

A LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT, COMPLETE WITH DINOSAUR

by rachel white

"Welcome to the 27th annual Le Grizz," said race director Pat Caffrey, "otherwise known as the 'Old Age Ain't For Sissies Fun Run.'"

"We have 37 first-timers this year," he continued. He also announced that there were four contenders for a Ten Bears award (for completing ten Le Grizz races), and two contenders for Chief Ten Bears (the event's lifetime achievement award for 20 completions), prompting a wave of "wows." Suddenly he hauled out a shotgun and yelled, "You may be ending this day with a whimper, but you'll start it with a bang!" and fired the gun, startling all the dogs in the vicinity and a few humans.

Caffrey has been the race director from the start. Twenty-seven years ago he and a group of likeminded friends calling themselves the Cheetah Herders came upon the idea for Montana's first ultramarathon. "Like all good ideas, it began in a bar," he says. It has become a favorite of many thanks to its quirky character, its warm welcome to first-timers, the beautiful fall scenery of northern Montana and Caffrey's sense of humor.

With the runners underway, five of us and our dog packed into the car to crew for my dad, Stuart White, one of the contenders for the Chief Ten Bears title. For almost as long as he had been running ultras, he had been thinking about this day. Last year, when he completed 19, the pressure began to rise. What if something happened and he couldn't get to 20? He didn't even race as much over the last year because he didn't want to get injured. Still, in spite of his caution, the potential wrench in the system came in May: his annual checkup revealed prostate cancer.

When he got the diagnosis, his first words were, "Can I still run Le Grizz in October?" My mom had never seen him so intent. "He told the doctor that running his 20th Le Grizz would be one of the most significant events in his life," she said.

The treatment (which was successful) and recovery process took a full three weeks off his running over the summer. But he put himself on a steep training curve as soon as he could run again, and hoped it would be enough.

Now in crew mode, we drove the course, stopping every three miles to load him up with drinks and gels. The road curves and bumps a bit, creating an amusing distraction: conversations were punctuated with random squeaks from a dog toy we had accidentally thrown in the food box. Our dog normally loves squeak toys, but wanted nothing to do with this bug-eyed dinosaur, whom we nicknamed "Abigail." We discovered that its distressed squeaking made an unusual accompaniment to our cowbells and cheering, allowing us to really whip up a healthy cacophony for the runners. (Being on a support

crew is no time to be a shrinking violet.) One runner, hearing her plaintive squawks, shouted back to us, "That is one sick chicken!"

Besides urging dad onward, we cheered for this year's other contender for Chief Ten Bears, Bob Feeney, and for Larry Carroll, a 72-year old who became a Chief 10 Bears five years ago. Other than Larry, the only other person to complete 20 before this year is Steve Skookumtumtum Heaps. A well-loved presence at ultras in the region, Heaps has done every single Le Grizz. To head up this elite club of tough-as-nails old running coots is Bob Hayes. Hayes is 82, started running in his 60s, and received his Ten Bears two years ago. He is a thin, white-haired, friendly-faced gnome, and charmed the hell out

of us when we cheered for him. Over the clamor of cowbells and sick chicken noises, he sang at the top of his lungs, "You are my sunshine! My only sunshine! You make me happy . . .!"

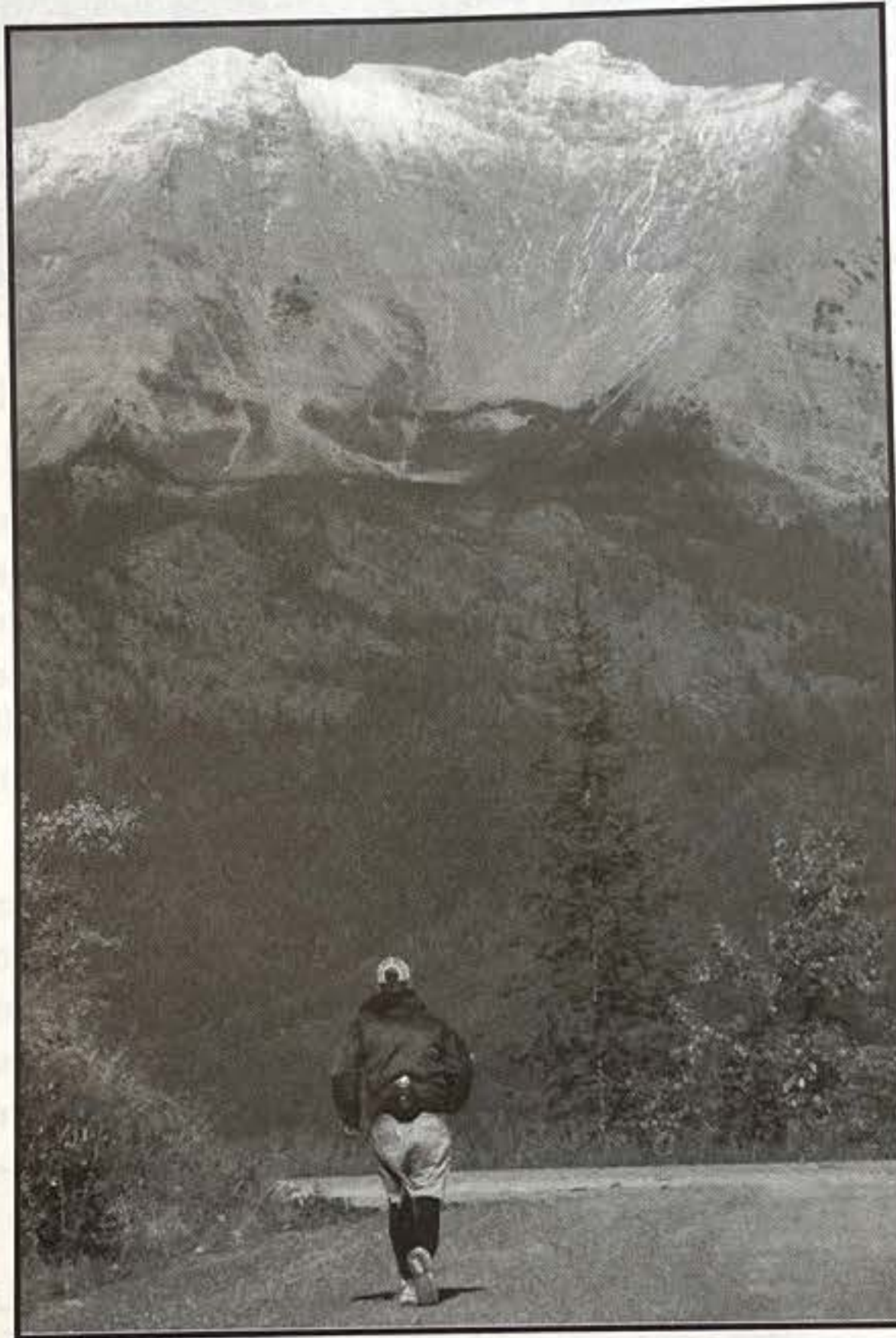
At the 28-mile mark, I joined my dad to pace and distract him from the miles ticking past. Somewhere between miles 32 and 36, Brian Christianson (running his first 50-mile race) and Brian Vandenburg (winner the last two years) were dueling it out two minutes apart. In the end, Vandenburg prevailed. For the women, Sarah Keller won with the third fastest women's master's time at Le Grizz. The four Ten Bears candidates, Ron Carey, Brooks Wade, Mary Ritz and Kathie Lang, all completed the event.

Meanwhile, dad's pace slowed a little, but we kept moving forward. As we came up to mile 46, I made a detour to the crew car. Time to dress up. What better way to say this occasion rocks than a 1980s prom dress? I pulled on my gown, and, looking like a swash of fuchsia aluminum foil, kept on running alongside my dad. Four miles to go.

Non-ultrarunners sometimes ask us why we do this. To borrow a line from Philippe Petit, the famous wire-walker, "There is no why." Doing something so physically difficult becomes a thing of beauty in itself, self-explanatory. The point is not to amaze people and the point is not even "fun." The point is to experience moments when you think, "I don't know if I can do this," and then keep pushing on.

This is exactly what Stuart White did. With a time of 9:56, he and the squeaking dino crossed the finish line for his 20th consecutive year, surrounded by family, friends and admirers. Prom dresses and rubber dinosaurs can't really do justice to such a moment. Fortunately, Pat Caffrey had made arrangements for a formal rite of passage. Maynard Kicking Woman, a Blackfoot tribal elder, confirmed the entry of Bob Feeney and my dad into the Chief Ten Bears clan, and invited everyone present to contemplate their accomplishments.

And what an accomplishment - to maintain the necessary mental determination and physical discipline for 20 years to keep coming back. In a sport defined by perseverance, it's one thing to challenge yourself to make it to the finish line—it's truly remarkable to make challenging yourself a way of life.



Shawn Otto at Great Northern - awesome Montana

PHOTO FROM BOB BUTSIC