

## Claude Hicks pushes the boundaries in ultras

By Fiona Green

When I was a student I once danced for 24 hours to raise money for charity. When I say dance, I use the term loosely as I possess neither rhythm nor style, but I do like to move to music. The fact that I was wearing a furry pink panther suit made the task a little more

challenging, but I digress. Dancing badly for 24 hours is one thing. Running for 24 hours is a completely different ball game. Yet, a few runners like Claude Hicks of Fort Worth take it in their stride.

Claude's race schedule last month was as follows :

February 7-- Rocky Raccoon, Huntsville State Park 100-miler 22 hours, 25 minutes.

February 14 -- Surfside Beach Marathon, 4:05.

February 21-- Iron Horse Rails to Trails, Florida, 100-miler 23 hours, 4 minutes.

February 28 -- Cowtown Ultra - 50k 5:11.



Claude Hicks, moments before he broke some teeth by eating a raw potato, one of the different types of food that might be served at ultra events.

Let's take a moment to grasp just how far 100 miles really is. 100 miles is 32 times a 5K. It's more than 4 marathons back-to-back. It's like running from downtown Fort Worth to Waco and beyond....

It's hard to believe anyone could run such a distance and finish, smiling and looking forward to the next challenge. Experts provide suggested guidelines concerning post-marathon rest periods. After a 100-mile ultra, you'd reckon you might be entitled to a month or two off, but regular as clockwork Claude will lace up his shoes the next day and head out the door for an easy 6-10 miles because it just feels right.

Talking to Claude about running is fascinating. For him, life is a running adventure and running is an addiction. Despite his obvious talent and accomplishments, he is extremely modest and down to earth. At 49, Claude, who has his own landscaping business, doesn't have an ounce of fat on his body. He is lean and muscular and one of the few guys who can get away with wearing colorful Spandex. When asked about the feelings he experiences when he crosses the finish line, he has one word -- amazement. He never ceases to be amazed at what the body can do. While many people today barely make the effort to walk to their mail box, he enjoys constantly pushing the envelope, testing himself to the limit. In January this year (2009), he covered 250 miles, in February -- 300.

Claude's first race was the Disneyland half marathon in 2004, which he ran with his mother. The experience was so enjoyable that he entered the Cowtown full marathon a month later. After that, he was hooked. In October last year (2008), when he ran the Louisville Kentucky Marathon, he achieved his goal of running a marathon in every state. The event also marked his 100th marathon.

He then decided to embrace the challenge of the Ultra. In a race of 50 or 100 miles, he explained, he is not concerned with time or age group placing (he is in the highly competitive 45 - 49 age group). His goal is simply to finish, but along the way he takes time to enjoy the whole experience, everything from the anticipation at the start to conversations with fellow runners on the course to the camaraderie

and celebrations following the event. He has made some great friends along the way, like Jim, a lawyer from Florida with whom he has now run over 25 races. As well as their mutual love of running, the two often share hotel expenses and transportation costs.

While most of us are familiar with what is needed mentally and physically to run a 5K or a 10K, we can't help but wonder what qualities someone needs to possess to be able to run 100 miles. Clearly, Claude has endurance, patience and determination. He will not give up. If he has paid his entry fee to run 100 miles, he will run 100 miles, no matter what! Maintaining a positive attitude is a key factor in ultra running. Inevitably during the course of a 100-miler, he will meet runners complaining about how awful they feel because of blisters, stomach cramps, hypothermia, sunstroke, broken toes etc (It all sounds so appealing -- where can I sign up?) Claude prefers to think positive. "We all have blisters and some degree of discomfort; that's to be expected," he says. He tries to forget the soreness and focus instead on the joy of being out there, broken teeth and all.

When covering such long distances, proper nutrition is obviously very important leading up to, during and after the event. 'Ultra fare' is somewhat different from the refreshments offered at standard races, and gels, orange slices and energy bars may be replaced by peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, boiled potatoes (or raw in some cases), hot dogs or apple pie. Of course, not all runners can digest such elaborate foods and many races will offer an area along the course where runners can drop off a bag with their own food. It is a matter of knowing what your stomach can handle and sticking to it. (Claude is pictured just before breaking teeth by eating a raw potato at the Run With The Devil 50-miler near Las Vegas in 2008).

Pacing in an ultra is very important. There is absolutely no sense in starting out at breakneck speed with so many miles to cover, and Claude prides himself on his ability to pick up the pace in the final stages of a race. While he acknowledges that some may say he is not giving his best effort, his philosophy is that he is not "in it to win it" but simply to finish. He admits that running in the dark can be tricky and will often necessitate a change of pace with walking breaks to ensure safety over the uneven terrain. He does still have a competitive streak, though, and proudly boasts that in the final 6 miles of the Houston marathon this year (2009), he managed to pass 889 runners.

For Claude, the toughest part of ultra running is the time involved. As he stands at the starting line, he can't help but think that at the same time the next day, he may still be running. He also realizes that during that time, he could have done the weekly shopping, had lunch, cleaned the house, mowed the lawn, seen a movie, had dinner and caught 8 hours of sleep. While time is not the focus for most ultra runners, a goal for many is to cover 100 miles in under 24 hours. Claude has two special belt buckles to show for his efforts in reaching that goal.

After speaking in depth to Ultra Man, his motivation is clear -- he simply loves to run. Running agrees with him. The more he runs the easier it becomes. As a bonus, he has noticed that since he started competing in ultras, his road races have been getting faster. On January 3rd this year (2009), he set a marathon PR of 3:43 on a hilly Mississippi course. Not bad, considering that earlier that week he had run a 50K in Indiana and a marathon in Kingwood, Texas.

Claude's wife, Debbie, is his biggest fan and his faithful support crew. She has also become a valuable volunteer at many of the races, so much so that some organizers will now invite Claude to participate and ask if Debbie might also be able to attend.

Now, that he has run a marathon in every state Claude's next goal is to run an ultra in every state. He would also love to take part in the Badwater Ultra in Death Valley, a race where it is so hot that runners are asked to run along a white line in the middle of the road so their shoes won't melt!

Following in the footsteps of Forrest Gump, his dream is to run across the States, and he estimates that he could probably do so within 6 months by running approximately 40 miles a day. He wouldn't do it for publicity or any specific organization, but just because