

Ouelessebougou - Not Your Parent's Utah

by John Farrow

People up in Utah have a thing about mountains: they like to get to the bottom of them as quickly as possible. In the winter, they ski down them. In the summer, they run down them. Frankly, I like that. To paraphrase Will Rogers, I never looked down a mountain I didn't like.

Recently I found myself in Salt Lake City for what a friend said was a fast race. As I have never had a particularly fast race in the mountains, part of me was initially skeptical, suspecting a Commie plot to promote a race up the Wasatch Range, instead.

But no, boys and girls, make no mistake about it - if you want a fast race, this is the place (to paraphrase somebody else). In fact, this is one race that will make your fast-twitch fibers think they have died and gone to heaven. Mine did - literally.

The Big O, they call it. *Cool*, I thought. *I'll get my tires rotated while I'm at it.*

Wrong. The "O" stands for Ouelessebougou, Utah's sister city in Mali, West Africa. The race raises money for educational programs in that Saharan Desert country, one of the poorest in Africa. Mali is also where Timbuktu is. In other words, way out there.

Then throw in the first tornado ever recorded in the city and this was shaping up as a very interesting weekend indeed. Driving through downtown, the Delta Center looked as if its plexiglass exterior had been used by the entire NBA as a practice board for a Monster Dunk contest. Broken and twisted trees were everywhere with radio and TV antennas all bent in the direction of the storm. *I don't know, Toto. This doesn't look like Kansas anymore.*

Good thing I had my Swiss Army knife with me. Perhaps this was all part of a new "Adventure Race" experience. It really would not have been a surprise to encounter wild dancing around a bonfire at the race packet pick-up.

At the start, I asked about the course. *Well, once you make a big left turn, you can almost see the finish line down below*, my friend said, adding almost apologetically, *but the first part is a bit uphill.*

Uphill?

Yes, right up there. She pointed to the far edge of the parking lot where it rose a few feet to the street. I felt I could handle that.

Once under way, the first half-mile of the race was gently rolling. Then runners began peeling off down the street to the left. In a moment I saw what she meant. Soon I too was screaming down what in the wintertime would be a double black diamond trail, wind whistling past my ears, arms pumping furiously to keep up with my feet. They say that 90 strides a minute is the most efficient for racing, but I was surely close to twice that as I blasted through the first mile in a time I hadn't seen in years.

Soon we slalomed down a side street for a brief respite of relatively flat running. My hamstrings

regrouped for another downward tear, the finish line still far below.

Here it came and the only thing to do was hang on and enjoy the ride. After a while the course began leveling out, but by then the second mile had passed even faster than the first. Now came the hard part. I hadn't run this fast in years and I was out of gas. Plus, my hamstrings were questioning my sanity and threatening bodily harm as I trudged to the finish. No PR but this is a race to get back in shape for.

We're all meeting at the Red Rock for dinner. Want to come? It's a brew pub.

Excuse me?

A brew pub. We have them now. And no membership fee.

The Red Rock Brewing Company seems to roster be the unofficial home of the SLC Track Club with great food and pitchers of excellent, locally-brewed beer. *I don't know, Toto. This doesn't look like Utah anymore.*□

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Albuquerque Road Runners Club