

# One Minute at 11,000 Feet

High times at the Himalayan 100-Mile Stage Race.

BY DUNCAN LARKIN

When I was invited to cover the Himalayan 100-Mile Stage Race/Mount Everest Challenge as a journalist in October 2007, I expected to chronicle a leisurely stroll up and down cobblestone roads halfway across the world. I expected stunning vistas of Mounts Everest and Kanchenjunga, bows and nods to friendly Gurkha villagers, bags stuffed full of Indian tourist kitsch (Buddhas, Ganeshas, and elephants), and postrace toasts to relaxing times with newfound friends.

I didn't expect to be running in one of the most competitive races of my life. And I certainly didn't expect the separation between me and my rival to be one measly minute after three days and 70 miles.

That's what happened; I think it makes for a pretty good running story.

It all started at the top of one of the largest peaks in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, 8,000 miles away from the start of the race and about three months before it. I was doubled over with my hands on my knees at the top of Mount Misery inside Valley Forge Park. I had decided to do my hill training there. With an elevation of 550 feet, Misery is hardly a mountain; it's not even a hillock by Himalayan standards. But it was all I had to train with, so I ran up it several times.

A week before that workout, I had received an invitation from the director of Himalayan Run & Trek Pvt. Ltd., an outgoing, opportunistic, Indian entrepreneur named C.S. Pandey. Mr. Pandey had kindly offered me the chance of a lifetime: travel on an all-expense paid trip to cover the race as a freelance writer.

How could I refuse such a trip? I didn't: I gladly accepted the assignment. After I woke up the next day, after the dreams of running easily atop the jagged roof of the world had faded, I concluded something ominous: I wasn't in shape to do this. Struggling with a painful level 2 sprain and its subsequent mental side effects (apathy, frustration, depression, and utter despair) for the greater part of 2007, I had let my running wither; my weekly mileage dipped below 50. I had been running some long singles, but nothing greater than 17 miles. I hadn't run a marathon all year—hadn't done much of anything in the anaerobic zone. It was hardly the stuff worthy of a Himalayan ultramarathoning adventure.

## Putting the journalistic duties in perspective

So when I was at the top of Mount Misery heaving, staring at pieces of glacial scree on the ground, and thinking about daunting, 20 percent grades and the resulting pulmonary edema, I decided not to race it. Yes, I would do it—would walk it if need be. But no, I would not race it. Besides, weren't running journalists the people with the pens and the Moleskin notepads riding along, enjoying relative comfort, and reaping the mechanical benefits of those hill-climbing press jeeps? Journalists certainly weren't supposed to kill themselves on assignment.

As some sort of preparation for the Himalayan 100-Mile Stage Race, I signed up to run my first ultramarathon three weeks before flying to India: it was the Vermont 50. With over 8,000 feet of vertical climb, the Vermont 50 was the closest thing to mountain running that I could find on the East Coast at that time. I did it—walked a lot of it, enjoyed the views, and felt little pressure to compete for anything other than just finishing it. I was satisfied with my time, 7:47, and my place, ninth overall.

A few weeks later (with a large internal-frame rucksack slung over my back), I found myself inside the dimly lit Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi in the middle of the night. I was shaking the hand of my mustachioed cab driver; he sipped from a Styrofoam cup brimming with dark coffee and beckoned me to follow him to the parking lot across the street where his cab was parked. As he crossed the road, he held up his hand (the one containing the coffee cup), informing countless oncoming vehicles to stop. Tuk-tuks screeched to a halt. Their drivers honked and waved their hands angrily. Tuk-tuks behind the tuk-tuks in front of us honked and then drove around, up, and onto the sidewalk—more honking and gesticulating, more high beams and clenched fists. The sea was parted. I followed behind him close at his heels. I looked the part: a patchy-bearded white man laden with a large rucksack following a cabdriver.

I was a Westerner in India for the first time.

The cab that I was taken to was white and dented. On its side was once printed "Incredible India!" but "India!" was smashed in so it read "Incredible dia!" A fire

extinguisher sat on the driver's left side. The car needed to be tuned; its engine revved slowly and then sped up.

We pulled out of the lot and ventured out onto Delhi's chaotic streets—streets full of wayward monkeys, spitting camels, and squatting beggars. Several near misses and a thousand honks later, we arrived at our destination: the Hotel Ashok. Located along the wide, tree-lined streets that dated back to colonial times, the Hotel Ashok was Delhi's version of the Tropicana in Vegas. It was old and weathered; it looked like wild parties took place inside its walls—a long time ago. A pompadoured, mustachioed receptionist waited on me. I was shown to my room by an army of tip-mongering bellhops and slept peacefully.

## Yet another plane ride

The next day, I ran for an hour in the adjacent Nehru Park to keep my legs fresh. (A decent 3.5K soft-surface loop takes you around it.) A few hours later, I was back in a cab on Delhi's crazy roads to the airport, where I boarded a plane bound for Bagdogra Airport.

Located about 40 miles from Mr. Pandey's base camp (Mirik) in the foothills of the Himalayas, Bagdogra Airport serves as the stepping-off point for most tourists bound for the hill-station towns of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. There, representatives from the race met me and the 70 or so other racers who had arrived. We surrendered our passports and were led to large, brightly painted buses that look like Indian versions of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters' school bus "Furthur." A father and several of his sons loaded our bags; the youngest son, about 9 years old or so, clambered up the roof and caught our bags, which he lashed down with thick burlap straps.

As we drove from Bagdogra to Mirik, we passed kids in plowed fields playing cricket with makeshift bats (hewn sticks from the forest). The kids waved their bats and saluted us in our colorful bus. We waved back.

We drove on, passing more villages. One village specialized in wooden headboards and had about 100 headboard shops. Inside them, craftsmen worked their planes and saws into a frenzy. The next village specialized in sculptures. Half-finished Hindu gods with 10 arms and legs stood headless outside shop huts waiting for the master craftsman to return to finish the job.

We drove over a one-lane bridge that spanned a vast, mostly dried-up river. People bathed in sections of it; upstream, others washed their clothes; farther upstream, people washed their cars. Along the river's banks, skeletal men sat under faded umbrellas and pounded piles of large rocks into smaller ones. In a few feeder streams, kids in loincloths stuck their hands into turbid water and pulled out live things that got thrown into wicker baskets. (The baskets, when full, were hoisted over the kids' backs and humped up a mountain.) People were moving and working—searching, pounding, and scrubbing.

Ahead of us were the foothills of the Himalayas. As the sun began to set, we started winding up switchbacks. The road was one-laned and impossibly curvy. Guardrails were nonexistent. Our bus driver honked before we negotiated blind turns. Land Rovers appeared going the other way—downhill. The drive took an hour. Halfway up the mountain, the sun set. Shapes and shadows appeared on the sides of the road: men and women hauled various things that were crammed into wicker baskets. People on the bus stopped taking pictures; it was too dark, and we were all too tired.

## The esteemed Mr. Pandey, fussy as ever

We entered Mirik, pulled up a side street, and drove into a floodlight-bathed courtyard. Signs welcoming us hung overhead. We wiped the sleep out of our eyes and stepped off the bus, into the open arms of Mr. C.S. Pandey.

Clad in a blue, form-fitting sweat suit with his name neatly embroidered in cursive script on its left side, Mr. Pandey reached out with open arms and hugged us all; he then ushered us into his lodge. His staff (dressed in the official Himalayan Run & Trek gear: orange reflector vests and tall, blue baseball caps) stood rigidly and soldierlike behind him. They sought out our names, our dates of birth, our next of kin, our blood type, and more. We graciously provided whatever we needed to; we were all happy and excited. Mr. Pandey's staff assigned us a tracking number. We were told that we must not forget it: I was number 131 for the rest of the trip. It was my serial number for 10 days.

We were then ushered into a briefing room with a lectern and chairs. Mr. Pandey made his grand entrance, cleared his throat, cleaned his glasses on his blue sweatshirt, and proceeded to read from a prepared statement that rested on a wooden lectern next to a dais. "Friends of the Himalayas," he began. "I welcome you to India. My name is C.S. Pandey. I am the race director of the Himalayan 100-Mile Stage Race/Mount Everest Challenge . . ."

A few minutes into his speech, he drifted from these prepared remarks and spoke extemporaneously. He was animated—articulate and calculating. He told us about the upcoming course and its inherent challenges. He cautioned us that this event was not necessarily a race; rather, it was an outdoor experience with the express purpose of providing relatively fit tourists with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take on the grandeur of the Himalayas. I nodded my head up and down. *Take it easy—enjoy yourself; you are a journalist*, I thought to myself.

Mr. Pandey then read us the official rules (from a lengthy book that he called the "PDI") and concluded his speech by telling us not to cheat.

As with all meals during the entire trip, dinner that night was a wonderful spread: curried chicken, fresh naan, basmati rice, and dal. We sat in front of long tables and got to know one another while we drank 8 percent-grade, sweet-tasting

Kingfisher beer that was served from tall bottles. (The bottle informed the drinker, ominously, not to imbibe from it outside the province of Sikkim.)

There were but a handful of Americans on the trip; most of the runners hailed from the United Kingdom. After dinner, we were assigned rooms. I was introduced to my roommate, an affable British man named Howard who had run numerous 100-milers throughout the world. We swapped running stories, talked about the exotic nature of India, and then turned in for the night.

## On to visit Darjeeling

The next day, we were offered the choice to either sightsee in Darjeeling (a two-hour, tedious drive away) or relax at the lodge and wander around the village of Mirik. I and about half the group decided on the former option. Mr. Pandey gave us orange scarves to wear (for tracking purposes, presumably) and then ushered us back onto the colorful buses. We spent the day visiting the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, shopping for tea and tourist baubles, and riding up a hill on a small steam-powered locomotive called a “toy train.”

That night, the whirlwind tour of Northern India ended. My thoughts drifted to tomorrow—to the race. From Mr. Pandey’s meticulous prerace briefing, I knew that the first day of the Himalayan 100-Mile Stage Race would be one of the hardest days: 24 miles with nearly 10,000 feet of vertical climb ending at an altitude over 11,000 feet above sea level. These nervous sentiments prevented me from sleeping. I was up all night, tossing and turning. Outside, packs of wild dogs howled at the moon. (It was full.) Cats in heat moaned. My bed’s sheets were damp; the bed I lay on was fashioned out of a long plank of plywood; the light from the hallway made a large oval that magnified through the window’s opalescent glass and shone on my face.

It was awful.

## Race day one

Five A.M. came slowly. Mirik’s cocks crowed. A villager squatting below my window scraped and banged away at his nascent coal fire.

Breakfast was served to us: it was porridge and toast. Afterward, we boarded buses for a two-hour drive (complete with 50,002 hairpin turns) to the start, which was in the small village of Maneybhanyjang. As we rounded turn number 50,001, Manzi, Mr. Pandey’s niece and his heir apparent, turned to us and pointed to a little copse of trees and prayer flags off in the distance, at the top of a gigantic mountain.

“That’s the first aid station,” she said with a smirk.

We gulped.

The buses pulled over in the middle of Maneybhanyang. Half-naked Westerners clad in tights, shorts, and singlets exited. We smelled like a putrid concoction of B.O. and Bengay. Some of us were strapped to the buses in GU belts, CamelBaks, and other ultramarathoning survival gear. I'm a minimalist, and so I wore just shorts and a T-shirt; I carried a single handheld water bottle. It was empty.

The entire village was lined up on the edge of the road; the villagers stared at us. We stared back. Kids crawled under the legs of the village elders and poked their heads out to get a better view; dirty men with narrow eyes and wispy mustaches peered from behind open doors. Dark teens wearing shawls, jeans, and plastic mud boots huddled together and tapped each other's elbows—pointing at us, the foreigners.

Two masked men dressed in traditional costumes (shaggy suits and smiling monster masks) waved their hands and stomped their feet in time with a ragtag band that played on rusty pipes and beat on a dirty drum. The music was high pitched and foreign.

Mr. Pandey appeared.

He had changed his uniform from the blue tracksuit to a gray one (his official title and name were still embroidered over the left nipple). A thin whipcord sash was slung across his chest. A whistle was attached to the sash. In his hands, he held a green flag attached to a wooden stick.

The band played, the monsters danced, the villagers gawked, and the foreign racers oohed and ahed and snapped digital pictures between slapping their legs limber and checking and rechecking their utility belts.

Mr. Pandey raised his green flag to get our attention. He thanked the mayor of the town and then thanked a general (standing beside him wearing a tan beret and a crisply starched uniform with Sam Browne belts) who was lending troops to guard us from Nepalese Maoist brigands who had been recently infiltrating the border in search of food and ammunition.

The general started to make a short speech. The band played on (squealing and thumping). Mr. Pandey told them to stop immediately—making a throat-cutting gesture with his hand. The general tried again. He thanked everyone, waved, and then nodded to Mr. Pandey, who nodded to his official time keeper, who wore two stopwatches (old watches with faded rubber wristbands and flaked soap scum that protruded from under their facings).

The general said, "Ready . . . go!" and waved the flag downward.

The villagers cheered. A couple of us ran. The first half mile (through Maneybhanyang) was flat. I recall that I ran side by side with a British runner at about 8:00 pace past kiosks and a waving crowd. The enormous mountain with its prayer-flag-streaming lodgepole loomed in front of us. Luckily for me, I was advised in advance what to expect on this difficult day by someone who had run the event last year, so when the first hill presented itself, I walked up it. This hill

led to another hill that led to a switchback that led to a 20 percent grade—all cobblestone. I walked fast. I swung my arms side to side. During the next three days, this was my method; this was how I attacked the race: walk up the hills.

## Early oxygen debt

If you're a competitive runner on your first day of a long race in the Himalayas, it's hard for you to go from a run to a walk in the first mile. Somehow, I managed to stay disciplined. The first 3,000 feet up, I negotiated the hills fast—moving up the steep parts of the switchback, cutting the tangents. By the first checkpoint at the top of the first mountain, I was in severe oxygen debt. I heaved and gasped, that ferrous taste formed, and the hands tingled. The little valley with the little village was a dot now. Clouds had rolled in. All was gray and cold.

I reached my first checkpoint. One of Mr. Pandey's workers squatted at the side of the road. At every checkpoint, these same workers made you do the same thing: stop and sign your name. I didn't like this mandatory signature break—had never done anything like it before. Throughout the week, my checkpoint signatures devolved from big, symmetrical, John Hancock-like bubbles to a doctor's scratch to a dead patient's flat line.

Another thing to note at the aid stations (presumably in the spirit of eco-friendly racing): there were no water cups—only water. You had to supply your own bottle. The first three days, this was no problem for me. I carried my handheld bottle, but the last two days of the race were real road races, and so I decided to run with nothing during them.

Commiserating one day with a fellow racer—a tall, gregarious South African ultrarunner named Dave—about this quirky quandary, I was given a great idea:

“What's with the mandatory bottle thing at the water stops?” I asked.

Dave laughed and in his fine Afrikaans accent said, “It don't bother me none. I just put my hands out like this. Then I have them pour it into my hands!”

That's what I did on day four and five: it worked great. I would come up to the water stop, yell “131! 131!”, come to a halt, sign the dead man's flat line, and put my cupped hands out like a beggar.

## Back to the first day

Despite my efforts to not care about the race, I did. All thoughts of being a journalist first, a participant second, and a racer never faded when I realized that I was in the lead. I had no idea what kind of lead I had. I had no idea what the “field” in this race was comprised of. I didn't know whether I was going too fast, too early. I got no feedback at all. Symbolically, it was foggy at the top of the first mountain; I couldn't even see behind me. I just knew that I was in first place

and felt the cold breath of the second-place runner bearing down on me. My feet shuffled faster and faster up the switchbacks.

I was racing.

There were a few flat sections, and I ran those; then more hills; then more switchbacks; then, finally, a long downhill section. I flew down that. I passed locals carrying things in large wicker baskets. These people were ghosts—blackened shapes appearing out of the mist. As they got closer, they smiled at me. (They were happy people—all of them.) They wore plastic mud boots and woolen clothes (shredded).

“Namaste,” I would say.

“Namaste, namaste!” they would reply courteously.

Yaks with bells around their necks appeared; they crossed my path and then disappeared into the mist. After each checkpoint, I did the same thing: I drank some water with glucose powder in it, ate little plantains and potatoes, and then went right into a crab walk up a 50 percent incline.

Land Rovers dating back to the first year of Indian independence appeared and passed me. Their engines ground and bore down as they climbed the grades along the way (grades so steep that loose pebbles touched by anything rolled down them). As the Land Rovers disappeared in the fog, their grinding would eventually fade. I would listen to it closely. Minutes of grinding and bearing meant tens of minutes (hours?) of slogging up ahead for me.

I looked at my watch. Two hours ticked, and then three hours passed. Up again? Yes: up, up, and up again!

The thin air gave me a headache. My body got cold. I shivered in the fog and put one soggy foot in front of the other on that long, 6,000-foot ascent. After the fourth hour, I wanted to sit on a granite wall and mumble to myself. I no longer cut the tangents. Racing didn't matter: it was now a matter of survival. The altitude made me delirious; I nearly quit. Another mountain with a thousand switchbacks presented itself around yet another bend. Another Land Rover passed me; one of Mr. Pandey's workers stuck his head out of its window and taunted me by yelling, “Hurry! Hurry! The Spaniard is catching you!”

“What Spaniard?” I asked. The Land Rover drove on.

## What competition?

This warning sent me into frenzied motion; I was shaken out of my complacent, self-pitying state. I waved my arms and put one foot in front of the other. Fear overcame me; my competitive spirit returned. I looked behind me in the fog. All I saw was emptiness.

4:10.

4:15.

I thought *Why am I carrying this little banana?* (I chucked it—it was biodegradable.)

4:20.

I mumbled, “Why am I carrying this little potato?” (It was dead weight and another renewable thing, so I threw it away.)

A sign appeared on the next hill; it read: “No sweets without sweat.” There was one final turn, and then I saw people holding a finish line banner for me. They cheered.

Time: 4:24. Place: first overall.

I thanked the finish line crew and turned to leave.

“Wait. Sir? Sir? You forgot to sign here,” the orange-vested official sitting behind a card table told me.

“—————,” I wrote.

The second-place runner, indeed a Spaniard named Miguel Gomez, finished five minutes behind me in 4:29.

Our accommodations up in Sandakphu (our base camp for the next two nights) were spartan. The men and women were segregated. We were each assigned a cot inside a barrackslike hut (Hut B for me) and shared a bathroom (read: hole in the ground). There was no running water. Kind attendants heated tubs of water for us on coal fires; some of us ladled this steaming water over our sweaty bodies. The food (cooked by Gurkhas) was fantastic: curried chicken, naan, dal, and unlimited supplies of sugar cookies. With full bellies and tired legs, we all turned in early that night.

## Race day two

That next morning, someone sat up, went outside, came back into Hut B, and told us that the stars were visible. This was good news, because we were up at a place where four of the five highest peaks in the world could be seen on a clear day.

I didn’t need to throw anything on, because I slept in every piece of warm clothing that I had brought. I went outside and walked up to the mess hall to watch the sun rise. The stars viewed from Sandakphu were incredible—not affected by one bit of light pollution. I picked out the easy Big and Little Dippers and then traced my fingers along the even easier Orion: his bright bow pointed outward to hunt Taurus, the bull, with his two dogs, Canis Major and Minor. Hunting and hunted: a prescient analogy for the race.

I got my dose of the camp’s strong coffee, munched on a bruised plantain, and then went back outside and put my hands in my pockets and took it all in. The sky went from black to gray. The stars withdrew, and then a long band of pink formed at the bottom of the horizon.

Then they appeared: the Himalayas.

The first thing we saw was their white hoods—magnificent. For a brief moment, they appeared without a torso, just jagged mirages floating in the sky. As the pink band widened, it turned orange and then fiery red; then came day.

The camp awoke. Fellow racers who had slept in scrambled up the hill, turned, and gaped. At first, none of us took pictures. We just stood there speechless, blowing wispy warm clouds into the cold air, making life-changing resolutions. Mr. Pandey, wearing a limp ski hat and a puffy, ribbed jacket that resembled a life jacket, came up and showed us which peak was which. The sun rose a bit more, and we all got out our cameras and snapped away. After the magic of the moment faded, we all resigned ourselves to our fate: 20 miles (10 out and 10 back) on tired legs.

Surprisingly, mine weren't that sore. I shook them out a bit, threw on a clean pair of racing clothes (shorts and shirt), and walked up to the start. Mr. Pandey gave us a speech—he did this before every day's race—and then he had some official pictures taken (backing us up nearly off the mountain). Finally, he unfurled his trademark green flag and started us. I recall being on the leftmost side of the starting line that day—nearly in a ditch—and having to dart around fast to get into position at the beginning. I was nervous and jumpy: five minutes between me and Miguel, the second-place runner, didn't seem like much.

I took the lead right at the start. Often during this five-day stage race, I was tempted to turn around and look for Miguel. I resisted this temptation based on the words of wisdom imparted to me by my high school track coach, Mr. Laughlin. Gentle, fatherly, an avowed communist during the '60s, and an excellent mentor and coach, he once told me the following about front-running that I will never forget:

“Never look behind you in a race. Looking behind you wastes energy—energy that you need to win. If you are looking behind you, then you've resigned yourself to losing. Look ahead: the finish line is in front of you. Only defeat runs behind you.”

I gritted my teeth and tunneled my vision.

## A search for air

When the first rise came, I ran up it. I felt Miguel's presence and felt obligated to run. I had let myself down in the first five minutes—failed momentarily in executing my plan of walking the hills. My lungs seared; my pulse shot up. I heaved in the thin Himalayan air. I panicked until I heard him. He was fighting for breath; he struggled as much as I did. He was human?

He was!

Upon hearing him struggle like that, I decided to revert back to my walk-the-hills strategy. There would be too many to run them out here; we were too high;

there was too much race left. I was already going anaerobic and couldn't have made it running for all 20 miles.

I walked up the next hill—fast. He did the same, I think, because he didn't catch me. The part of the race that contained significant downhill then came, and I decided to run them hard; I slapped my feet down and threw my arms wide. I tried to put distance on him during those segments. I also tried to do it on the later uphill parts, right before the rise of the hill ended. As soon as I saw the rise end, I would pick it up into a jog and increase my turnover to an all-out run.

Sadly, there wasn't much time for observing the wondrous scenery. I had bitten the competitive bug and mostly refused to look at anything other than trail that lay straight ahead of me. The day was sunny. The views: spectacular. I do remember a few scenes, however. Coming up a rise, I saw the long end of a slung Kalashnikov assault rifle that was silhouetted against the majesty of Mount Kanchenjunga. The gun belonged to a member of the Indian border patrol, there to guard us members of the race from marauding Nepalese Maoists. As I put more hill between me and the guard, I saw more of him. He wore jungle fatigues and a tall baseball cap. He waved, and I did my “namaste” routine.

In another vivid scene, I remember scaring a herd of yaks and the poor shepherd boy in red mud boots who had been leading them across the cobblestones. The boy did his best to control them, but before I knew it, I was in the middle of a heard of beasts that had very long, very sharp, very curvy horns. It was too late. I was trapped. In their midst, I thought about the constellations that I saw that morning. I thought about Orion and Taurus—hunters, hunted, yaks, and bulls. My thoughts then drifted down a slippery analogous slope. I pictured bullfights and finally thought about Spain and my Spanish opponent who was bearing down on me with a picador's lance leveled at my back.

## My lead cut down to a minute—or less

The turnaround at Molle appeared at the end of a long rise. A bright orange star made out of reflective material sat on a pole that was stuck in the ground. After signing my name, I turned and ran back down the hill—back to Sandakphu. I recall looking at my watch to see how much of a lead I had on Miguel.

Not even a minute.

He looked strong. He wore thin shades and a stoic expression. He hardly breathed. His arms were relaxed; he embodied calm. I remember moving very fast down that hill after the turnaround. I contemplated the eight-mile slog back up to the finish. At this point, I started to see people in the race. It got lonely out there, and to see fellow racers was a welcome sight. I vowed to find the breath to give everyone some encouragement.

“Almost there—looking good,” I told the people coming up the hill by the turnaround.

“Keep it up; you got a big hill before the turnaround, so save something,” I uttered to folks who couldn’t see the turnaround.

“Great job,” I offered to people farther back.

“Don’t quit. You can do it!” I uttered, speaking to those brave souls at the end of the chain.

A long, painful line of steep hills came and I became forlorn. Could I finish it? Oh, this hurt! Sadness turned to paranoia that then turned to panic.

*Where is he?* I asked myself. I couldn’t hear him. I wanted to look.

The voice of Mr. Laughlin rang in my ears. The more tired I got that day, the more oxygen I searched for, the louder his voice got, too. I closed my eyes and could even see him in his Benicia Panthers tracksuit (hooded and baggy) with his big ’80s glasses and his manicured beard (spaded like Cardinal Richelieu), his plastic whistles dangling around his neck, hanging like a tangled mess of neon crucifixes and rosary beads. I remembered our weekend drive up to a track meet in Sacramento in 1990 and how he told me about the true merits of ideal communism—about Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, about the merits of King and Gandhi, about nonviolence and the power that can reside in the masses. But what really came back was that same quote that he gave me later during that long ride, when the subject of dead labor leaders and the world’s peaceful change agents had grown stale, when we were talking strategy on how to win in the varsity boys’ open two-mile. After years of toil, after subpar 12:30 races my freshman and sophomore years, I had finally become a 10:17 man. Mr. Laughlin had helped me achieve this.

## The voice from the past returns

“I hate running in the front. What happens if the pace is too slow?” I remember asking him.

“Run your race,” he said gently.

“OK, so I’m in the front. I’m feeling good—putting some distance on the pack. Can I look back to check on it?” came my next question.

Again I heard it: “Never. Never look behind you in a race. Looking behind you wastes energy—energy that you need to win. If you are looking behind you, then you’ve resigned yourself to losing. Look ahead: the finish line is in front of you. Only defeat runs behind you.”

The voice faded.

I stared straight ahead.

Up and up—up some more I ran. The white Quonset huts that comprised the edge of Sandakphu appeared on a craggy cliff. I could see the finish, but 1,000 feet more separated me from it.

Those last miles hurt. I used all my reserves. When any flat sections came, I ran them. I couldn’t hear Miguel. The mist had started to come back, wrapping

up the finish line in a gray blanket. Some orange-vested racing crew saw me and radioed to the finish line. I took off with some semblance of a kick and broke the finishing tape with a pump of my fist.

Miguel came in two minutes later. I shook his hand and patted him on the back with my gloved hand.

That night, Mr. Pandey's staff posted the results for the day: I had a seven-minute lead.

"That's not much," someone told me, tapping a finger on my and Miguel's names at the top of the bulletin board.

"I know, I know," I said pensively with my arms crossed. Tomorrow's third stage was a big day: a 26.2-mile run with the first 16 miles on undulating terrain and the last 10 miles descending 6,000 feet. I worried about my quads holding up at the end and racked my brain for a strategy. Should I stay in front at the beginning or take it easy and progress into it? I decided to go with the former game plan.

### Race day three

Twelve hours later, Mr. Pandey raised his green flag and dropped it. We were off!

I shot out and around the group, jockeying for first position again. Miguel was right behind me on my heels. The first 10 miles were the same as day two, so it was mostly a descent on cobblestone roads. I walked up the hills as usual and accelerated when things went horizontal or downward. I think I had a pretty decent lead on Miguel early on. I remember looking at my watch at the 10-mile mark in Molle and having run it exactly the same (down to the second) pace as yesterday: 80 minutes.

I felt strong—confident.

After the 10-mile checkpoint, the course took us on a tedious, four-mile out-and-back up to the little village of Phulet. It's essentially a drop from a cliff for three miles and then a brutal climb up for a mile, then turn around and do it all in reverse. I remember seeing the checkpoint at the turnaround shrouded in mist. I remember clawing at cobblestone and almost being able to put my hand out and touch the hill—it was that steep.

I tapped my watch at the turnaround and timed it until I saw Miguel: two minutes—giving me a four-minute lead.

Everything was comfortable; I was in control at that point.

I warned people running the opposite direction about the upcoming hill at Phulet.

As I zipped passed the checkpoints, I said this: "131!" (my number) and wrote this: "—————," (my dead man's signature); I greeted like this: "Namaste!" and politely declined water like this: "No, thank you."

Then the real downhill part of that day's race came: mile 18.

Down meant straight down. At first, the path (marked as such with red arrows spray-painted on every possible surface) was gradual; then a cliff appeared. The red-arrowed path simply disappeared. In its place, various railroad ties serving as crude steps presented themselves to my ragged legs. I had to change my stride. I went from bounding to kicking my knees up and high. I was worried about breaking a leg or an ankle. I pictured falling over and losing the race right there in that grand obstacle course.

And that's when it all fell apart.

I heard a twig snap and disobeyed Mr. Laughlin's advice: I looked behind me.

Miguel was there. He must have made up over four minutes in a matter of three miles—he was a flying man on a mission—a man cutting down that mountain as if he were skiing it. I've never seen anything like it in all my years of racing.

Miguel had found my Achilles' heel. Around 1,000 years ago, my ancestors (the providers of my current, hopelessly clumsy genes) evolved from a cold, primordial swamp. I reckon that they were hairy and probably tripped a lot. Their feet were clubbed, their toenails black and full of sandal jam. They dragged along clubs and probably got lost a lot. They didn't dance or ski. They probably didn't take the most logical path up or down a hill; they just ooga-boogad their way hither and yon.

They weren't graceful, which means I'm not either.

## How steep can this get?

Miguel was graceful. He was the fastest downhill runner that I've ever seen in my life. He must have been running 5:20-type pace down that hill. His route selection was perfect. Mine: pained. The railroad ties disappeared, and the cliff got steeper. Rainwater had run down that trail for hundreds of years and had carved gigantic, Badlandsesque canyons. Miguel bounded back and forth on them; I just ooga-boogad my way through them.

Within a minute, he was gone—disappeared around a steep bend. I had been passed.

I asked myself, *What to do? Should I pursue him?*

I decided to go with my first answer to the question: let him go. He had planned this and was letting his cards play out. I decided to stay safe first, and when I had a break, when the slope wasn't something that a marble would roll down, when the footing wasn't anything that required blind prayer, I would pick it up and try to minimize the damage.

It got worse. We entered a large valley; then we entered a village. What seemed like a million concrete steps appeared. I tried to pick my knees up, but I couldn't.

I was no longer interested in happy villagers and blurting out “Namaste!” I was angry and tired.

Then I fell. My knees cut into stone; my ankles scraped along jagged, rocky edges. Blood trickled. I felt sick, dehydrated, and nauseous. At one of the checkpoints, some of the orange-vested race workers told me that I had 10K to.

*This can't be right, my mind told me.*

*Pandey's signs are wrong, my subconscious affirmed.*

*I'm dying down here, my quads moaned.*

*I'm going to barf, my stomach cautioned.*

Onward.

## A bridge spans it—sort of

Down more steps I stumbled. Happy villagers multiplied—grinning and waving. Eventually, I could hear the rushing of a river below me. I saw a ramshackle bridge, and a few minutes and a thousand more stairs later, I crossed over it. The bridge was missing planks. A hundred feet below was a raging river.

Mind: *Jump!*

Body: *Die.*

Mind: *I'm warning you; this is a real danger. You could die.*

Adrenaline-infused body: *Jump! Jump! Jump!*

Stomach: *I'm warning you; I'm going to puke!*

Legs: *Why do you enter these contests? I thought you were going to walk this thing? Aren't you a journalist?*

Heart: *I'm good. I'm aerobic. All systems go.*

Mind: *Shut up, heart.*

Soul: *Finish this thing.*

The repairs on the bridge entailed placing (not fastening in any way) planks over some sections of missing bridge. I avoided those, too. Once across the river, I saw a kilometer stone for Rimbik (the finish): 4K.

Four K was too long.

I stopped running and reverted to that all-too-familiar dead man's walk. Everything—heart, mind, lungs, and soul—quit. I said, “To hell with the race.” I imagined Miguel—the smarter racer—crowned in laurels riding in a chariot in front of cheering villagers. And I envisioned me, the race's *flaneur*, walking in with my head hung low.

I estimated that Miguel put at least 10 minutes on me—if not more. He was nowhere to be seen. My tongue swelled up.

Three K remained, and after a very long time came the marker for 2K to go. Then some semblance of a village appeared. Then there was 1K to go. Then a turn came. Then I saw a few kiosks full of wrinkled women selling Fanta and shrink-

wrapped plastic soccer balls. A few more meters later, I saw the village's only tailor; he sat there (toothless) working away behind an ancient sewing machine. Across the street was Rimbik's equivalent of Home Depot; piles of ax and plow heads were strewn in front of rows of mud boots.

At last the finish came! Exhausted and severely dehydrated, I stumbled up to a curly mustachioed race official and signed my name.

"The Spaniard beat you by six minutes today," he told me, twirling the pointy ends of his mustache lazily with his fingers.

After 70 miles and three days, one measly minute separated the first- and second-place runners.

The real race had just begun.

## Race day four

The night before, after a long, rejuvenative nap, I had studied the course on the official elevation map. Mr. Pandey was giving us a break. Day four's course was point-to-point, all on roads, and only 13 miles long; there was only 1,000 feet of elevation gain; we were running at only 6,000 feet above sea level. Easy is a relative thing. With one minute separating Miguel and me, I determined that the fourth day was going to be a pivotal one. Everything was going to come down to how fast he and I ran on this day.

Essentially, the day's race was one big ditch: four or so miles down, five miles flat, and four miles up. The race ended in a village called Palmanjua. It was warmer down there—humid, steamy.

"Go!" Mr. Pandey yelled, dropping the green-flag-on-a-stick.

My plan was to get right behind Miguel and sit on him—never let go of him. After we ran through Rimbik and started our steep descent, I did that. I got right on his heels and let him set the pace: a recreational jog. We were both very sore from the marathon. You could discern that by seeing our wincing and our stiff, unnatural strides. We ran down and down along a winding switchback that overlooked a stunning vista: an enormous valley with terraces and huts. We were on the roads finally. This was welcoming for me, because I fancy myself more a road racer. After my legs warmed up, I felt strong. I wanted to open it up and take off at full speed, putting as much distance between Miguel and me as possible.

But I resisted and kept disciplined. I set up camp on his shoulder and let him hear me in his ear.

Down and down we ran again. *Ouch, ouch, ouch*—my legs felt sore and stiff!

We reached our first checkpoint. I think he let me go first. I signed my name and then, trying to be a good sport, waited for him to sign his name before starting out again.

As we reached the flat part of the race (about mile five) he put on the jets—a sudden, unexpected surge. I countered and slipped in right behind him. I felt strong and confident at that point.

Then he backed off. So did I.

Was it a test? It was.

## The mine gives us a lesson in safety

We then came to our next checkpoint. I let him sign first. He thanked me. He waited for me, and then we took off again. He offered me a drink from his tiny water bottle. I said, “No, gracias.” As we ran that flat section, we wound around a few turns that eventually took us past a gigantic mine shaft. Milky white water flowed out of its dark holes. Inside, workers could be heard banging and clanging. Outside, men shoveled rocks onto a flapping, ramshackle conveyor belt that ran into some sort of grinder that clanked sonorously. The workers waved to us. Above them was a sign that read: “No safety, no pay. Know pain, no safety. Know safety!”

I felt my legs. *Know pain*, I thought.

Water poured across the road—ankle deep at certain sections. Miguel and I took turns offering each other the easiest, driest path across these parts.

Another checkpoint came (our last before the 1,000-foot climb); we again demonstrated mutual good sportsmanship.

Then the large hill appeared. We first crossed that big river we had been paralleling. Wedged into its middle, receiving the brunt of the river’s pressure, was a statue of the Hindu mother goddess, Durga, her 10 arms flailing. Driftwood and other pieces of flotsam had collected in between the arms, making even more limbs protrude from her pale torso. It was a bit eerie, because of the statue’s hominine features.

Up we started.

I knew it was going to be at least four miles, and so I put my head down and stared at the insects and the chipped sections of asphalt on the ground.

Miguel began to fade.

I felt strong still—not ready to fade, capable, alert, on top of things. I knew that I could run these hills—they were asphalt and not nearly as steep as the ones from days past. They were 6,000 feet lower and forgiving—they flattened sooner and longer. So I ran them.

I started to put distance between me and Miguel. At first, I could hear his breath on my shoulder, and then it grew faint, and then, when I rounded up a switchback a mile later, I couldn’t see him anymore.

I was pulling away.

## The buses signal what's ahead

Brightly painted buses passed me. As they turned up a switchback, they accelerated and kicked up plumes of blue exhaust that went right up my flaring nostrils. As I did on the first day, I listened for the drone of their engines, timed the duration of vehicular work (the hills left for me), and compared it to the duration of their high-pitched accelerations (the length of flats left for me). I was hoping for a minimal amount of time for the former and a maximum amount of time for the latter. I also counted their honks, which equaled the number of hairpin turns I still had to run (or tangents to cut).

About two miles into that unforgiving hill, I heard the sound of steam-powered turbines behind me. I panicked, turned around, and looked. It was day four's eventual stage winner, Emlyn Christie, a perpetually smiling and jovial 2:52 marathoner from London. He let out an encouraging, "Go, Duncan!" and passed me as if I were standing still.

"Go, Emlyn," I offered meekly and then (naturally, selfishly), I asked him about my silly little predicament.

"Where's Miguel?"

"Shuh-shuh-shuh—a ways back. I passed him a ways back," he huffed.

"Shuh-shuh-shuh. Thanks, man. Go for it, man! This—shuh-shuh-shuh—one's all you," I huffed back at him.

Emlyn came up to the next hairpin turn and disappeared from sight.

I reached that turn, crossed another bridge, turned again, and then saw Mane Jimenez, the race's official photographer. I knew that he had been trucked to the finish line and that he probably walked down from the finish to take some pictures of the racers nearing the end of childbirth.

"How far is there to go?" I gasped.

Manny smiled, dropped down to one knee, focused his large lens on my pained face, and snapped. "Not even 200 meters to go," he said.

After a final turn, I came upon Mr. Pandey's race workers. They chattered at each other in Nepali as they draped the finish tape across the road so I could break it. (They diligently and courteously did this for every finisher of every segment.)

My time that day was 1:35.

Five minutes later, Miguel arrived. I shook his hand and said, "Good race."

"Good race," he told me.

I had lengthened my lead to six minutes; it was still too close to call. Going into the last day's race, there was still too much uncertainty.

It was still a race.

## Race day five

Seventeen miles (five miles up, then 12 down) was the official distance for the last day. With my narrow lead, I figured that it was my race to lose. I knew that if I ran up the hill as I did on the fourth day—nothing too forceful, steady—I would be OK. I expected Miguel to take off once we crested that hill, as he did on the third day. My strategy was to run those downhill segments fast and relaxed—to let the legs just go with the drop (not to accelerate down them).

At the starting line, Mr. Pandey gave us a motivational speech (using his trademark word whiskers “friends, friends”) and then raised his flag one last time and sent us on our merry way.

Emlyn and I went out early. Miguel wasn't around. We worked the hill together—he passing me, then I passing him, encouraging each other incessantly. That five-mile segment took forever to work through. As I crested the hill, I saw that Emlyn was about 300 meters behind me. I didn't know where Miguel was.

I took off down the hill. The past four days had taken their toll on my legs and feet. Everything—every muscle fiber, tendon, and bone—was nearing its breaking point. Still, I pushed the downhills hard. I got a bit paranoid a few times. Small noises in the bamboo forest played tricks with my mind: I thought they were the crack of Miguel bearing down on me as he did on day three.

Around mile 13 or so, I heard the slapping footfalls of a runner. I turned and looked: Emlyn. He saw me look and yelled my name. I tried to stay with him and then concluded that it didn't matter if he passed me. I thought about the yellow-shirted cyclist in the Tour de France sipping champagne on his last day as he freewheeled backward past the Place de la Concorde, down the Champs-Élysées. So I backed off and let him go.

“You got it, man!” I cheered.

The last 5K of the race dragged on interminably. I remember that my feet hurt really badly. My mind played tricks. It asked ridiculous hypothetical questions such as *What happens if I break my leg on this upcoming pothole?* or *What happens if I get some sort of side stitch or my nose drips arterial blood?*

## At last! Back at Maneybhanyjang

The outskirts of Maneybhanjang (our race's starting and finishing point) finally appeared. In the distance, I could hear that ramshackle band from the first day playing. A gantlet of schoolchildren had formed. They wore uniforms and waved small Indian flags. As I came across the line, I dropped to my hands and knees. I was made to sign my name one last time and then posed for a few pictures.

There was nowhere to go; there was no chute; there wasn't a group of handlers with space blankets to care for me. No EMTs checked my pupils; no volunteer

kids helped me take off the chip from my shoes. There wasn't even a place to sit down (the finish is crammed in between a rock wall and a guardrail). I plopped down (cross-legged) under the finish line banner and congratulated people as they came in—people like Miguel who, despite slowing slightly on that last day, still finished the race second overall. We shook hands and shared stories about our hard-fought race.

That night back at the lodge in Mirik, Mr. Pandey hosted a fine awards ceremony. A few local West Bengalese satraps arrived in official Indian government cars and presented us with our trophies. I received a beautiful gold plaque. The race's female winner, Elin Wright, was awarded the race's Sant Nagpal Baba Memorial Gold Award because she won every stage of the race. We posed and smiled. Mr. Pandey handed a few of us the microphone; we were expected to say something. I looked out at the group of tired runners, realized that none of us had eaten dinner, and said that I had nothing to say. I sat back down.

Now, a few months after the race, rested and with a full belly, I do have some things to say.

I hope you enjoyed them. 