

Kokopelli's Trail Solo Attempt

Or: Fear and Loathing in Moab - a crew-person's viewpoint and ruminations, by Ben Holmes

Many apologies to the ghost of Hunter S. Thompson. All Hunter S. Thompson "Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas" quotes or paraphrases are in red.

I like a challenge, and I like to see people work hard toward their own special challenges. For the past 11 years, I've been building a trail-running community here in the Midwest. My group, the Trail Nerds now has up to ten group runs per week, and we host 23 races, yearly. It's been my own special challenge that has had its share of a lot of work, but with its share of fun, too.

This story is about a Trail Nerd who took on a personal challenge to run the entire 140-mile length of Kokopelli's Trail; a trail consisting of single-track trail, jeep roads, some pavement, and with a lot of climbs and descents into beautiful desert canyons. At this point in his life, David Wakefield had finished only one 100-mile event, prior to taking on this endeavor. Let's get on with the story:

Denver, Thursday morning. So I rented a Jeep Liberty. "Trail Tested," the decal on the side said. (We'll see about that). Fortunately, I opted for the "I'll-be-go-to-Hell-insurance." The daily cost of such, was the same price as the daily car rental cost, itself. The man assured me that as long as I had the Jeep back to the rental agency in Denver by Monday at 11 a.m., that I could deliver a 2-foot by 2-foot cube of compressed metal, and I would be "good to go" with just a phone call and a signature to the insurance agency. (This idea somehow appealed to me, greatly). And this strategy had served me well at the Cascade Crest 100, a few years back. While I was running, my support crew had destroyed a rear quarter panel and tore the passenger side sheet metal off; and other than the check-in gal uttering multiple expletives, everything was good to go at SeaTac, the day of our return.

I drove the 300 gorgeous miles to Utah. Moab - a tourist town, but also a "great outdoors" jumping-off point. I passed by the appropriately named "Gonzo Inn." Fellow Topeka area runners, David Wakefield and Darin Schneidewind had already arrived in Moab on Tuesday. They had driven out earlier to scope-out some of the potential aid stops for Dave. You see, Mr. Wakefield was going to attempt a 140-mile solo run of Kokopelli's Trail, from Loma, Colorado, to Moab, Utah. Only three other trail-runner's (that we know of) have attempted this feat.

Flash-back six months. Our conversation went something like this, when Dave first started talking about doing Kokopelli. Me: "Sounds like big trouble. You're going to need plenty of legal advice before this thing is over. As your attorney, I advise you to take along a very fast blonde with no top. And you'll need a tough pacer that's just as crazy as you. Classic iPod loaded with 160 GB of special music. Acapulco shirts. Get the hell out of K.C. for at least 84 hours. Blows my weekend." Wakefield: "Why?" Me: "Because naturally, I'm going to have to go with you. And we're going to have to arm ourselves... to the teeth!" So Dave asked me to crew for him on his quest for semi-backwater-fame, and Darin chipped-in as his primary pacer. (The blonde was just a passing fantasy, left-in for literary effect). To round-out our expeditionary force, a Salomon team mate of Dave that lives in Arizona (Eric Bohn) and his sharp-minded (and fit) wife Janie, were to join us after the first night of the adventure.

Dave was already very “race fit” and fast, but he totally started training like a madman for this run. He got fitter than any sane 37-year-old Kansan should ever consider. David Wakefield. **One of God's own prototypes. A high-powered six-foot-two mutant of some kind never even considered for mass production. Too weird to live, and too rare to die.** And way-faster than he should be, for having the frame and underpinnings of a modern-day Sasquatch.

Darin and Dave train a lot together. And both have been on a roll for the past few years. They keep getting faster and stronger...beyond all human reasoning. **There was madness in any direction, at any hour. You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever they were doing was right, that they were winning.** Darin is also one of those "broke the mold" kind of guys. He's very unique and very tough; a masters guy that can pull-out a 3:43 win on a technically-tough 50-Kilometer course.



Darin and Dave scope-out some of Kokopelli's World.



Dave, at the start of his journey.

The first forty miles or so, Dave ran completely solo. Darin and I spent our time making sandwiches, updating Dave's progress on Facebook (while we still have cell phone coverage), and just hanging-out. By about 10 p.m., Dave is getting spooked...he's got "the fear," running by himself with half-seen predators' eyes glaring back at him, in the unforgiving L.E.D. light. Darin starts his pacing duties, and takes off with Dave. I have a crazy-ass drive on nut-cake roads, to get to the next meeting point. The boys get into a rhythm. And right after sunrise, Eric and Janie magically show up to help with the crewing and pacing duties.



Darin, waiting for signs of Dave.

Eric takes off with Dave, to pace him on a nasty little climb on a completely unsupportable 18-mile section. Janie, Darin and I get into the rented Jeep and drive to the next meeting point. But we can't get as far down the road (as Dave had estimated), to meet with them. This road would be tough enough for a Jeep Rubicon with a lift-kit, let alone for a sissy, rented Jeep Liberty. We got to within 3 miles of where he wanted us to be, but could go no further for fear of shining-up the skid-plates or high-centering or maybe even rolling the poor vehicle. By the time Eric delivered Dave to us, he was really hungry, and had run out of water, for a second time. This would not be the last time that he would run out of water.

We left Darin to pace Dave. Janie and Eric and I took-off to get supplies, and to go get their car that we'd left at another location. The road we were traveling was really rough, but worse yet: with the spectacle of holiday traffic...and with people driving cars and pulling trailers on a "jeep road from hell" that they had no sane business even being on, (using unworthy equipment). Holy crap! I hear the swish-swish noise of rapid air release on the right side of the Jeep, and then the tire deflation alarm goes off. There's no place to pull over to change it! We have to drive another two miles on the road from Hell, through multiple stream-crossings and cliff-huggings, before there was a spot wide enough to pull over. Janie and Eric and I then became a tire-changing machine that would make any NASCAR pit crew proud. What a team!



Dave and Darin had a 12-mile stretch to do. But this section was fully sun-exposed, with a six-mile climb; or more like a “sicks-mile” climb. Dave had elected not to take his water bladder device, and instead took just two hand held bottles. He was very stubborn about that. Sasquatch Logic had taken-over his brain. We had a hard time getting to them, with one wrong turn and the flat tire. When we finally did get to them, we found Dave and Darin in bad spirits. This was the fourth (and last time) that Dave would run out of water on this run. This time, he almost threw-in the towel. Thank goodness, Janie and Eric were still thinking clearly. Janie said: let's rehydrate the crap out of him, and see how he feels in a while. So, in a wind & sand storm in the middle of Nowhere, Utah, we shoved water, electrolytes, and food down his throat for some forty-odd minutes. And this was the coolest moment of the whole epic voyage; Dave says, "let's do this thing," and he starts moving again, at mile 108. This guy just doesn't give up!



Our main pacer Darin, was tired. (By the end of this he will have paced Dave for 80 miles of the run). Eric and Janie had been pacing and crewing for Dave also, but they were hungry; hungry for more than just PB & J sandwiches or some of the other stuff we'd been fixing for Dave on this run. And our water, gas and supplies were running out. So, Darin and I decided to drive the two-hour round trip to Moab, and get what we needed. We left Eric and Janie to take care of Dave. Damn I was tired. And Darin couldn't nap while I drove, for fear of me falling asleep. **My vibrations were getting nasty. But why? Was**

there no communication in this car? Had we deteriorated to the level of dumb beasts? Darin to me: "As your attorney, I advise you to drive at top speed...it'll be a damn miracle if we can get there before you turn into a wild animal." The possibility of physical and mental collapse is now very real. No sympathy for the Devil. Keep that in mind. Buy the ticket, take the ride.

We reach Moab, fill up at a gas station, and go to the grocery store. Some local-yokel says, "you can't park your car here." Me: Why not? Is this not a reasonable place to park? "Reasonable? You're on a sidewalk! This is the sidewalk! He adds, "and what are you looking at?" Darin interjects: "It's okay. Ben's just admiring the shape of your skull."

The grocery store is busier than hell on this Memorial Day weekend. Who are all these people? These faces? Where did they come from? They look like caricatures of used car dealers from Dallas, and sweet Jesus, there are a hell of a lot of them at 7 p.m. on a Saturday evening. All on holiday, and still humping the American dream. Bad waves of paranoia, madness, fear and loathing - intolerable vibrations in this place. Get out. The weasels were closing in. I could smell the ugly brutes. "I hate to say this, but this place is getting to me. I think I'm getting the Fear." Darin and I both forgot why we are there. We left with just four sandwiches and a few jugs of water. Whatever. We were out of it. And out of there. Thank goodness!

We get back to find Janie and Eric taking turns driving while pacing Dave on a road section of the trail. We give Janie and Eric all four of the sandwiches, since they haven't eaten for about 20 hours. I drove ahead to the viewpoint trailhead, to park and try to wait for them and to desperately try to sleep for an hour. I couldn't sleep. The wind noise and the heebie-jeebies have got a hold of me, bad. Panic. It crept up my spine like first rising vibes of a psychotic frenzy. All these horrible realities began to dawn on me. There I was. Alone in Utah, completely twisted on sleep deprivation, driving on sick outback roads, (with thousand-foot drop-offs and no guardrails); and driving on a "temporary" donut tire. And on top of everything else, I was starting to hallucinate, and see weird things out of the corner of my eyes. How would David Horton handle this situation? Stay calm. Stay calm. You better take care of me, Lord. If you don't, you're gonna have me on your hands.

Dave was having his own mind issues. Dave, hallucinating at mile 131: "Darin, do you see all of these spiders, man? I've been seeing them for a while...tarantulas! I think I need to smash them!" Darin: "Those aren't spiders; they're just drops of water from my bottle that have dripped-out, onto the dirt." Dave: "Nope, they're tarantulas; I need to stop and smash them!" Darin: "What? No. It isn't the damn tarantulas! We can't stop here. This is bat country. Get a hold of yourself, man! Just point yourself down the frigging hill and walk! If you stop now, you'll attract the spiders' attention. You know that they go for the eyes, don't you?" Dave didn't argue, and kept shuffling along. Darin, (to himself): no point in mentioning these bats. Poor bastard will see them soon enough!

The rest of their conversation went something like this - Wakefield: "There's a uh, big machine in the sky, some kind of, I dunno, electric snake, coming straight at us." Darin: "Shoot it." Wakefield: "Not yet; I want to study its habits."

Eric and Janie and I kept playing leap-frog on the jeep trail for the last 8 miles. We'd drive to the next mile marker and wait for Darin and Dave, and check to see if either one needed anything. It was at this point that I noticed how beautiful the sky was, without the light-pollution of a large city. You could see the whole arc of the Milky Way galaxy, above. To the East (behind Dave), you could see a crescent moon rising with Venus. I mentioned this to Dave at one point, and all that came out of his mouth was unintelligible gibberish; you know, the first language of choice for a very tired, very sore, full-grown Sasquatch.

Dave finishes officially right before sun-up, with the crescent moon and Venus behind him. Being upright for 35 hours hasn't prepared him for the excruciating pain of trying to bend his Sasquatch body in half, to get into a car seat. We drive him back to the campground and jam him into his tent. He's out within 3 seconds.

Sleep in? Forget it! Three hours of sleep with a tent flapping in a 40-MPH wind, and Darin and I are up and at 'em, and in critical need of a shower. The sandblasting we were getting at the campsite just wasn't cutting the greasy stink off of our bodies. I say: "You drive. You drive. I think there's something wrong with me." We head to the local hostel, for our desperate date with near-cleanliness. Hippy proprietor: "It'll be three bucks each," and (smelling us from behind the counter), "I guarantee you'll really dig it." Darin and I were still out of it. Me: "Let me tell you, he was lying to us! I could see it in his eyes." Darin: "Eyes?"

We get back to the campsite, in a less-greasy and much better mood. Dave is up and about, and downright cheery, but not walking too well, that's for sure. We all pack-up, and say our goodbyes. It was definitely an epic trip to remember, for sure. After what we'd been through, I had no qualms about driving alone 300 miles with a donut tire, (with just three hours sleep). Piece of cake! I stayed in Longmont that night, within a stone's throw of Oscar Blues Brewing. I walked to Oscar's, and had an ODB Barleywine (or two). How appropriate...a Wu Tang reference. Yep: the Trail Nerds' Clan ain't nothin' to mess with!

Post Script:

I was thoroughly impressed by the mental toughness of Dave, throughout the entire adventure. And Darin was unbelievable as a hard-as-a-whore's-heart pacer. We had some bad luck in a few spots, mainly brought on by sleep-deprived poor decision making. And during a few really tough times, Eric and Janie were the "cogs of reason," when our "brain gears" had slipped and ground to dust. Throughout the whole experience, we stayed a cohesive team and we got through it!

Happy trails,

Bad Ben Holmes