

## **John Nichols – Western States -- June 26, 2010 – Rabbit Hunting**

“Rabbit Hunting” is short hand for the race strategy I employ at Western States. My approach is to make good time through the high country while eating, drinking, and running efficiently. I like to get to Robinson Flat at mile 30 up about 4-5 pounds, so that I have margin for error later in the day. As I enter the heat of the day through the canyons over the next 25 miles, my primary focus is pounding ice water into my gut and on my head so that I keep the core body temperature under control, particularly during the more challenging switch-back climbs. Once I emerge from the canyons at Michigan Bluff mile 55, I do a calculation on how much daylight remains. It's at this point where I'll go ahead and put myself into physical jeopardy in order to maximize how much of the course I can cover before it gets dark. Leaving Foresthill at mile 62, I pick up my pacer, and if I've still got wheels, we go “rabbit hunting”. In other words, we go looking for more talented runners who got excited and made a mistake in the canyons. Rabbit hunting usually goes on for about 20 miles. Then, the last 4-5 hours, it's a matter of grinding it out to the finish line and hopefully securing a silver buckle.

### **Expectation. Execution. No Excuses. No Explanation. – Tony Dungy**

Those were the 4 Es Tony Dungy posted in the locker room of the year the Indianapolis Colts won the Super Bowl. It seemed to capture the required state of mind for approaching the Western States, so a few of us adopted this as our 2010 training mantra.

Each year brings a unique set of challenges. In the weeks leading up to 2010 race day, I was feeling extremely well prepared. I likely couldn't match my 2007 time of 20:46, but it would be fun to get close.

2010 was forming up to be an interesting year in that the snow pack in the high sierras was such that crews could not make it to Red Star Ridge. The course between mile 12 and mile 23 would need to be diverted. Running through snow at altitude is a significant complication, but the revised course drops down to a lower elevation sooner, thereby providing an advantage.

**"Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go." -- T.S. Eliot**

\*\*\*\*\* 5:00am. Squaw Valley. Race Begins. \*\*\*\*\*

Picture by Luis Escobar → Top of the Escarpment, about 4 miles into the race. Picture below shows Geoff Roes the eventual winner followed by Tony Krupicka, who would also break the course record.



I completed the climb out of Squaw Valley, about 3000 feet of ascent. Took about an hour. Only 96 miles to go. Pretty normal time for me. Quick enough to get ahead of the crowd before the single-track begins, but under control. The guys in the picture probably were at least 15 minutes ahead already.

The 6 miles of snow following the initial climb were really difficult. Felt like the quad and hips were taking on early damage. It was up/down/sideways, trying to keep from falling too many times and pulling something that would cause problems later in the race. The snow was melting fast, and the most efficient path was to run straight through flowing mini-streams in many sections. Feet got wet & numb, but it seemed safer than trying to hop around and make an early mistake. I was looking forward to surviving this section and detouring onto the “snow course” fire road that they promised during the pre-race briefing.

#### **Talbot Creek aid station. Mile 14.**

This was about 2 miles after turning onto the fire road and most of us began to pick up the pace. It was a relief to have navigated the snow. Now I attempted to get into a rhythm and start to bank some time.



I ran most of this section with my friend John Blue. I paced John during his Western States run back in 2003. We had a pretty good group running at an even clip for the next 4 miles; making good time and growing optimistic that the course would be relatively fast. Dropping down to about 5000 feet this early in the race helped alleviate the sluggish feeling that comes from snow-running at the higher elevations.

I caught up to Adam Ray during this section. I knew I was setting a good pace as Adam is usually farther ahead of me. He and I would spend a substantial part of the day together, providing encouragement, as well as some light-hearted smack talking about who would stomp who by the end of the day.



**Poppy Trail aid station. Mile 19.6. 102nd place. Time 3:23.**

This 4 mile stretch to Duncan was a beautiful, but deceptively difficult single track. It didn't have significant climbs or descents, but it seemed relentlessly lumpy, and the footing was squishy. I was glad to finally emerge and climb back up to Duncan.

**Duncan Canyon aid station. Mile 23.8. 102nd place. Time 4:10.**

24 miles into the race, Gus was there waiting with bottles full of ice, water, and mango Gatorade. I guzzled my 11 ounces of soy milk, grabbed some lube and sun screen, and started the descent into Duncan Canyon.

I was about 30 minutes faster than my 2007 pace. It appeared skipping the ups/downs of the pacific crest trail on the way to Red Star Ridge proved to be significantly faster. I suspected we might give some of this time back during the snow-packed climb out of Robinson, but overall, the prospects for good time were improving.



I pretty much held serve place-wise during this difficult 10k stretch. Due to a forest fire a few years back, this section was rather exposed, and the footing was rocky. I spend most of the next several miles working together with Adam. Duncan Creek about 2 miles in was flowing high, but the race officials anchored a large yellow cable that provided some level of security for our crossing. About 4 miles in, Adam and I hit another set of streams, and this time filled out water bottles. This high up, it's pretty safe to drink straight from the streams. And even though the temperatures were not in the 90s, the elevation was still high enough that staying hydrated was a primary concern.

**Robinson Flat aid station. Mile 29.7. 101st place. Time 5:38.**

Robinson the first medical checkpoint. As expected, I was up about 5 pounds and fueling well.

Leaving Robinson, we were right back into the snow drift slog, with about a 1.5 mile climb up Little Bald Mountain. I found this section to be severely draining, but made myself think ahead to the several mile downhill stretch that lay ahead. I navigated the treacherous sections, got into the clearing, and immediately ended up face down in the dirt. So it goes. I actually felt much better after that. Seems like a jolt of adrenaline can confuse the muscle fatigue neurons.

**Miller's Defeat aid station. Mile 35.3. 97<sup>th</sup> place. Time 6:51.**

Adam and a few others got by me on the climb to Little Bald, but I picked up 4 places during this stretch. A few I passed on the way to Miller's Defeat. I'm guessing the others I passed in the aid station at Robinson's Flat, as I got in and out of there quickly.

Only 2.7 miles to the next aid station, so I topped of the bottles with ice and scooted along without delay.

**Dusty Corners aid station. Mile 38. 93<sup>rd</sup> place. Time 7:19.**

I made up three places during this short stretch. It was good to see Gus again at the aid station. We swapped bottles, and I did the usual soy milk guzzling, lube & sunscreen routine. I was having some difficulty with my shorts, which wanted to become plumber pants. We tried some duct tape to hold them in place, but this did not seem promising. I tightened the draw string, and lightened the pockets a bit, then went on down the trail on the way to Last Chance, trying not to moon anyone.

This is a fairly shady single track section, but seemed more exposed than I remember. It was about 12:30pm and starting to heat up. The day would get into the mid-90s. Warm enough to respect, but not so bad that it would be a significant issue if I kept pounding the ice water.

**Last Chance aid station. Mile 43.3. 105<sup>th</sup> place?. Time 8:27?.**

I made good time on the 5 mile section leading to Last Chance. However, the checkpoint splits showed me dropping to 105<sup>th</sup> place and taking 1:08 to complete the section. I suspect a clerical error, as I left the aid station with Adam Ray who was in 87<sup>th</sup> place.

The next stretch covers about 1 mile of gentle downhill, 2 miles of severe downhill, followed by a 1.7m 33 switchback uphill climb to Devil's Thumb. This tends to be a turning point in the race. The downhill is so severe that it is difficult to control if your quads are not still reasonably resilient. Then, you follow it up with a relentless climb that takes at least 45 minutes on a normal day.

**"Doc, you've been hitting it awful hard haven't you?" -- Wyatt Earp, Tombstone**  
**"Nonsense Wyatt, I've yet begun to defile myself." -- Doc Holiday, Tombstone**

I ran really fast during the long descent and picked up several places. After crossing the swinging bridge, I took a couple of minutes to kneel down in the creek at the base of the climb, trying to cool down the quads before commencing the climb. I then completed the climb in 41 minutes, faster than normal, and I didn't think I was pushing too hard. At this point I was about 15 minutes ahead of my 2007 pace, and was growing optimistic that I could post a fast time.

**Devil's Thumb aid station. Mile 47.8. 79<sup>th</sup> place. Time 9:21.**

I always enjoy the Devil's Thumb aid station, which is run by the Buffalo Chips Running Club. I have many good friends who are working this aid station. This was another medical checkpoint, and I was still up about 4 pounds.

As I left the aid station, I ran into my friend Jady Palco.

**"Pardon me, but you know, you wook just wike a wabbit" – Elmer Fudd**

Jady was starting to struggle, but he was smiling. Jady is always smiling. He just seems to enjoy life. If he's running well, he's smiling. When he's projectile-vomiting, he's smiling. Jady is a talented runner who tends to set a fast early pace. One of these days, I'll talk him into dialing back the first 40 to a more conservative clip. The day he is behind me all the way to Michigan Bluff is the day he will beat me to Auburn. In the meantime, Jady stays on my rabbit hunting list.

I began to pick up the pace, making good time on the runnable downhill stretch into El Dorado Canyon.

**El Dorado Creek aid station. Mile 52.9. 74<sup>th</sup> place. Time 10:13.**

I made up 5 places during this stretch, perhaps an early start to the rabbit hunting.

The aid station volunteers are kind to make it all the way down to El Dorado Creek. This has to be difficult to haul supplies to this checkpoint. I was so grateful to be able to load up on ice water before starting the 2.5m climb to Michigan Bluff.

This climb usually takes me pretty close to an hour. Most of it is a hike, but there are some parts where a slow jog can be sustained. It's longer than the climb to Devil's Thumb, but not as steep.

I didn't see anyone on the trail for a full 40 minutes until Lee McKinley reeled me in. Lee is a veteran rabbit hunter.

**"Doggone you, old, mean wabbit!" – Elmer Fudd**

Lee runs so steady that he even hunts down other rabbit hunters. I wasn't too concerned about getting caught by Lee. That was going to happen at some point. I only lost 1 place during this climb, which I thought was a good sign. I'm not a strong climber.

**Michigan Bluff aid station. Mile 55.7. 75<sup>th</sup> place. Time 11:10.**

I passed the medical checkpoint again, still about 4 pounds over my original starting weight. I looked around for Gus, but didn't see him, so iced up my bottles, grabbed some pretzels, and went on down the road into Volcano Canyon. After leaving Dusty Corners, Gus was going to return to Auburn, pick up my pacer at the high school, and then head back to Michigan Bluff. If they encountered any delay and/or I was running fast, the timelines might not work. Consequently, I told him if I did not seem him immediately upon arriving at Michigan Bluff, I would assume he did not make it and head on to Foresthill. Getting my pacer to Foresthill was the only priority. Extra assistance from the crew at Michigan Bluff was just a nice-to-have.

Fortunately, I was starting to feel relatively good and was starting to hit a rhythm. Also, I like to get out of Michigan Bluff quickly. It's a bit of a mash unit. People often emerge from the canyons looking like refugees from an apartment fire. Too many people puking. Good to get away before the power of suggestion takes hold.

I ran well over the next 7 miles and made up another three places. I was pleased to be able to navigate the switch-back descent to Volcano creek with the quad pain under control. This is the part of the race where the wheels can really start to come off. On the other hand, if your quads are still responsive, the next 25 miles have substantial downhill and you can really make good time. If your quads are screaming, the downhill sections are pure torture.

**Foresthill aid station. Mile 62. 72nd place. Time 12:18.**

My pacer Karalee Morris met me at the top of Bath road and expressed enthusiasm for what we might be able to do since I'd completed the most brutal 62 miles of the course in pretty close to 12 hours. I was about 30 minutes ahead of my 2007 pace. Low 20s was a possibility, if I could stay under 8 hours for the last 38.

I fueled and lubed and then went over to the medical checkpoint. Given that I had over 3 hours of daylight, I decided to skip flashlights and headlamps, and assume I would pick up what I needed for night running from my Rucky Chucky Far Side mile 78 drop bag.

Karalee asked how I was feeling. I replied that except for some blistering, I thought the wheels were intact enough to chase the sun to the river crossing. She asked whether the blisters needed attention, and I said no. Best not to open the shoes up if you can avoid it. My general rule is that you ignore just about everything except for major blisters on the arch or the heel. In those two areas, the pain is more difficult to tune out. You'll compensate, and have bigger problems 5-10 miles down the trail. Other blisters will just help you stay awake.

We took off down California Street and then onto the switch back trail. Surprisingly, we were able to really gear things up. I turned up the iPod and started to focus. Nothing like Kings of Leon, Seether, and Timbaland to get me in a running groove.

**Be vewy, vewy qwiet. I'm hunting wabbits – Elmer Fudd**

My next 8 miles were my fastest of the day, and the rabbit hunting was on. We went from the California street trailhead to Cal-2 in pretty close to 90 minutes, something I can rarely do even when I'm fresh. We caught 9 more rabbits during this stretch, a sizeable catch for this late stage of the race. We even caught that rabbit hunter Lee McKinley just before Cal-2. He's a particularly wascally wabbit and would catch me later in the night, but if you are anywhere near Lee at mile 70, you know you have a fast day in play.

**Peachstone aka Cal-2 aid station. Mile . 63rd place. Time 14:05.**

I didn't pause for long at the Cal-2 aid station. I loaded up on ice water, grabbed some cheese nips, and tried to keep the momentum. I was pretty excited about being able to run so quickly at this stage of the race. Covering that stretch so fast may have been my first mistake of the day, but at the time, it was fun.

I continued to make good time for the next few miles, but began to lose steam when I got near the section called Sandy Bottoms. At this point, I eased up on the throttle and decided to just keep making good time on the way to the River Crossing, but not push so hard that I would get myself into trouble. There was no doubt I'd cross the river in daylight, something I'd only been able to achieve on one other occasion.

**Rucky Chucky River Crossing. Mile 78. 58<sup>th</sup> place. Time 15:35.**

I made up 5 more places during this stretch. However, I only recall passing 1 or 2 runners. I think the others must have been on the stretchers at the Cal-2 aid station.



If the river is low enough, the race officials usually have a large cable the runners can hang onto while working their way across. However, this year, due to the snow pack and late snow melt, the river was too high for this. Instead, we crossed in rubber rafts. It seemed pretty efficient. A bit slower than using the cable, primarily due to having to deal with life jackets etc, but I don't think we lost too much time.



**“Why Johnny Ringo, you looked like someone just walked over your grave.” – Doc Holiday, Tombstone**

Upon emerging from the boat, we encountered Jen Pfeifer. She was preparing to pace Mark Murray and asked whether I had seen him. I told her Mark was ahead of me. She said, “no he’s not, he hasn’t crossed the river”. That was concerning. Mark was on my rabbit hunting list, but not one I expected to catch. He should be able to finish this race 1-2 hours ahead of me. Now I was concerned that he had encountered significant difficulties on the trail.

*(A few days later, Mark’s other pacer told me we had actually passed them at the Cal-2 aid station, just past mile 70. I left the aid station without awareness that I’d snared a ware, wascally wabbit.)*

At the far side of the river I put on the head lamp and prepared for the final stages of the race. I hike/jogged the 2 mile fire road climb to green gate, and tried to summon up the stones for what the last 20 miles would require. I was definitely feeling the effects of the first 80 miles.

**Green Gate aid station. Mile 79.8. 56th place. Time 16:07.**

I made up two more places by the time I reached Green Gate. I don't recall passing anyone, but I'm a few fries short of a happy meal by this point in the race. I suspect there were a couple folks in the medical tents on the other side of the river.

Now it was time to go to work. The next 5 miles are deceptively challenging. Rather technical in spots, 3 stream crossings, and several small uphill that begin to seem like big uphill.

**"I'm afraid the strain was more than he could bear." – Doc Holiday, Tombstone**

Lee McKinley caught me again on this section. I reserved some hope that I could get over this bad patch, find a gear, and go rabbit hunting again, but I suspected I may have used up my suds rabbit hunting on the way to the river.

**"I twied and I twied, but I just simply can't seem to catch that old wabbit!" – Elmer Fudd**

**Auburn Lake Trails aid station. Mile 85.2. 53rd place. Time 17:28.**

I picked up a few more places, but was losing momentum. I could get a decent pace going on the flat sections, but even minor upgrades slowed me down considerably. On a good night, I should have been able to do this stretch in close to an hour. This time it took me close to 1:20. Losing traction, but still on a good time preservation trajectory.

I can't really say it was hot, but it sure wasn't cooling off. Usually after sundown the temperature drops quickly. But tonight I was still asking for ice at the aid stations. Good thing the race was today. Tomorrow was forecast to be well above 100.

**Brown's Bar aid station. Mile 89.9. 50<sup>th</sup> place. Time 18:42.**

**"Life may not be the party we hoped for, but while we're here we should dance..." -- Unknown**

The Hash House Harriers run the mile 90 aid station. They are a pretty drunk group by this time of the night, so I like to get in and out of there pretty quickly.

I made up a few more places, which was surprising, since I my pace continued to degrade. It appears there were a few folks slowing down more. After running almost 19 hours, not many of us have much spark in our step.

The next mile is a steep rocky descent with a couple of stream crossings. I knew my feet were blistered and I would be losing a few toenails, but there is nothing like a dark downhill late in the race to serve as a harsh reminder.

**I never saw a wild thing**

**sorry for itself.**

**A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough**

**without ever having felt sorry for itself.**

■ **D. H. Lawrence**

I'll admit, I started to feel sorry for myself, but it didn't last long. As I was contemplating my blisters, I thought about Amy Palmiero-Winters, who was attempting to become the first amputee to finish the Western States 100 (she would finish in 27:43). I recalled the difficulty of staying vertical in the high country snow drifts, and the significant pounding of the long switch-back descents. Amy was taking this on with one leg and a prosthetic blade. That's a level of "tough" most of us can't even imagine.

**People die every day, Frankie - mopping floors, washing dishes and you know what their last thought is? I never got my shot. If she dies today you know what her last thought would be? I think I did all right. – Eddie Dupris, Million Dollar Baby**

Quarry Trail is traditionally my worst section of the race. It's a rocky climb and deceptively long. It takes FOREVER to get to the Highway 49 crossing. Karalee could sense my dread for this climb and encouraged me to pick up the pace. She noted that "it's really not that steep, most folks think you have to hike this stretch, but I think it's runnable". I appreciated Karalee's positive attitude, but I've been here before. I learned from Grant Carboni, who paced me a couple of occasions, that around midnight of a 100 mile race, ***your pacer will tell you all kinds of lies.***

**Highway 49 aid station. Mile 93.5. 51st place. Time 19:41.**

Last medical checkpoint. Only 2 pounds up. I guzzled soy milk and left the aid station.

**"You gonna do something? Or just stand there and bleed?" – Wyatt Earp, Tombstone**

Karalee looked down at my feet and asked "how long has your foot been bleeding?". I didn't know. They seemed to feel better than a few miles ago when I was losing toenails in that drop down from Brown's Bar.

Picture → Blown shoes. I've run five 100-milers on these. Time to retire them. I seem to have blown out the right size of the left shoe.



In my drop bag, I had a spare battery pack for my headlamp as well as a handheld flashlight. I grabbed neither.

**“Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgment.” -- Bix Bender**

Why would I have two backup lights in my mile 93 drop bag? Could it be that I've learned how important it is to have adequate light at this point in my race? But I brain cramped and took off. I figured there was only 90 minutes left of running, I had the top-of-the-line Petzel, and it had not started to dim.

I've been taking salt capsules all day to try to keep an electrolyte balance and avoid sever muscle cramps. Unfortunately, there is no known cure for brain cramps. The brain you have at mile 93 is not the same brain you had earlier in the day.

Sure enough, one mile into the climb to Cool, the headlamp flickered and went dark. Unfortunately, my pacer had the same headlamp, and it also went dark. The blind leading the blind. I briefly considered running back to the mile 93 aid station to retrieve lights, but the thought of adding a couple miles at this point wasn't something I was willing to take on. Rather, I decided to stumble through the dark, rely on the full moon, and my familiarity with this part of the trail.

Karalee was able to coax a bit of low beam out of her head lamp, so we switched positions, and she tried to warn me about major roots and rocks.

I tripped a couple of times. No major damage. Just felt a bit stupid. We survived the descent to No Hands Bridge at mile 97. I was looking forward to the final 5k as it was mostly uphill. Running in the dark uphill is much better than running in the dark downhill.

**No Hands Bridge aid station. Mile 96.8.**

Karalee borrowed a small waist light at the aid station, which gave us just enough guidance to navigate the final single track stretches. It was difficult, but it's not like I was setting any land-speed records with my pace at this point anyway.

**Finish Line. Placer High track. Mile 100.2. 53<sup>th</sup> Place. Time 21:35**



## **"West and wewaxation at wast!" – Elmer Fudd**

Overall, I was very pleased with this finish. I made too many mistakes to have my best race, but so it goes. After all, a 45-year old with marginal running talent who has a 50-60-hour-per-week job, really shouldn't be able to run from Squaw Valley to Auburn in close to 21 hours.

I made it to mile 80 in daylight. There might yet be a few more rabbits in the old hat. I'm already looking forward to 2011.

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### **Western States Endurance Run — by the numbers**

Started: 426 runners

Finished under 30 hours: 328

Finished under 24 hours: 123

Countries represented: 21

Start line: Squaw Valley USA

Finish line: Placer High School, Auburn

Peak elevation: 8,750 feet

Total ascent: 18,090 feet

Total descent: 22,970 feet

Total distance: 100.2 miles