

# Defying Death Valley

by CHRIS BALLARD

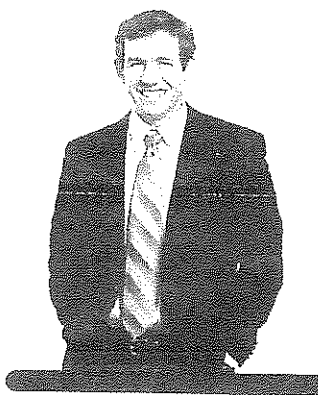
**I**t's been a month now, and the top of Arthur Webb's right big toe remains a sunken rectangle of pale, wrinkled skin. Not that he's upset, considering that Webb is the one who yanked the toenail off with a pair of pliers in the first place. It's something he does to both big toes every year, just after he squeezes his feet into a pair of too-small shoes and runs 15 miles to loosen the nails. Otherwise, they tend to crack and bleed as the toes swell like tiny, overinflated balloons during the Badwater Ultramarathon, the grueling 135-mile race through Death Valley that Webb has run for the past 12 summers.

Think of Badwater as five consecutive marathons, only they're uphill (from 280 feet below sea level to 8,360 feet above), held inside a blast furnace (the temperature hovers at 115°—and that's at night) and capable of frying runners' brains like a fistful of peyote (intense hallucinations from sleep deprivation are part of the event's charm). During the day it's 130° of shadeless hell, the heat mirage so thick that runners appear to be churning through a wall of water. Shoes actually melt, the soles disengaging like skin shed by small synthetic animals. The race is invitation-only and famously humbling, which makes Webb something of a legend. He has run the second-most Badwaters ever, finishing as high as fourth (in just under 34 hours), and he consistently "buckles," earning a coveted Badwater belt buckle by breaking 48 hours. And, oh, yeah, Webb is 67 years old.

Sixty-seven. That's a year older than Joe Biden. Webb has two grown children, has been married 41 years and recently retired after 30 years as a postal service electrician in Santa Rosa, Calif. Yet he still runs 15 to 20 miles every day for 10 months of the year. To acclimatize for Badwater, he sits in a 170° sauna for an hour at a time—that is, when he's not running in it. And come race time he endures stress fractures and vomiting; once, he briefly lost both consciousness and an active pulse. Some golden years, huh?

But to Webb, this is the joy of retirement. He doesn't run for fame or money—good thing, as he gets neither. Nor is he some narcissistic fanatic. He has never let running come before family; if midnight was the only time he could train, he ran in the dark, then woke at dawn with the kids.

The way Webb sees it, running is never hard. Hard is having your father bail on the family, forcing your mother to work two jobs to support five kids. Hard is moving a dozen times before ending up in a foster home when your mom can't carry on. By 13, Webb was working full time as a busboy. Still,



**Arthur Webb has run in 12 straight Badwater Ultramarathons, during which shoes can actually melt, the soles disengaging like skin shed by small animals.**

he graduated from Cal State–Northridge and made a life for himself, discovering running at 35. So you believe him when he says he hates excuses. "The minute you lean on an excuse, you slide backward," he says. "You made the commitment, so whatever you do, you're morally obligated to follow that commitment. If you don't, what's the purpose?"

Each year Webb dedicates his race to the Valley of the Moon Children's Home in Santa Rosa, which cares for kids from dysfunctional families. He visits regularly, preaching self-reliance without self-pity. "You know that story about the engine—I think I can?" says Webb. "I take the *think* out. My thing is, 'Yes I can, yes I can.'" Last year a boy came up to Webb after one of his presentations. "You know what," the boy said, "I've now run twice."

"Good for you," replied Webb, beaming. "No, I've run away from this facility twice," the boy said. "But because of you I'm going to stick it out." As he retells the story, Webb's blue eyes, set deep into a creased face, go watery.

The chance to inspire others is, he says, why he is so fanatical about finishing every race he starts. But what happens when his body doesn't hold up its end of the bargain? This year at Badwater, Webb felt "wrong" and broke down at mile 17. He was rushed to a medical station. You are 67 years old, the doctor reminded him. Your fluids are imbalanced, and you need to rest. So Webb did, for nearly nine hours. Then, still woozy, he asked his wife, Christine, to drive him back to where he'd stopped.

The road was searingly hot and pitch dark. The pack was a good half-day ahead. Hot winds whipped Webb's legs. He felt like collapsing again. Finishing would be a Herculean task; buckling seemed out of the question. Still, Webb stuck in his earphones, pumped up Led Zeppelin and began again. Usually, competitors alternate between running and walking; by mile 55, Webb realized he needed to run nearly the rest of the route, much of it uphill, to have a shot at buckling. So he ran. Through day and night. Up the side of Mount Whitney. He even clocked a couple of seven-minute miles. And then, finally, the small man with the gray hair and the herky-jerky stride—"a giddyup," as Badwater vet Chris Frost affectionately calls it—hobbled over the finish line. The clock said 46 hours and 35 minutes. Webb had buckled, barely. That night at the awards ceremony he received a standing ovation from the other competitors. Think about that when you're feeling too lazy to go to the gym.

Next year Webb will be back, and he plans on running Badwater until he can't. "People say, 'What if you die out there?'" he says. "And I say, 'So what? I gotta go sometime, right?' After all, I'd rather die living than live dying." □

## Talk Back

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