



# Young & restless ultramarathoner a true roadie



**Nick Hollon, just 19, does Badwater good**

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Poway High alum Nickademus Hollon (left) gets water from Akos Konya during the 135-mile Badwater Ultramarathon. (Joel Briggs / Courtesy photo) -

Hanging out at a Death Valley hotel last week, Nickademus Hollon felt curious eyes stealing glances at him. The visitors had been lured by the Badwater Ultramarathon, a 135-mile race that crosses the desert floor in the heat of summer before climbing toward Mount Whitney.

“Who the hell is this kid?” the 2008 Poway High graduate sensed people were wondering. “Why is he here?”

Ultramarathons are typically filled by middle-age people in search of life-defining challenges. Average age of Badwater's 86 starters this year: 44.

Then there was Hollon, at 19, too young to legally order a beer, but old enough to dream.

On July 14, 33 hours and 21 minutes after he began in the desert, Hollon reached the Badwater finish more than halfway up Whitney, becoming the youngest finisher in the race's 23-year history.

He placed 18th overall. The previous youngest finisher was a 24-year-old from Austria.

Six days later, the balls of his feet still pink from blisters, nails on his big toes black from bruising, his lips peeling, Hollon thought of the people who had cast doubtful looks his way.

“To prove 'em all wrong,” Hollon said, “that was fabulous.”

Hollon began entering 5Ks with his mother at 12. He ran his first marathon at 15. About that same time, he read Dean Karnazes' book “Ultramarathon Man: Confessions of an All-Night Runner.”

In his first Badwater attempt, Karnazes collapsed at about Mile 72, passed out before waking up 50 miles away in a hotel.

“Any race that could do that,” Hollon said, “I figured was truly messed up.”

His reasons for wanting to attempt Badwater were simple. With temperatures climbing to the 120s, could he withstand the heat? Could he absorb the pounding from 13,000 feet of climbing and another 4,700 feet of descent? If his body were able, would his brain cooperate?

“I like seeing if my mind is tough enough,” he said.

Hollon was supported in the race by a six-person, two-vehicle crew. A crew member ran or walked with him most of the way. He consumed 64 to 72 ounces of fluids and two or three salt tablets every hour.

Oceanside's Akos Konya, second at Badwater the past three years, served as one of Hollon's crew members.

“He's a different type runner than I am,” Konya said. “I'm kind of yelling (at his crew). I'm kind of mean when I'm running. Nick, he was always smiling.”

Inside, Hollon often was hurting and fueled by anger.

At about Mile 25, with dark opera music playing on his iPod, he said he went on an “anti-God high.” One friend has battled leukemia. His girlfriend was diagnosed with epilepsy in February.

“My grandmother says bad things happen to good people because God knows they can handle it while bad people would sooner perish,” Hollon said. “I was (mad) at that quote.”

With the temperature climbing to 122, he yelled, “Bring on the heat! Make it hotter.”

In the weeks before Badwater, Hollon, a geology major at Northern Arizona University, acclimated to the heat by driving to the desert with the heater blasting in his Jeep. He took two jugs of room-temperature water with no ice, ran 15 miles one day, slept in a mud cave, then ran 20 miles the next.

“Is that smart?” Hollon said. “Probably not. I lived.”

He figured if he could survive the Spartan conditions, he'd feel pampered by his crew.

By Mile 92, past Panamint Pass, at about 2 a.m., Hollon battled blisters on the bottom of his feet. He said he welcomed the pain.

“The suffering that I go through is voluntary,” he said. “The pain my girlfriend goes through, that's involuntary suffering.”

Among the runners Hollon beat to the finish line was Karnazes, who finished nearly 90 minutes later.

Of Hollon's feat, Karnazes said, “It's just remarkable. At 19, the last thing on my mind was spending hours and hours running in the middle of nowhere. I was focused on college. I was chasing women. I wasn't chasing Badwater buckles.”

There is no prize money at Badwater. Runners who finish in 48 hours or less earn silver belt buckles.

Karnazes said he does worry that Hollon might be doing harm to his body. Just to qualify for Badwater, Hollon ran 207 miles combined in two races during a six-week span late last year.

To guard against injury and burnout, Hollon said in the future he'll limit himself to one 100-mile race a year. He's not wasting any time establishing a new challenge. Although he's never ridden a bike farther than 80 miles, he wants to enter next October's Furnace Creek 508, the 508-mile bike ride that starts in Santa Clarita and passes through the Mojave Desert and Death Valley.

“I want to show I'm not just a runner,” said Hollon, who has run a 3:04 marathon, fast enough to qualify for the Boston Marathon.

There is irony to Hollon achieving long-distance fame. He ran varsity cross country at Poway High but admits he was not on the best of terms with his coach.

Hollon wasn't passionate about the sport then. He acted in school plays. He dabbled in triathlon. He skipped some practices to go on longer runs with friends.

Said Hollon, “I can imagine him opening the paper or looking at an ultrarunning magazine, seeing my face on the cover and saying, ‘That damn, kid.’”

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