

Organ Pipe Failure... November, 2013



There is an extraordinary 21 mile loop at Organ Pipe that takes you, via a twining and rolling unimproved dirt road, out into the backcountry. Beginning just across from the Visitors' Center, it travels through and around a windswept swath of the Sonoran desert, rising above a huge wash and past the foothills the demarcate the west end of the O'Odham reservation, and is overseen by an army of saguaros and yuccas and chollas, as well as the namesake cactus of the park.

Val and I drove it one day with the girls, and the day after The Hippo arrived I figured it would be a hell of a run and decided I'd go ahead and try it. While not exactly trained up for what would more or less be a marathon distance run (factoring in the condition of the road I guessed it would take me between three and four hours) I was rested, felt pretty strong, and drew the basic conclusion for myself that if I had an Ironman in my legs, I could certainly tackle a lap of the desert.

The wind was singing before the sun even rose the next morning, and while the thermometer was somewhere between 35 and 40 degrees it felt colder. No matter, I ate two huge bowls of oatmeal and, over coffee, laid out my plans and my gear.

Val, The Hippo and the girls would drive the loop ahead of me, have lunch about 13 miles in at a trailhead, and then go for a hike for maybe a couple hours.

That would give me enough time to catch and pass them, and I would place a couple of stones on the hood of the truck to let them know I had been through. Done with their hike, they'd then drive the balance of the loop and meet me back at the Visitors Center if I beat them, and if not, I joked they could pick me up off the road and take me to the nearest hospital. Practically, it meant I would have a sweep vehicle coming up behind me if I really got into trouble.

The sun came up strong and the wind, which had typically been dying off toward midday, only increased in intensity, migrating from simple gusts to a steady force,

humming through the needles of the cactus and hissing past the leaves of the creosote and the palo verdes. Sheltered from the wind, and standing in sunlight, the temperature was probably sixty degrees. Add the wind, and it was easily below 40. A funny set of conditions.

Still, I filled my reservoir with 100 ounces of water, took four salt capsules and six Gu shots, enough to take calories on board every half hour and what should have been enough water to last for the entire adventure. I wore a windproof cycling hoodie, tights, took a hat, a wool cap, and stuffed a backup windbreaker into my pack and snugged down the laces of my trail shoes.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Val asked me as we both shrank from the cold wind at the front door of the Visitor’s Center.

“Well, no, but I’ll be fine. Plus, you guys will have to drive past me regardless so even if things go sideways you’ll be able to pick me up on the road.”

With that, I hit the start button on my watch and began running up the road, getting used to the loose gravel scree pulling my feet in all different directions every time I landed a step, and frankly enjoying the horrified look of the very occasional park visitors as they passed me in their warm, safe, vehicles.

Maybe two or three miles in Red Beauty passed me, the girls hanging out the window to shout encouragement, and then I was back to the very complete solitude of my run.

The trail ran slightly uphill along a huge wash toward the foothills, and I settled into what I felt was a good pace. Because of the unseasonal cold, the challenge was to continue to move at a rate that kept my body temperature up, as I realized quite early on the issue I would have out here was hypothermia. If I were to slow down, the piercing wind would transport so much heat away from my body that it would be difficult to recover, and I refused to let myself become one of those people who foolishly fail to take the complex environmental challenge of the desert into account.

The trail steepened, and I labored slowly up hills, only to crest and drop into washes and arroyos strewn with branches and gravel, and I paid extremely careful attention to my watch. Every ten minutes, I drank four to eight sips of water. Every thirty minutes, I took on calories. Every forty five minutes, I took a salt capsule.

The wind was sometimes strong enough to buffet me on exposed ridges, and I had to focus intently on my path. While I was on a roadway, the looseness of the surface and the hundreds of odd-sized rocks threatened a turned ankle, which would have quickly become a catastrophic injury. Virtually no one was on this loop, and other than Red Beauty, only a single black pickup truck passed me as I moved deeper into the park.

12 miles in, I saw the Toyota parked at the appointed trail head. My legs had taken a measurable pounding on this front half, and having to work up and through a steep pass had taken more energy from me than I had expected.

I did not allow myself to be worried or doubt the outcome, the finish line at the Visitor's Center, but I acknowledged to myself that what was originally conceived of as an enjoyable challenge had now become very serious in nature, and that a lapse in judgement or concentration had every possibility of visiting great harm upon me.

There was no sign of the girls or The Hippo at the truck, and I figured that they were off on their hike. I placed two smallish stones on the mirror. I also saw that the trail lights were on, so drew "Lights On!!" in the sand at the driver's side door to alert them when they returned. I had wired these lights, the big Hellas, to the auxiliary battery, so there was no real danger of the truck not starting, but it served to remind me of all the little things that go wrong that, when aggregated, can throw even a day hike off course.

I ran on, leaving the truck behind me and candidly wishing that I had seen Val there, as I would have called it a day.

As it was, I was tired, and the crushing combination of the high, drying sun and the icy, driving winds had me immediately recalibrate my sense of urgency about completing this run.

The dozens of small, nameless muscles that serve to stabilize one up and down the legs began to fatigue, making it even harder for me to keep my balance and pick my way through the rocks.

I kept returning to my watch, deeply concerned that I not miss a drink, or a nutrition break, or a salt pill.

I kept moving, and thirteen, fourteen, fifteen miles passed and while I was moving at my proscribed, very measured pace, I began to feel a slight chill.

I tried to slightly increase my pace, but by mile seventeen the big muscles in my quads and calves began to tremble and twitch, signaling to me potential cramps that I simply could not afford to have.

Still moving, I pulled my pack off and put on my extra jacket, pulled my wool hat on, and moved forward, keeping cadence by chanting "do not stop... do not stop... do not stop" over and over knowing that if I gave this wind an opportunity, it would plant the insidious seeds of a cold that would spread, inexorably, through me.

"Are you scared?" I asked myself at mile 18, my legs starting to give way.

"No" I told myself, firmly.

I stopped running and began to walk, the Angry Man Walk as described to me by Z-Man, head down and pumping my arms furiously to keep generating heat and to keep whittling down the distance between myself and safety.

I listened, my head cocked and ears desperately hoping to catch the sound of the truck coming up to me, but each time I looked back over my shoulder all there was to see was desert, mountains, and a million nameless and barbed plants that could offer me no solace or safety or shelter.

By mile 19 I was walking with a slightly drunk gait, unable to land properly on my feet, which had been pounded into a constant ache by the terrain. I had at least half an hour between me and the visitors center, and I began to worry that I had not seen Val yet, wondering if there was some problem with the truck.

“Do not stop.”

I was cold, and in pain, and, finally, sacred.

“All right. Let’s get going, Ironman.”

I kept saying it to myself, desperate to get to shelter, and when I went to take a drink after another ten minute stretch of road my mouth came away dry. No more water.

Last resort. I pulled a lollipop I had cadged from one of the girls from my backpack, and kept moving.

Maybe a mile from the end of the path I heard the crunch and hum of a vehicle on the wind, and turned, and in the distance behind me saw the truck.

I spun and waved my arms frantically, and The Hippo pulled to one side and the girls threw the doors open and I quite nearly vaulted into the back, my eyes rolling back into my head and I gasped that I was fine.

I begged them to get me to the Visitor’s Center, and we were there in minutes, and The Hippo and Val had to carry me, one on each side, through the doors.

I collapsed onto a bench, and Val looked at me in concern and brought me water and I lay back, eyes closed, trying to control my breathing and doing what I could to answer Val’s very basic questions - Was I OK? Could she get me something?

I announced that I wanted to get back into the truck and we could go see if the showers were hot at the developed campground in the park, but the twenty yard walk through the parking lot was too ambitious.

As I climbed into the passenger seat, both legs cramped badly, and I staggered out of the truck again to try to release them. The Hippo ran to help me, and began to walk me back to the visitor's center.

I actually didn't make it, collapsing at the doors into his arms as Val ran inside to get help.

I came to on the ground, confused about what had happened, and The Hippo and a collection of rangers got me back to the bench where I immediately lay flat on my back.

I was wrapped in a blanket, one of the rangers went to make me a hot cup of coffee, and after a small bite of food actually began to feel dramatically better.



The EMT showed up,

As I lay on the bench, properly recovering from the effort and the stress of my run, Val leaned over me and said something that made me smile.

“First of all, no more of this shit from you. Understood? Second, and you’ll love this, sweetie, but when I ran in here to get help you know what the rangers said on the phone to the EMT?”

“No - what?”

“Male, 30s, in possible distress.”

I smiled.

“Great news... even on the brink of collapse, I still look good.”

“Well” corrected Val, “to be clear you *do not* look good, but at least you don’t look forty three.”

And Val and the Hippo took me back to our tent, and fed me, and I curled into my sleeping bag and fell blissfully asleep, cradled in the arms of the same desert that would have just as happily killed me not a handful of hours before.