

Tuesday, May 10, 2005

The Morning Read: She flies by day

Runner will try to survive 135 miles of desert to raise money to solve illness she studies.

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The Orange County Register

IRVINE – The legend goes like this: At the end of the 135-mile, uphill, three-day, Death Valley race, if your central nervous system is still part of your body, if your synapses are still firing, if your legs are still attached, you will see a side of yourself that you've never seen before.

Some finishers may hallucinate or have out-of-body experiences. They may see God. They may dry heave. They may get really quiet or have such a feeling of elation that they can't stop jabbering.

"I'm curious to see who I am," says Judit Pallos, 27, an Irvine woman with a growing reputation for freakish endurance that earned her an invitation to the prestigious Badwater Ultramarathon. The race will begin July 11 (estimated daytime temperature: 130 degrees), and she hopes to finish in less than 48 hours.

"I hope I'm on the quiet side," she says.

As it stands now - before she's finished her first Badwater race - there is little question who Judit Pallos is.

Hers is a very simple life.

Mornings: running.

Nights: cross training with weights, kick boxing or volleyball, then resting for tomorrow's run.

Weekends: absolutely insane amount of running.

Work: Fruit flies.

The running and the fruit flies will come together in the Badwater race, where Pallos will be raising money for Huntington's Disease research, which is her career. Contributions to her effort can be made at justgiving.com/pfp/juditbadwater.

Pallos' job is to coax sometimes reluctant fruit flies to mate. She works as a research associate in a laboratory at UC Irvine, trying to find a cure for the genetic disease in which people slowly lose their ability to think or talk or walk.

Sometimes, she catches herself speaking aloud to the little insects, urging them to get busy, saying, "Come on."

Hundreds of times per day, Pallos does what she calls "crossing." In other words, she puts a boy fruit fly into a vial with a girl fruit fly.

"It's amazing to work with those little guys," she says. "The males dance for the females before they mate. They look very cute. They have little hairy heads. They move their legs at you under the microscope.

"I love them."

Working in the lab so much can make you almost as loopy as running a 135-mile race. She remembers getting so attached to a strange little fruit fly - a gynandromorph (both male and female reproductive systems) - that she gave it the nickname "Mokuska," which means "little squirrel" in Hungarian.

Pallos was born in Hungary and studied biology with an emphasis on genetics in her hometown at the University of Szeged. She came to Orange County in 2000 when she got a job in the UCI "fly lab."

Fly labs are important in the fight against Huntington's Disease because the flies have about 10-day life spans. Researchers can watch the disease pass from generation to generation in a matter of days. They also can test thousands of flies at a time. Mice labs, for example, take longer to produce results.

Her lab has seen great success. In 2001, she was part of the team that discovered a drug that slowed the symptoms of the disease. Pallos says that 30,000 Americans have Huntington's Disease, with an additional 150,000 at risk because they are related to a carrier.

"I hope we are close to making this the last generation of Huntington's Disease in humans," she says.

So far, she has raised \$810 from sponsorships for her upcoming race.

Pretty good for a woman who ran her first mile in the spring of 2001. She wanted to get some exercise, so she ran around a lake in the park near her home.

Then, she saw a documentary film called "Running in the Sun" about the incredible fortitude of the runners in the Badwater race.

Since then, she's been hooked.

She's run five marathons, a 31-miler and a 50-miler. In 2004, she ran 103 miles in one 24-hour race in San Diego.

Still she says this: "I'm not a runner."

She claims that ultramarathon champions Paula Radcliffe and Pamela Reed, who have both won the Badwater race, are "real" runners.

Pallos might not think of herself as a runner, but she runs 60 miles a week. Every Sunday, she runs a 26-mile course, which is nearly the length of a marathon. She runs so far that she carries a dollar in her pocket for bus fare in case she tires out and needs a ride.

She's never used the dollar.

She eats copious amounts of fruits and vegetables, consuming two bananas, apples and pears per day, along with a bag of carrots and four cups of milk. She eats meat once a week and never eats fast food.

Ice cream, she says, is her only vice.

Last year, Pallos was part of the race crew for Ian Parker, who teaches at UCI down the hall from Pallos' lab.

Parker has run the race three times, and he'll never forget the crazy tricks his mind played on him.

"I was seeing a small Irish lady dressed in a green cape," Parker says. "She had a strange little knapsack she was carrying."

The year before, Parker remembers the pretzel men. He was talking to them.

"I knew enough to know that I better stop talking to them," Parker says with a laugh.

Badwater runners are followed by a car that carries water, food and extra shoes. The crew also runs alongside the competitor to set the pace. Last year, Pallos ran about 85 miles alongside Parker.

"I've dreamed about doing it myself so many times," she says.

This year, she's got her own crew.

She has set 48 hours as her goal. As the race gets closer, she'll spend as much as an hour every night in the sauna so her body will get used to losing moisture in great heat. She's not going to practice staying up for 48 hours straight.

"It's hard to train for sleep deprivation," she says.

Parker is confident she'll get a Badwater belt buckle, which is the prize for finishing under 48 hours.

"She's exceedingly committed," he says.

She'll do fine as long as she ignores the little Irish ladies and the pretzel men.