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Sports

Print Page

Quitting is not an option

Marathons are a piece of cake for Bill Bradley Jr., who keeps seeking longer and more grueling endurance races.

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Until last weekend, the last time Bill Bradley Jr. was in Alaska, he was on a cruise.

"It was a long time ago," Bradley said earlier this week. "It was kind of an eat-a-thon. When we came up it was late September; it was rainy and cold; we didn't even go outside much so it was like — lots of bingo. I haven't played bingo since.

"I'm not really a cruise guy. I'm more of an active guy."

That's an understatement for Bradley, an endurance runner who has entered races that make marathons look like short-distance sprints. The race he's training for now is what brought him to Alaska: a 100-mile race in the wilderness surrounding Anchorage, to be held Feb. 16. Last weekend, Bradley made his first training run.

"It was pretty wild; I learned a lot, man," said Bradley, who towed 30 pounds worth of camping equipment in a sled behind him as he ran. "The temperature, when it gets into the low 20's, the snow becomes very soft. It took me five hours to run 13 miles!"

That's not fast enough for Bradley, who is determined to spend his next trip to Alaska running 100 miles in those same conditions in under 48 hours. It is the type of thing that most people would never attempt. But as Bradley has spent the last year proving — he is not most people.

During the summer, he attempted his first 100-mile race and, failing at his first attempt (after running for 60-plus miles near Squaw Valley), he succeeded in his second 100-miler near Marin Headlands.

Next came Furnace Creek — a 508-mile bike ride around Hawaii's Big Island that Bradley finished in just over 46 hours. After that came the Ultraman Triathlon, a race truly made for endurance enthusiasts like Bradley.

Those who've known him for a long time, like his younger sister Leslie Murphy, are not entirely surprised at the direction Bradley's life has taken. Looking back, Murphy can see the seeds of what has become Bradley's passion.

"He's always been an athlete," said Murphy, now the CEO of Novato-based Bradley Electric. "He fit into that role very well in high school, and he still has a lot of friends from that. And he has a lot of passion; whenever he tried anything, he would always go to the extreme in that."

During his 47 years, Bradley has found all sorts of passions to get lost in. Nearly 20 years ago, it was drinking that he did to an extreme. Soon he found healthier passions to pour himself into — business, for one. For a decade, he grew a chain of independent video stores, winning a Retailer of the Year recognition in 2001.

“I remember him deciding he was going to bowl,” Murphy said. “He got lessons from a professional bowler, and tried to be a professional bowler.”

“It doesn’t matter what I do,” Bradley said. “If I like it, I’m going to do it to excess.”

Long-distance running has always appealed to Bradley; he has been doing marathons and triathlons for over a decade. But when his video store business failed, Bradley found that he could run races that gave new definition to the term “long-distance.”

“I had done seven Ironmans and lots of half-ironmans,” Bradley said. (An Ironman is a triathlon composed of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride and a 26.2-mile run.) “Literally I felt in a rut with that. When you do something epic, it’s usually your first time doing it. When I ran my first half-Ironman, I was crying coming down to the finish.”

Around three years ago, around the same time that his business was failing, Bradley read Dean Karnazes’ book *Ultra-Marathon Man*. The book changed Bradley’s outlook.

“When I did stuff before, literally people thought I was crazy,” Bradley said. “Now, since that book came out, it’s cool to be crazy.”

Bradley has set out to follow in Karnazes’ many footsteps. Karnazes has earned a measure of fame for his endurance exploits — and Bradley’s itinerary for the upcoming year includes many of the endurance races that Karnazes has already run.

After the 100-mile race in Alaska, Bradley is set to run the 200-mile Providian Relay from Calistoga to Santa Cruz in April. Most run the 200-mile race as part of a relay team, but Karnazes has famously run it solo several times, and Bradley would like to duplicate that feat.

Then in June, Bradley hopes to enter the Race Across America (RAAM) — a bike race which, as the name suggests, starts on one side of America (Oceanside, Calif.) and ends on the other (at the Boardwalk in Atlantic City, N.J.).

And if all goes well, the RAAM would be followed by the Badwater Ultramarathon — a 135-mile run through Death Valley in the middle of July (with temperatures sometimes reaching 120 Fahrenheit) that starts at sea level and ends up by Mt. Whitney at 8,000 feet.

The thought of all these races sounds like too much for one person to handle. But that is, in part, what makes them so appealing to Bradley.

“In all my past races I’ve had crews,” said Bradley, his mind now focused on the Alaska race. “This is unsupported; this will be the first time I haven’t had a crew following me in a van, giving me food and water.

“But that’s when I know it’s going to be epic — it’s the unknown. When you don’t know if you’re going to make it. Then when you do, you’re on the top (of all your troubles.)”

At the events Bradley races in, there are others who share his determination to push their bodies to the limit. But even among endurance athletes, Bradley is unusual. When he biked the Furnace Creek 508, he made quite an impression on Ruben Flores — an endurance-

runner in his own right who served on Bradley's crew.

"He's not like any other endurance athlete I've ever met," Flores said. "Most endurance athletes are extremely detailed, all the way down to what toothpicks they used. Bill was the exact opposite. His plan was: 'Show up, and give it all you've got.'"

"The other guys on the crew had these Excel spreadsheets ready to chart his fuel intake and his water. They said, 'Let us have your plan so we can keep track.' He said, 'I don't have a plan.'"

Perhaps if Bradley stopped to make a detailed plan, he might stop and realize what he's getting himself into. He seems to prefer to approach each race with a bit of spontaneity — like the time he ran a 50-mile race on one day's notice.

That urge to try new things, to try something without knowing he will succeed, helps explain the schedule he has created for himself this year.

"When you hear of his schedule, there's no way anybody would want to try to do all of these in the same year," Flores said. "People take five years to get ready for (races like the Furnace Creek 508). He's like, 'Well I heard about this guy doing it, so I thought I'd give it a try.'"

In that respect, Bradley is the opposite of almost every other endurance athlete. On the other hand, in his positive attitude, he is exactly like other endurance athletes.

"I always try to keep saying positive stuff in my head," Bradley said. "You cannot afford to have a negative thought."

So Bradley overcomes adversity. During the night, between 3 and 6 in the morning, his mind drifts toward sleep — according to Flores, at two different times during the Furnace Creek 508, he fell asleep while riding the bike. "His eyes were open, and he was going straight, but he was asleep on the bike."

He overcomes mechanical failures — a broken pedal during the Ultraman Championships didn't stop him, and he rode the final 13 miles on a single pedal.

He hopes that what he does can be an inspiration to others — that he might inspire others to do whatever it is that they find epic in their lives. He has no plans of stopping, of slowing down — his vision of retirement would involve, he says, a lot of mountain-climbing.

"Quitting is not an option," he said. "Period. If quitting is not an option, in the back of your mind, that's one less decision you have to make out there."



MARK DITTMER/ADVANCE When he's not in his running shoes, Bill Bradley Jr. works on business development for his family's company, Bradley Electric. But his mind never strays far from his passion ...#8221; the search for epic athletic achievement.