

UR Interview: Jim O'Brien

by Larry Gassan

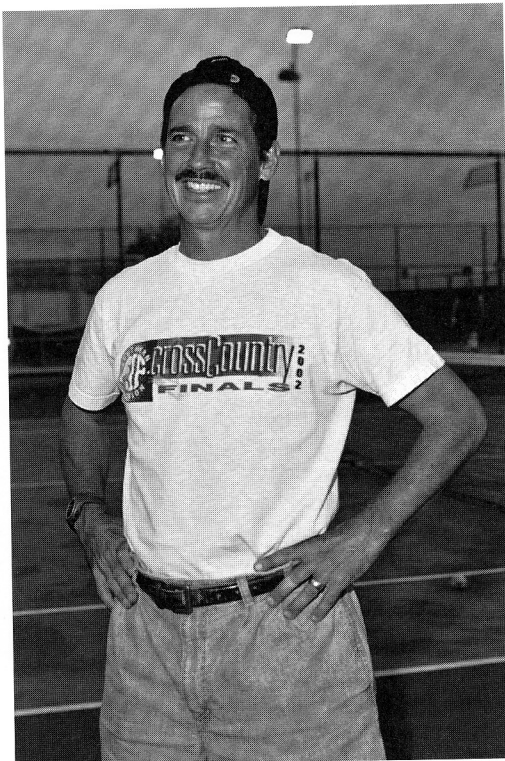
Jim O'Brien, coach, ultra legend, and unrivalled Angeles Crest 100 Mile record holder, announced his retirement from private coaching in September. Jim cited professional and family reasons for disbanding his Team Blarney, which was synonymous with running achievement here in southern California. There just wasn't enough time in the day, however. In addition, Jim's daughter Erin is now 10, and time is always short.

While coaching track at Arcadia High School with 85 runners, Jim also works at Pasadena City College, where he coaches track, cross-country and teaches physical education classes. At Team Blarney, Jim coached a spectrum of runners and distances at his memorable Monday (and then Tuesday) night workouts. His team included speedy 10-km runners as well as those training for 100-milers, and included runners from their late teens to 60s.

Jim brought a high level of ethics and honesty to his craft. That alone would make him a standout. But his athletic accomplishments backed it up. His 17:35:48 Angeles Crest 100 Mile record from 1989 is the benchmark that all of us have measured ourselves against. And that was when the course was almost two full miles longer than it is now. At Leadville in 1989, his epic surges up Hope Pass on the way to Winfield left four-time winner Skip Hamilton behind on the way to a course record that stood for five years, until Juan Herrera took it in 1994. To flesh out some of these details, I caught up with Jim on a recent Tuesday night at Pasadena City College, while he was putting the hurt on his tennis class.

How did you initially get into ultrarunning?

I was in San Diego in the late 1970s and early 1980s, pursuing a degree in physical education at San Diego State University. At that time I was into road racing. I'd heard about a "run across America." Unlike a stage race, it was first to the finish. It got me thinking, and there was a year's leeway to prepare for the event. However it later got cancelled due to sponsorship problems.



Jim O'Brien at the track.

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In 1985 I'd moved up from San Diego to Monrovia and got a job at Cal Tech in Pasadena teaching phys-ed. I tried the Mount Wilson trail race, an eight-mile uphill grinder from Sierra Madre up the Old Mount Wilson trail to the observatory. I won my age division and met local ultrarunners like Jack Slater, Ralph West and Judy Milke. At that point I had run 13 marathons in 12 months, mainly to demystify the marathon process. I'd also heard about Ken Hamada's idea of putting on a 100-mile. 1986 was the inaugural Angeles Crest 100 Mile. I set my sights on the '87 race. I tried to get in but Hamada wouldn't let me in, with no 50-milers under my belt, only a string of sub-2:30 marathons. So for my first 50-mile I did the Mile Square 50 in Fountain Valley, 10 loops. I set goal of 33 to 35 minutes per loop, a sub six-hour finish. By 26 miles I had lapped everybody, and won it in 5:58. The steady pace was the key to a good performance.

How about Angeles Crest?

In 1987, I entered Angeles Crest, ran it

with bronchitis, and finished third (19:51) behind Jim Gensichen, with Jim Pellon seven minutes in front of me. Afterwards I took to bed with pneumonia. What I learned was that solid food in a race is inefficient, but I had done it out of deference to common knowledge. I then started to really research liquid nutrition. In 1988 I ran Western States (100 Mile). I was second past Red Star Ridge, but after a five-mile wrong turn down Maxwell Canyon I was 25th by Robinson Flat. I wound up ninth by the finish, after working my way back through the field.

I really prepared for Angeles Crest in 1989. I sacrificed for six months before the race. I had meticulous planning; crew, pacers, and nutrition, all dialed in. I had three plans. Plan "C" was to run (close to) the record. Plan "B" was to run conservatively and break the existing record. The secret plan "A" was to go under 18 hours. The training began a year before the race. My mileage for the six peak weeks before the race, nine weeks prior to race day, was 150 to 200 miles per week in a continuous build. I then tapered downward from 200-100-75-50 per week. The Tuesday before the race I did a speed workout to deplete the fast-twitch muscle fibers.

I got back to basics on what worked. My nutrition was liquid-based, in total defiance of conventional wisdom. I was using mango nectar mixed with Carboplex, with ProOptimizer as the protein supplement every 25 miles. I also took water with potassium tablets for electrolyte absorption.

After a cool start, the day was warm through Shortcut (mile 59). I was outracing most of the aid stations, which had not been set up yet. For instance, I beat the crews up to Newcomb's Pass (mile 68)—the trucks passed me on the way up the road. After Newcombs, a heavy inversion layer cut visibility down to three feet in through Santa Anita Cyn to Chantry (75 miles). However, I knew the way cold. At this time I was running a caloric deficit because my bottles were mixed and still on the trucks, and my pacer Bill Kissell couldn't get to them without me waiting around. At Chantry there was

no scale to weigh in on. I stuck to my plan throughout. I stayed in the chair for a full 10 minutes getting a massage before heading up Mount Wilson.

Jim crossed the finish line at the Rose Bowl in 17:35—on a course that measured 102 miles. He was the first person ever to finish the race the same day he started.

What about other 100-milers?

My original goals were to do every 100-mile that existed in 1989. Those were Old Dominion, Vermont, Western, Leadville, Wasatch and Angeles Crest. At Leadville I did the (training) for six weeks before the course, splitting my time between Steamboat Springs (three days) and Leadville (four days) each week.

Come race day I was running with Skip Hamilton, a four-time winner who was known as “the Mayor of Leadville,” which was o.k. by me. Skip held back in the first 13 miles. When I was changing out of my tights at May Queen, Skip passed me. I let him lead until the base of Mount Hope, which was about a mile past the water crossing after the elk wallow at Twin Lakes. I passed him there. I started throwing surges at Hamilton going up to Hope Pass. I’d let him come close, then I’d surge ahead. Then I’d repeat. By the top of Hope I was pretty whacked. Bill Clements passed me there, but I let him go.

I saw Skip on his way up to Winfield while I was heading back to the base of Hope Pass—he wasn’t long for the race (and dropped at Twin Lakes). The return leg to Twin Lakes took 2:30 as planned. I took the lead back from Clements at Twin Lakes. Midway between Twin Lakes and Half Moon, it began to dump rain. The trails turned to grease. I dropped my first pacer, who was suffering from intestinal distress, and ran solo to Fish Hatchery (75 miles). I then picked up a wild-card pacer who probably had a snappier workout than he bargained for, slipping and sliding up Pole Line Pass—complete with lightning and hail. Out of May Queen (87 miles) the mud was so bad that a USFS truck sank to its hubs on the dirt road while trying to light the way.

Jim crossed the finish line in a record time of 17:55. There had been three inches of hail on the streets of Leadville at the finish line. Jim’s record stood until 1994, when it was broken under a mild full-moon dry night by Juan Herrera in huaraches.

At Wasatch in 1991 Jim stayed in Park City for three weeks, and trained with

Dana “blood and guts” Miller, running the course in three sections over three days. The race threw a succession of obstacles at Jim. The course itself is difficult on a good day. Fog and pouring rain (again) made route-finding up Chin Scraper very difficult, where he topped out on a rock crag. Rain-battered, he decided going up was safer than climbing down. Continued rain throughout the day turned trails into mud-runs and bottomless shoe-sucking misery. Dense fog at night added to route-finding challenges up past Desolation Lake (70 miles). Jim left Brighton (75 miles) just ahead of race director John Grobben, who was seriously considering stopping the race due to the extreme conditions. But Jim won it in 22:50—not a course record but almost two hours ahead of Neal Beidleman and the other 55 finishers, of 105 starters.

What ended your ultrarunning career?

A knee injury, that initially was a result of a fall while running where I fractured the head of the femur, cracked the bone inward, and took a year and a half to heal (back in 1995). All other knee issues are directly related to this fall. Three years ago I had a cartilage replacement on the left knee, using my own tissue grown in a lab in Boston, which seems to have helped

What is the best memory of your own ultrarunning career?

The 1989 Angeles Crest. The day was magic—everything came together.

How did you get into coaching?

I was approached by the Foothill Flyers to coach them. I decided that I’d rather have my own club rather than provide “friendly coaching” and then have someone get injured, and end up getting sued. This way I could get USATF (insurance) coverage. And this led to Team Blarney, which met on Monday, then Tuesday nights at 7:00 p.m. for the famous track workouts.

Some of the runners Jim has coached included: Jennifer Johnston, who went from being a good marathoner to winning Angeles Crest for the women twice, and was on the U.S. 100-km team; Bruce Hoff and Dana Taylor (Dana set a course record at Kettle Moraine 100 in 1997 which stood for two years, and Bruce ran at Wasatch and Hardrock); Francisco Fabian, a chain smoker who after a year with Jim finished Angeles Crest in 26:28; and Hal Chiasson, who fooled all of us with his Clark Kent exterior, but was in reality a tough guy waiting to happen.

What are some of the biggest mistakes beginning ultrarunners make?

Not taking the distances seriously, not treating the training seriously, and being self-coached with no serious direction. Also, a blind willingness to replicate mistakes and resistance to positive ideas.

Can an average long distance runner realistically aspire to finishing a tough trail 100-miler?

Yes, provided the runner is willing to work at it. In order to get the most out of your ability, you have to run at a higher level of seriousness. Why? To maximize your ability to finish the distance in the shortest possible time. The runner must be willing to train at a higher intensity, and to properly prepare for the rigors of the distance. This is unavoidable.

What are the minimum training requirements for someone hoping to finish a tough trail 100-miler?

Running 20 miles a week isn’t going to cut it. Distance runs aren’t enough either. Most ultrarunners run their training runs slower than their race pace. This isn’t good. This is where speed work comes in. But speed work must be understood as an efficiency-building exercise. Nobody does speed work at 12 to 15-minute miles; it’s too slow. Speed work is designed to reinforce efficient running habits.

Are road ultras still a good goal for ultrarunners, in light of the huge shift towards trail running?

Of course they are. There are races for all settings and distances. I’d like to try one someday (once my knee heals properly).

How does one sort through the myriad of performance related drinks, food and supplements?

Well, we’ve come a long way since Gatorade. I’d say that more than 90 percent of (the products) are pretty sound. After that, it’s personal preference. My preferences lean towards products that do not have citric acid in them. More races have ended due to stomach problems than any other cause.

Finally, how would you summarize your experiences and outlook?

The race is a journey. The preparation is a journey. Be willing to experiment. There is no magic pill, drink, food, or anything. You’re going to have to work at it and be willing to focus. That said, there are a lot of interesting things in life to do. When you focus on one thing, other things go by the wayside. It doesn’t hurt to try other things and maintain a balance.