

**“How I Made Sure That No Food Would Go To Waste On Thanksgiving”
or
“My Icarus Florida UltraFest Race Report”**

by Brian Cavanagh

My race report focuses on what led up to my participating in the wonderful experience I had at the Icarus Florida UltraFest. We see the end result at the race itself, but as distance runners know, it is the preparation that gets us fit enough and the motivation that we develop in training that prepare us for the challenge of an ultra.

So I got to the Icarus Florida UltraFest the day before my 12 hour race. Wanted to check things out. Started walking the loop, found that people were pretty “laid-back & relaxed” and enjoying the event. The 6 day race had been underway for four and a half days, the 3 day for 2 days, the 2 day race had just started, and the 24 & 12 hr races were to start the next morning. I had my hotel room about 20 min away, and I had time to kill, so I familiarized myself with the course and the event. I met Mike Melton, head timer, and his reliable sidekick, Jason Gruss. These guys know their stuff! Over a 38 year span, I coached distance runners, officiated a bit, and started and organized a 100K single loop road relay and a 30K road race and these guys were right on top of every detail and having fun enjoying the race experience with the participants. More than just timers, they encouraged individual runners each time they came around the 1.0408 km loop (that’s a kilometer plus 40.8 meters). Mike explained how they had an ankle strap with a chip AND another chip in each runner’s race bib that would ensure that each runner’s lap was recorded. If a runner stood near the chip mat for a while, he had that issue covered as well. Precision in length of course matters to me, and they had a foolproof timing system to go with it. This event was being organized meticulously so runners could just “do their thing”: rack up the miles and kilometers running and walking. Race Director Andrei Nana had made sure that the course would be nationally & internationally certified as accurate, with USATF certification # FL14002DL and IAAF Course Certification number USA-2014-060-BDC. Having measured more than 100 courses for USATF Certifications of accuracy, I know that these require exacting measurement procedures which are the “Gold Standard” of accuracy for all courses in running and walking road racing. Nine national records have been set at Icarus; accurate courses are essential to having record times accepted as accurate times. When a course is measured this way, the measurement device is calibrated before and after each day of measurement. For more on this “Gold Standard” of measurement for distance running on road courses, see http://www.sullivanstriders.org/usatf_course_accuracy.htm

Next, I walked over to the main tent with rows upon rows of all sorts of food and met Claire Nana. To quote her husband Andrei, “Claire has done all the precise planning for the race. She and Carey (our aid station manager) prepared the meal schedules and menu as well as all the logistics.” Claire was managing the variety of food preparations she and Andrei had made available. It was the greatest variety of food I have ever seen for a race. I was half-expecting a restaurant reviewer to stop by and ask what wines they recommended in the evening for the 6 day race. “Ah yes, ‘Gatorade 2016’, that was a very good year: citrus notes and a sugary aftertaste... it pairs nicely with a Gu and one of Claire’s smoothies.” She was running the food and drink aid station, and she had a helper who took care of runners’ feet. Massages were also being given, showers were available for the 6 day runners, and much expertise was being doled out as well. Claire & I got to talking about sport psychology & motivation especially, then I learned that she wrote an excellent book, “Leverage”, about transforming setbacks into advantages. Everybody experiences them, and I remembered Ken Posner’s words about being able to bounce back from challenging points in his Double Badwater record run. I had only known one really tough patch in any of the limited number of ultras I had done, competing solo in the 100K Catskill Mountain Road

Relay in 2000, and did not know there can be several in a long race. It had been 16 years since I had last run an ultra, and I was interested how athletes motivated themselves to do these much longer distances such as the 6, 3, & 2 day races. My own two experiences at 24 hours consisted of being on my feet for about 16 of the 24 hours, so I was curious how others stayed out there walking and running for far longer. After reading Claire's book in the weeks after the race, I can say that it is a gold mine of information on becoming stronger and dealing with setbacks of any kind, and is especially applicable to challenging yourself when running longer distances. The higher the goal, the greater the challenge and the more likely that you will need to draw upon the strengths you have cultivated in your development as a person and as an athlete.

I met George ("Scott") Maxwell & Henrik and enjoyed walking some laps and swapping stories as I familiarized myself with the curving beautiful park course. I liked the relaxed vibe, which to me, epitomizes longer ultras. I think Henrik, Manoshri and I were the only ones who had cut the fronts of our shoes open. That was a Tom Osler tip I read about around 1980. Henrik had been one of the top 3 along with Tina & Manoshri in the 6 day race, so I felt a sense of confirmation by doing something experienced ultra runners were doing. I had been following Mike Melton's live results online since the 6, 3, and 2 day races started, admiring the tenacity of the competitors and drawing inspiration from their accomplishments. While my 12 hour race would be much shorter than theirs and a sizable challenge for me, I would try to apply the same joy of movement and persistence which they did for longer.

I met Andrei, and I could quickly tell that he was highly focused as a race director. He had been doing this for four and a half days by this point. His degree of organization was amazing. I did not see a single thing that had not been addressed in the planning process. He greatly credits his co-race director Claire, and they work excellently as a team. As a former race director, I try to look at things from a runner's perspective. Andrei and Claire have created a phenomenal event by anticipating and planning well so that their competitors are ready to rock and roll.

What got me to Icarus

I always loved the story of Icarus. It is a story of valiant effort, daring to transcend what others say cannot be done, and yet it is also a story of hubris, or excessive pride, and a reminder that we are mortal. The Paul Winter Consort's wonderfully melodic instrumental song, Icarus, was brought to the moon to be played nearly a half century ago, symbolic of humankind's ability to rise to great heights. You can listen to the song at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4Df3a3dfWQ>

Before this ultra, I had gone through a period of being unable to run for 7 years due to toe tenosynovitis, a tendinitis in the sheath of tendon of my most distant big toe joint that took a year to overcome and to be able to walk on without sharp pain. It happened when I could run 8:00 miles for 30K and was prepping for a 3:30 marathon at the age of 44 in 2001. Having discovered the ability to run high school cross country well as a 17 year old, I had run my first 26 miler just shy of age 19, my first official marathon of 2:53 just shy of age 20, and a PR 2:48:51 when I was 24. At the age of 44, I was giving focused marathon training a try again after a few introductory ultras in the early 90's, hiking a lot of mountains, racing run/bike duathlons, cycling, building trails, cross country skiing, running 100K in 15 hrs and "Working for The Man", LOL. Because ending my running career was the only thing left that could work to heal my toe injury, I switched over to cycling because the toe did not have to flex, then started doing mountain road hill climb races, 100 milers on the bike :-) and then loop 12 hour bike races. I always liked having a challenge to aim for, and I liked going further. As T.S. Eliot wrote, "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go."

After 7 years of being active in non-running ways, I found in 2008 that, surprisingly, I could run a few steps without any pain whatsoever, which became 10 steps, which became 20, then those turned into minutes, then over the weeks, turned into miles. I had lost so much running conditioning that lightheadedness and being out of breath from simple jogging had to be controlled by walking slowly between attempts at "slogging" (sloppy

jogging). I was moving slower than molasses flowing uphill in the wintertime. Whoever said cross training on a bike prepares you for running should be pummeled with organic carrots and peas shot out of a cannon. Bit by bit, the running condition started coming back in fits and starts amidst occasional injuries and my main focus on training for my annual 12 hour bike race. I had no expectation of being able to do a running race again until I got an email from a father who lost his daughter at the Virginia Tech shooting. He asked if I could help him by measuring a course for a race that would be a fund raiser in his daughter's memory for scholarships for remarkable young people like her. This remarkable father who had run the Raid Gauloises and his remarkable wife showed the positivity and strength that I found so compelling that, after I did the measurement work to get their course USATF Certified, I wanted to run the 5K in their honor and in their daughter's memory. After 35 minutes and serious concerns over lightning very close to other runners on the race course during the 5K, their remarkable strength and sense of mission had started me on a new path, thankful of the ability to be able to run and to be healthy.

I kept competing at 12 hour bike races, then in 2014 decided to stop distance bike training & racing and shift toward running again, as I was able to run injury-free for as long as 10K in a turtle-acious time of an hour and five minutes. You know you are not running very fast when you describe your 10K time by starting with "An hour and..." :-) I built up to doing a half marathon by a year later. The guy who won the marathon in 2:57 passed me near the end of my 2:57 half marathon; it was as if I was passed by a former shadow of myself, LOL! I was ecstatic just to be able to finish, having never DNF'ed in well over 400 races, and was so happy to be out there finally running in my first race over 10K in fourteen years. Later that summer, in attempting to run 15 miles as part of my dream to someday run a marathon again, I ran 7.5 miles then had to walk back with ITB pain that made running impossible. It was a defeat. Eventually getting physical therapy after months of thinking I knew what I was doing, I started altering my training to include much more in the way of corrective exercises that would prevent injuries. A year later, I gave an informal 12 hour running race a shot and covered 23 miles with no ITB issues in 6:30 of the 12 night hours in FL heat. I'm a northerner only moderately adapted to the heat. The main issue, thankfully, was so benign: getting slower at running as the hours went by, which I knew could be corrected by conditioning and time, and I liked seeing what I could do, and I was happy with doing more than I had in 16 years!

This got me thinking: "How can I do better?" It was 3 months before Icarus. I saw a link on Facebook to the page where I found info about Icarus and I liked the philosophy of transcending limits, because really, limits do not exist. We either do something or we don't. Limits are constructs of our imaginations, and we can just as easily counteract them if we choose to do so by imagining ourselves accomplishing things rather than not doing so, as long as the goals are realistic. The more reasons we give ourselves for why we want to do something, the more likely we are to do it. At a certain point, thoughts become words which become actions, and it is us, not our environment or other people, who determine those actions. Almost every action we take in our lives is a result of a choice or choices we make. As Johnny Kelly said about training for the Boston Marathon, "You get out there and put one foot in front of the other." The first climber to solo Everest, and without extra oxygen, Reinhold Messner, found himself directionless and without purpose after he lost his brother to an avalanche only 100 meters away from him on a Himalayan climb. Reinhold wrote of the seven-year chasm in his life, devoid of the challenges of climbing the most difficult mountains on the planet, and his decision to return to climbing. To paraphrase: "Between the imagined and the real, between the dream and the accomplishment, every sense is enlivened and one's life is enriched." To live fully is to live a rich life. This is what challenges such as Icarus mean to me.

Regarding limits, there are accomplishments, and then there are perceptions about those accomplishments we may have beforehand. We want to be prepared. Sometimes we don't attempt something for fear of failure or injury or perceived or real lack of capability. When preconceptions become limits, sometimes they need to be cast off to see what we are capable of. Everybody has their own strengths and degree of willingness to commit themselves, and whatever they do, if they improve, they are headed in the right direction. Personal growth is when a human being is a "human becoming". Perhaps it is in our nature to want to be better as human beings; it

is why we adapt and have learned to adjust to living in the most challenging environments on the planet. We try new experiences and enjoy the vigor they add to our lives as we rise to meet the challenges of those experiences.

I thought a good way to add richness to my life would be to try to stay on my feet for a lot more than my previous six and a half hours. I was curious how many miles/kilometers I could run/walk. Having already experienced a career-ending injury, I knew that I had to listen to my body as well as be willing to challenge myself to do more than before. Striking the right balance is one of the keys to doing your best in distance running. My body responds well to longer distances in training if I get enough rest afterwards and if I do supplemental exercises in preparation along with running and walking. Barefoot running and walking on sand and various weight lifts and calisthenics and physical therapy exercises for old injuries were essential to keeping my running muscles healthy and free from previous ITB and achilles tendon problems.

There was one minor problem with aiming for my longest run in 16 years: not much training in 16 years, LOL! As they say, you don't want to shoot a cannon out of a canoe. Bob Crego, a friend of mine who set a record for running across the US in a 10 person relay team from St Lawrence University (with 2 mile relay legs at a time), once comically said, "It's hard to taper for a 10 mile race when you are running less than 10 miles a week." Uh, yeah, Bob. That's about what I'm lookin' at. Due to injuries that periodically interfered, I was averaging 1 mile of running and 2 miles of walking per day since 2014, and even less mileage than that before then. I was essentially aiming my cannon from my canoe, saying "Shiver me timbers, damn the torpedoes full speed ahead!"

So, after I ran a half marathon at an improving pace in Montreal in late September with no ITB or achilles or other injury issues, I walked a lot for a week, despite the soreness those first three days after that race. Yeah, it was risking injury, but it turned out OK. Keeping yourself going is what it is about in an ultra, and I wanted to see what I could do to keep myself going despite my leg muscles not being 100%. In that week, I racked up over 50 miles, my most in 15 years, and no injury problems arose. That was my Icarus race simulation spread out over more time. My biggest week before Montreal was about 20 miles of running. My Icarus dream? Run/walk at least 10 of the 12 hours in the Icarus Florida UltraFest, and see if I could cover 50K. From dream to goal, as I did my training, 50K became my minimum standard, a stepping stone, a building block, a goal. I'd rather try and fail than not try. I like the flexibility of the "Go as you please" races where you can do as much as you want and have the freedom to take breaks whenever you want. The focus shifts to the process of running, not just the end result, and I like that. Good results are a consequence of being immersed in the right processes.

I decided to focus on doing everything right to keep my ITB & achilles tendon healthy so that on race day I could make the most of my limited training background. As an athlete in the early stages of a comeback, I was essentially a rookie again. Maybe not in knowledge, after 38 years of coaching endurance athletes and advising race directors, but definitely in terms of recent experiences. In my absence from running, I had missed important developments like pizza-flavored gels, jelly bean "recovery systems", and sticks to roll your sore muscles with. It would be a challenge for a 60 year old brain to remember what to do right in terms of pacing, blister prevention, fueling, hydration, and body temperature management that was last done when said brain was age 44. We all have our doubts, regardless of the numbers or the quality of the experiences we aim for, and I needed to set achievable goals and manage those doubts. Going beyond what you think you can do is at the heart of an ultra. It is fun to surpass what you thought you could do; it empowers you with confidence to pursue other goals and challenges, and enlivens you with the prospects of more adventures that may lie ahead. My own philosophy is that (1) goals should be achievable, and then (2) hopes and then (3) dreams can be pursued beyond them as: (2) hopes that are possibly achievable, and (3) dreams that are long-shot-achievable if almost everything goes right. My hope was walking and running for 10 hours of the 12, a big step up from 6.5 hours, and my dream was 60K.

Time to immerse myself in the process

Race day came and directions were given by Race Director Andrei Nana to those of us in the 12 & 24 hour who would all be starting at the same time that morning. The 6, 3, 2 day and 24 hour races would all finish 24 hours later, on Sunday morning, while the 12 hr would finish Saturday night. Everything was very well-organized, the best I have ever seen for a race, and the runners were raring to go. I still had some rookie details to attend to when the race started, so I started a few minutes late, then completed my first few laps behind everybody. My right forefoot was burning a little: it's called Morton's foot, caused by a longer 2nd toe which causes nerve irritation in the metatarsal arch in some people when that toe gets a little more stress from leaving the ground after the big toe does, so I shortened my stride a bit on that side and it went away after about 5 to 6K and didn't come back. Eventually, I was part of the continually circuiting runners and walkers who were at all different stages of their various journeys. Some regularly ran faster than me, while others I could keep up with for extended periods of time, chatting and listening. People took breaks as they needed, whether it was for eating, drinking, bathroom, or otherwise. I like the really laid-back nature of time-limited ultras like this: you take breaks whenever you feel like you need to, and there is a lot of flexibility in how you rack up your miles/kilometers. You mainly need to stay on the course and go over the timing mats, eat before you're hungry, drink before you're thirsty, and move forward feeling as good as possible for as long as possible so that you can last as long as possible. For those who know they can last the time duration of their event, they can run faster. For me, it would be about staying on my feet for more hours than I did in the August heat.

I found myself walking/running & talking with Pam Sanchez, George "Scott" Maxwell, Jesus Atencio, Henrik, and a recent mom who I later saw pushing her 18 month old son in his baby jogger, and got a chance to talk a little bit with Manoshri whose persistence and enjoyment of running were evident. You do more of what you enjoy. You like running a lot, you run more. There were many others whose names I don't recall or did not get, but I hope to meet up with them another time. Everybody was friendly and was joined by the common mission to be the best they could be on that day. Or 2 days... or 3 days... or 6 days! :-). It was a shared adventure, and well worth doing. I think Pam's singlet said it best: "This is my happy hour." So many people enjoying running. This was a great place for a runner to be!

Wanting to eventually qualify for the Boston Marathon in my 60's, for which I will need a 3:55, I found it somewhat humorous when I passed 26 miles in a little under 8 hours. I was running "half-fast", like my high school music teacher humorously once told us when we were playing our musical instruments in class, LOL! Having gone past my 23 miles and having another 4 hours to go, I kept going except for brief food, drink & bathroom stops. Timer Jason Gruss had cheerfully given me some medical tape to put on nipples when he saw me trying to affix new bandaids that kept falling off. "UltraRunning 101," he said, LOL! Yep, I was a rookie again, and it was fun to be learning. :-)

A half hour stop was worth it after 9 hours to ice the soles of my feet and my knee which I could use with a stiff-legged jog that eventually required walking. It was where my ITB injury had been in the previous year, but wasn't getting any worse as long as I walked. Icing was an investment in "not flying too close to the sun", as Icarus himself did. (Icarus didn't do the icing part, but the flying part, which melted the wax on his wings. Icarus would have used Gorilla Glue and de-icer nowadays and been cleared for takeoff by the FAA.) I was slowing down on my lap speeds and I was telling myself to go with that flow, and to keep "doing the best I can with what I got". Andrei came over to talk when I was icing and I honestly felt honored to trade stories with such an experienced athlete. He has a great sense of enthusiasm for ultra running and training and a great amount of technical knowledge on training, a kind of knowledge which I enjoy learning about and sharing with other athletes and coaches.

We wound up walking a couple of laps while talking after I ended the icing, and I noticed afterwards that the lap pace was faster. Left to my own devices, I would walk slower, but given company at a brisker yet reasonable pace, I went faster. I realized that my focus can improve the next time I do this race so that I sustain a faster pace I am capable of. For the last 3 hours or so, I tried keeping myself within shooting range of my dream level of accomplishment, 60K, and it was slowly becoming a dream for another day and that was OK with me.

Acceptance is a powerful tool that enables us to keep going. I was exceeding all of my other expectations, and wanted to continue the process I was immersed in. Going into the final few laps, I was running a bit more and then when 12 hours hot, I planted my flag and staked my claim to a “second running career PR” of 35.353 miles or 56.9K, a result I was very happy with! I later estimated that I was moving forwards for 11 of the 12 hours, beyond my hope of 10 hours, and averaged 11:05 per km or 17:49 per mile when I was walking or running if I subtracted my non-moving breaks.

The quality of the experience was excellent, and I am looking forward to running beyond 60K at the 2017 Icarus Florida UltraFest. If it is appropriate to do so in November, my goal will be 49.7 miles. Just kidding. We like those nice round numbers. Like 49.7097 miles. (That’s 80K!) To paraphrase Seb Coe, “If I knew how fast I would run before I did a race, there would be no mystery to it. I love not knowing what I might do, then stepping out on the track to see what I can do.”

I am looking forward to the mystery and adventure. And telling non-runners how many kilometers I ran... ;-)

Congratulations to all of the runners who participated at Icarus Florida UltraFest, many thanks to organizers Andrei & Claire Nana, aid station manager Carey, timers Mike Melton & Jason Gruss, and the many other numerous elves and munchkins who worked to make this event such a great success!