and mushy snow conspired against them.

One down, and three to go

Three weeks later Gary and Keith made their appearance at the Vermont 100, my home-course event. Because I was running it, too, I wasn't in position to pace him, but I gave Gary a whole lot of insider dope about the Vermont course. With friendlier conditions, Gary finished in just over 27 hours, and Keith was a few minutes over 23. Gary admitted to being tired from the previous 100, which is quite understandable. Then, in August, it was on to Colorado to take on the Leadville Trail 100-Mile, the Race Across the Sky. Once again I gave Gary tips and advice from my having finished it in 2003 and pacing the last 50 miles twice thereafter. Out there in the Rockies, the challenge isn't so much the amount of vertical as it is dealing with the oxygen-starving high elevation and adverse weather. The course is an out-and-back 50-mile that climbs to 12,600 feet at both the 45- and 55-mile marks. The lowest point is still a lofty 9,200 feet. In the six times I've traversed Hope Pass, the weather was never pleasant but varied among sleet, snow, rain, freezing rain, and hail. I kept track of Gary's progress on the race webcast and experienced some anxious moments in doing so. At the last reporting station before the finish (mile 87), Gary was right on the cusp of being too slow to make

► Gary and Keith at the start of Leadville, the third leg of the Grand Slam.



it. For a number of hours I couldn't tell if he made the cutoff but finally it got posted at 29:23:51, so he had a whole 36 minutes to spare. Young Keith cruised the course rather more comfortably in 27:39:34. Three down and only one to go.

Leg four

On the second weekend in September, out in Utah, the slammers assembled once again, this time to tackle the Wasatch Front 100, the last, and many would say the most difficult, race in the series. Even though the elevation doesn't reach as high as at Leadville, the overall average of nearly 8,000 feet still presents a significant challenge along with a plethora of often-rugged single-track trails. A testament to its difficulty is the 36-hour cutoff, unlike the 30-hour limit for the other three events. Both father and son were obviously tired after three energy-sapping events, and this one was no piece of cake. I had tackled Wasatch in 2002 and 2005 and finally completed the beast on my third attempt in 2007. Wasatch also had a webcast of the race, and I tuned in with particularly avid interest. This one fortunately was not so much of a nail-biter thanks to the wisdom and thoughtfulness of the younger Knipling. Keith knew that his dad, at twice his age, was nearly exhausted from the summer of challenges and chose to accompany Gary the entire 100 miles. Keith would therefore be Gary's second-ever pacer. It proved to be a sensible and essential gesture and the duo completed the trek in a respectable time of 32:22:48, good for a tie in 82nd place. What a giant relief for me and, of course, for both of them. They did it; they slammed! Gary and Keith succeeded as the first father-and-son team ever to complete the Grand Slam.

► Keith and Gary only about 100 feet from the finish at the Wasatch 100 and the completion of their Grand Slam.



Follow-up on Jim Campiformio

After Jim's disappointing experience at the 2006 edition of Western States, he returned to tackle it the next year. In 2007 he finished in his Western States best of 26:39:41, placing 144th among 270 finishers. Due to subsequent injuries, he was able to do only a very limited amount of running in 2008, but by virtue of his 2007 Western States finish, he was able to enter the lottery for the 2009 Hard Rock 100 in Colorado. He was immensely thankful that the Hard Rock lottery gives a two-year qualifying window for completion of one of the more difficult 100 milers. Western States is on that list, and his 2007 finish was the key. The great closure on Jim's story is that he made it in via the lottery and was able to overcome his back problem. He resumed an aggressive training program, and in July 2009 finished Hard Rock in 41:41:22, placing 75th among 105 finishers. Way to go, Jim!

My thoughts after the fact

Gary totally inspired me at Western States with his determination, strength, and spirit. Even though I was only the pacer, that particular effort is way up near the top of my own list of favorite ultrarunning experiences. He says our story isn't unusual, but I maintain that the beer and milk part certainly is. We have become particularly fast friends and thoroughly enjoy those infrequent times when we can get together to run on his turf or mine. His favorite 100 is the Massanutten Mountain Trail, where he holds the record for the most finishes at 18. He persuaded me to enter the 2007 edition, and though I finished, I can't say that I enjoyed it because I had never experienced so many rocks anywhere. He keeps tackling some of the bigger centuries such as Cascade Crest, Big Horn, Black Hills, Massanutten, and Grindstone, while my most recent 100-miler was back in 2010 at Vermont. 