

I first heard about Jim in 1989. I saw one of his schedules, and blanched. By December 1992 I'd seen the light after a spectacular AC100 DNF. It took four long years to unlearn all the bad habits I'd taught myself to earn my AC100 buckle in 1996. Jim paced me the last 25 miles.

I thought I knew running. Wrong. I got the Master Class that night More on that in a bit.

Let's go to the the beginning of the story.

The Road to the Record

Jim O'Brien set the Angeles Crest course record in 1989, which has yet to be bested. The right man or woman will eventually shatter it, but they'll have to work for it. His 17:35:48 is the benchmark that all of us have measured ourselves against—on a course almost 2 miles longer than it is now.

The lead-in to Angeles Crest

"In '85 I'd moved up from San Diego to Monrovia and got a job at Cal Tech in Pasadena teaching PE. Tried the Mt Wilson Trail Race, an 8-mile uphill grinder from Sierra Madre up the Old Mt Wilson trail to the observatory. I won my age-division."

"I met local ultrarunners like Jack Slater, Ralph West and Judy Milke. At this point I'd run 13 marathons in 12 months, mainly to demystify the marathon process. I raced two and ran 11 as training runs. I'd also heard about Ken Hamada's idea of putting on a 100. 1986 was the inaugural AC100. I set my sights on '87. Tried to get in but Hamada wouldn't let me in—no 50's under my belt, and only a string of sub 2:30 marathons".

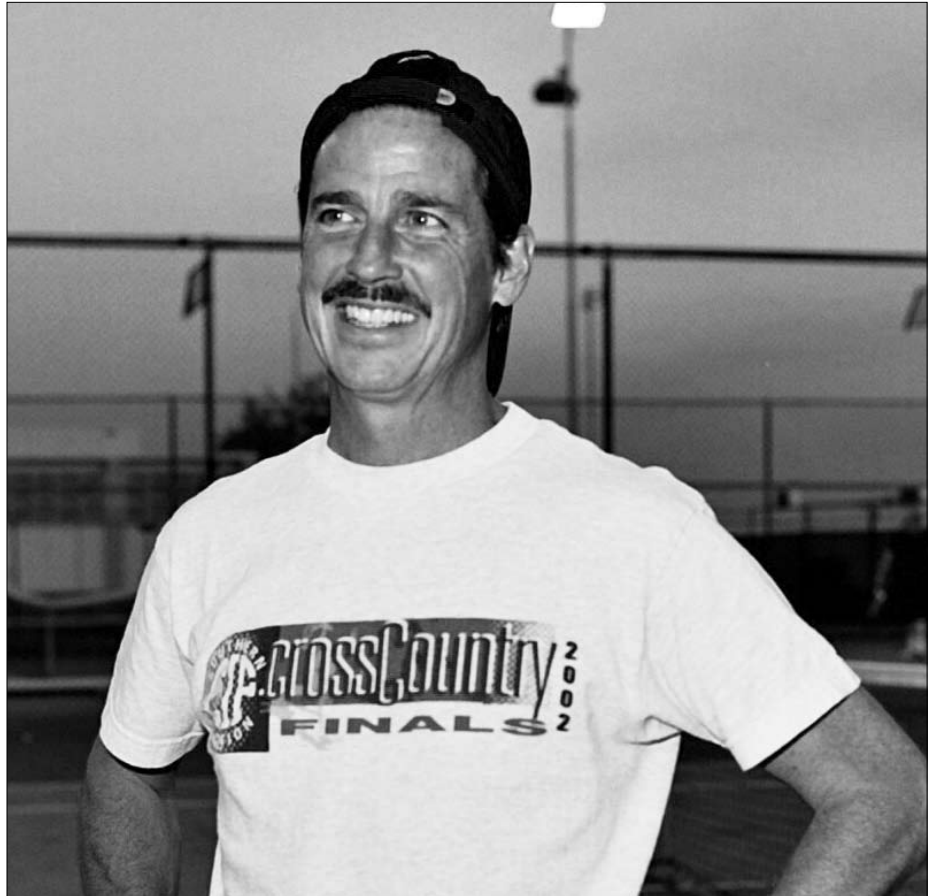
"So for my first 50—I did the Mile Square 50 in Fountain Valley—10 loops. Set goal of 33-35min per loop, sub 6 hr finish. By 26 miles I'd lapped everybody. Won it in 5:58"

"The steady pace was the key to a good performance".

Running 100s: Two Missed Opportunities

"In 1987-I entered AC, ran it with bronchitis, finished 3rd (19:51) behind Jim Gensichen, with Jim Pellon 7minutes in front of me. Afterwards 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 started to really research liquid nutrition".

"In 1988 I ran Western. Was 2nd past Red Star Ridge, but after a 5-mile wrong turn down Maxwell Canyon I was 25th by Robin-



Jim O'Brien: 2003

son Flat. I wound up 9th by the finish line after working my way back through the field". Jim wasn't going to endure missed opportunities like that again.

AC100 1989: The Record That Still Stands

"I really prepared for Angeles Crest in '89. I sacrificed for 6 months before the race. Meticulous planning. Had crew, pacers, nutrition dialed in. I had three plans. Plan C was to run the record. Plan B was to run conservative, 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, 9 weeks prior to race day was 150-200 miles per week in a continuous build. Tapered downward 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. Nutrition was going to be liquid-based, in total defiance of conventional received wisdom. I was using mango nectar mixed with Carboplex, with ProOptimizer as the protein supplement every 25 miles. 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 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 3' in through Santa Anita Cyn to Chantry (75miles). 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 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 the full 10 minutes getting the massage etc before heading up Mt Wilson."

Jim crossed the finish line at the Rose Bowl in 17:35—on a that course measured 102 miles until 1992. He was the first person to finish the race the same day he started.

Best memories of your own ultrarunning career?

"1989 Angeles Crest. The day was magic. Everything came together".

Keep reading for what runners learned from Jim. >>>



Jennifer Johnston & Jim O'Brien, 1998

Jim's Coaching Legacy

Jim's greatest gift was to awaken the potential in each runner who cared to make the effort.

Jennifer Johnston

I was plodding my way through my post-doc at Caltech, running the same 5-6 mile circuit around campus until the fateful day when a friend suggested I go to Jim's track workouts.

That next Monday began a very special relationship with Jim, and changed my life from pushing myself within self-created boundaries, to getting rid of the boundaries and seeing how far I could go.

Jim is the consummate coach—he knows when you have given your all and when you are trying to coast along and will you call you out right then and there. His monthly training schedules, personalized for each person in the Monday group, were always a challenge and you knew if you finished the calendar as directed you would be in the best shape of your life.

Jim's coaching skills were not just about helping you to train to your peak, but also about encouragement and friendship. Jim made time for all of us on the team and I felt that I could go to his office anytime and sit down and talk to him.

While I never dreamed I would run longer than a marathon, Jim just made it seem so fun to run on the trails that it wasn't long before I was running longer and longer. Ever since I joined his group, I wanted to run the AC100 race because he made it sound so fun, and through doing the various training runs of the AC course I fell in love with the San Gabriel mountains.

It took me 5 years to get tired of road racing and finally enter AC. However, in all those 5 years I ran in the San Gabriels every weekend and trained with Jim, Larry Gas-



Jana Gustman and Jennifer Johnston, 2nd and 1st place women, 2001.

san, Bruce Hoff, Bruce Mauldin, Suzanne Brana, Tommy Nielsen, Evelyn Marshall, Mark Marcelli, Jay Grobeson, and later on Jana Gustman.

Jim helped me to see that the love of the trails is what you need to enjoy running 100 milers. The training gets you ready for the race, but also becomes a part of what you are, and that there is no where else you would rather spend a weekend than in the beautiful San Gabriel mountains.

When I decided to run AC, Jim prepared the calendars for training for AC100 that I had seen him prepare for everyone else. I trained those calendars to the mile and made sure I prepared everything according to the plan—except the Jim's Mango-plex drink because that made me puke every-time. Even though everyone else seemed to swear by it and Evelyn set the course record for women while drinking it, I could not keep it down.

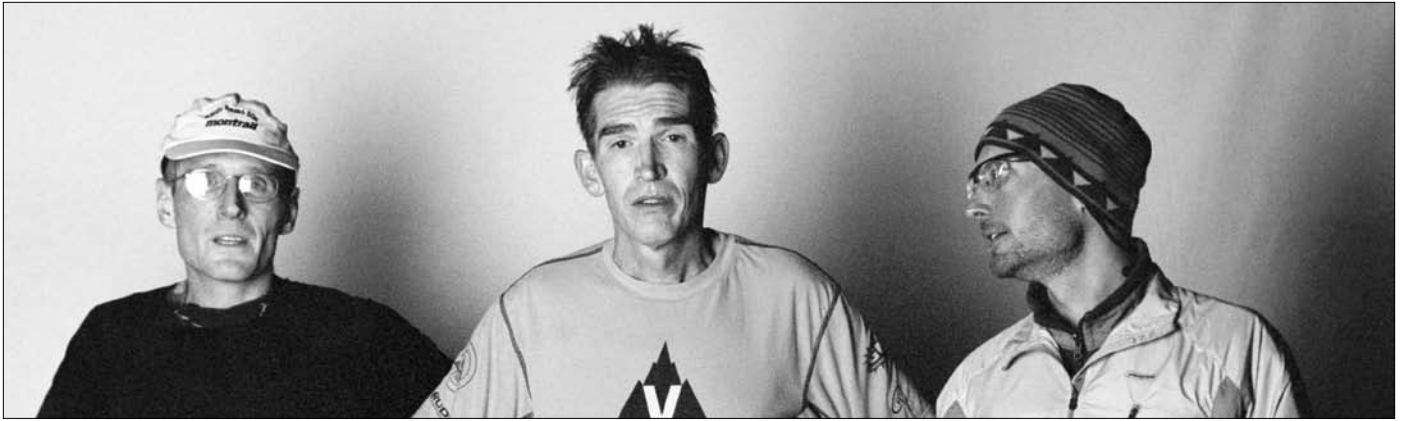
After all those calendars I knew I could not be more prepared for the race than I was, and I think after Jim, I knew every square inch of the AC course almost better than anyone.

I made sure I had Jim lined up to pace me in from Chantry to the finish, because I knew he would be able to squeeze every last bit out of me and help me to have a successful race. Plus, I had seen him haul Larry Gassan and Bruce Hoff's trashed carcasses across the finish line so I knew he could get me there too.

With my bottles of de-fizzed Mountain Dew and Carbo-Plex we took off from Chantry with Jim encouraging me. I have no idea how I did it, but because Jim was pacing me I knew I just had to do whatever he said and it would all work out—which it did.

I submitted this picture for the AC book because it sums up Jim's enthusiasm for his runners—I swear he looks more excited for me winning than I was at the time. Whenever I look at this picture, it reminds me of how Jim changed my life by being not only a great running coach, but by teaching me how to always strive for the best and never, ever give up on something you want.

Thanks Jim, for all the good friends, and exciting and unforgettable times I have experienced because of you.



Bruce Hoff after pacing Andy Jones-Wilkins, flanked by Andy Roth, 2004

Bruce Hoff

By 1994 I had been dabbling in trail ultrarunning for several years and in that year put away a laundry list of 50K and 50M finishes (plus running the JMT, the grand canyon, and other adventures). By the end of the summer I was all upside down in my running: Lots of racing, little training, feeling flat. I entered the AC100 on a whim just a couple weeks before the event. (In retrospect, “100 mile”+ “whim”= Trouble!!) By the time I reached the halfway point at Chilao I had my head between my knees. At Charlton Flats I hitched a ride to Short-cut, where I dropped. As my pacer, Steve Elder drove me back to L.A. he said that at Chilao he'd spoken to his acquaintance Jim O'Brien, who said, “Send him to me. I'll fix his problems.”

Seven months later I sheepishly approached Jim for his guidance. He wrote up a custom training schedule for each runner, four weeks at a time.

I marveled that an early workout for an aspiring 100 mile runner included “24 x 200m” on the track. Normally reserved, he could occasionally burst out a classic comment. When I asked why a weekday included “AM 12mi; PM 8” instead of just a 20 miler, he replied “Anyone can run a hundred miles! The question is who can run the fastest. By breaking it up, your average pace will be quicker.

I also got a new appreciation for just how many miles a runner could log in a week, astounded at how the volume could keep getting higher and higher without injury occurring. One Sunday night in Aug '95 I'd just finished a very long weekend; and was contemplating the next month of assigned training. In mock desperation I fell to my knees and pleaded, “Just drop me off in Wrightwood tonight. I'll start running the 100 miles now. Even after this long week-

end, that would be easier than the next four weeks of training.” (In the years that followed I liked to call a series of 10 consecutive weeks, all over 100 miles, a “Full Blarney.”)

On race day the hard work had paid off. I was amazed to cruise through Chilao in about 10 hours, hardly feeling winded. The fatigue started sometime after Short Cut. I can't say I was super human. I struggled a lot after Winter Creek, yet I finished in the top ten, quite a difference from the previous year's DNF.

I learned a lot about training and racing from Jim in my years with Team Blarney. Within a year of joining I PR'ed in everything from the half marathon to the hundred mile. In the years that followed I got a sub-24 hour Wasatch, a 6:12 50 mile, and a second place at Rocky Raccoon, all following the Blarney plan. Thanks, Jim.

Joe Franko

I'd always wanted to do a really long race and so trained myself to do the Angeles Crest 100 Mile Run. The first time I did it I barely finished in just under 33 hours, blowing out my IT-band in the process. I did it again the next year and took about 5 hours off my time, enough to convince me that I had the potential to “buckle” if I trained well.

I needed a coach. Since I knew that Jim held the course record I called him up and asked him if he would consider coaching me. He told me about his track club at Cal Tech and suggested I come out and check it out.

He said he'd be happy to prepare me a monthly schedule. I think I was one of Jim's first ultra-runner trainees. Everyone else seemed to be training to run marathons. It seemed like Jim had me doing twice what everyone else on the team was doing! There were times I doubted Jim's sanity!

Little did I realize how much commit-

ment Jim's coaching would call for from me. Jim had me running back-to-back long runs every weekend, plus doing speed work on the track every Tuesday night. Within months I was running over 100 miles per week and the running became a part-time job. He had me running marathons as training runs! My mile times on the track came down by 3 minutes a mile! Jim soon had me running twice a day and by the month before my next AC100 my longest weekend was 30 miles on Friday, 40 miles on Saturday, and 30 miles on Sunday. Besides getting much, much stronger, Jim's coaching convinced me that I could run strongly even when I was tired! That idea alone was a break-through for me.

Many folks felt that Jim's training was a killer and it was! But for those of us who could follow it, it made us strong, confident, and fully ready to compete. For the first time in my life, I was a competitive runner. Jim understood that to be competitive you had to push yourself beyond any of your self-imposed limits. He convinced me that my goals were obtainable and his knowledge of me as a runner kept me just this side of injury, always pushing myself each week, each run, a little harder, though sometimes pulling back and running just for the sheer joy of running, a nice easy pace over mountain trails.

After almost a year of training with Jim, I approached the AC100 with confidence. By mile 26 running up Mt Baden-Powell, I passed one of the previous year's front runners, who turned around and said, as I approached, “What are you doing up here, Franko?”

When I hit 50 miles I couldn't believe how strong I felt. Jim and his runners that year were doing the last aid station on the course at Millard. I blew into Millard in 6th place and Jim was ecstatic, clapping me

on the back and congratulating me on a great race. He knew that I was close to not only buckling, but making it in somewhere around 22 hours.

Jim grabbed a water bottle and said, "I'm running you in!" It was fortunate, since I'd lost my pacer up on Mt Wilson when he got frightened of running so fast at that height! Jim took me out of the aid station and pushed my butt when I was really tired. He got the best run out of me he could and we passed 2 runners in the last 5 miles of the race. A week later he sent me a card with a note that talked of how proud he was of my accomplishment. It's a card I still treasure. I know it was my race and that I ran it well, but I couldn't have gotten anywhere near the time without Jim's coaching.

A few years later Jim was preparing me for the Superior Trail 100. I didn't feel well before the race and didn't think I would do well. Unknown to me, Jim talked with my pacer and said to him, "Joe can win this race outright. Be prepared for it." That's exactly what happened! I led the race from mile 55 to the end. Jim had a better assessment of what I could do than I had and that is, after all, one of the reasons one has a coach. To inspire, cajole, push, and assess one to victory and the accomplishment of one's goals.

I always be grateful to Jim for teaching me that I am capable of accomplishing more than I thought I could.

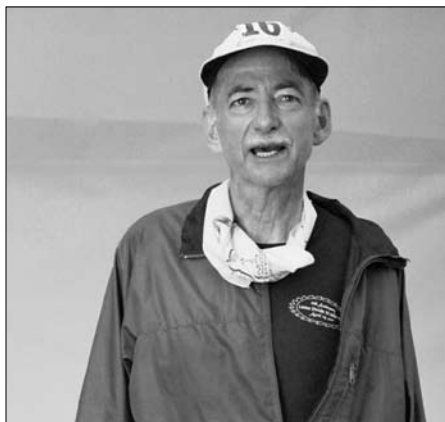
He's a hell of a coach!

Hal Chiasson

I'm 66, and have six AC finishes under my belt, a 7th hundred back East, a number of 50K's, 50 milers, and a 100K, good pacing experiences, and enjoy spreading the knowledge I've gained about the sport with fellow runners.

Jim's adages have stood the test of time. This means putting in the miles, focusing on the goal & not getting side-tracked by trying to run too many races, the liquid diet, eating your last big meal 12-15 hrs before the start of the race, carbo loading, using carbo plex during the race, alternating with water, using pro-optimizer as a recovery drink and/or part way through the run, massages during the training, doing cross-training while injured, training at elevation and preferably on the course, speed work once a week, tempo runs once a week, keep moving, even when the going gets tough, etc.

Thanks, Jim.



Hal Chiasson, 2004

Dave Turner

A few years ago I had the pleasure of being apart of the Team Blarney Experience. For those that don't know about Team Blarney, it was Jim O'Briens' track club/coaching service which met at Cal Tech Pasadena and later Arcadia High school.

It was an enriching experience to be sure. For not only did I learn a great deal about how to properly train for and run ultras, I also met people who became some of my very dearest friends.

I got to soar with eagles.

By the time I got there in 1994 Jimmy had already laid down his mythical AC performance. Now 20 years later despite the best efforts of some of the best ultra talent out there the record still stands. I like that. It shows that it will take a serious, methodical and yes, lucky effort to top it. Mt . Wilson and the Sam Merrill trail have a not-so-subtle way of stripping whatever motivation you may still be holding onto in your sleep deprived, dehydrated, and eggshell psyche on 75-90 mile legs. It's a beautiful thing you'll see.

In my "The older I get the better I was case" I was lucky to have discovered Team Blarney when I did. I had already been running ultras on my own for a few years.

I already had a fair base; of course to be put on a diet of 100 mile weeks for months on end has a way of recalibrating your definition of fatigue.

The other new aspect was to be doing track work. We had a saying: "Hit the line running".

Let's just say if your schedule says you're going to run 24- 200 meter repeats you'll take every advantage you can get. Talk about dividends. In the 9 month period of 1994 I trained with Jimmy I dropped 5 hours off my AC time. This was including a major bonk-fest in the Idlehour where I



Dave Turner & pacer Erin Moran, 1994

probably lost an "Idle-hour" and more at Sam Merrill. More importantly I learned from Jimmy how it feels to be properly trained for the distance and to not settle for less than a truly peak race.

Imagine if you will you want to take a trip to the moon. On your own you may understand the general concept. Get a rocket, fire it at the sky and correct as you go—you'll get there, maybe. On the other hand there are those that have the proper understanding to tune the rocket, fuel it up right, tighten up all the gaskets, give you a map, aim it correctly, correct your trajectory, deploy your retro-rockets and then tell you to look out the window because you are there. All the while you feel like you accomplished your mission. In fact you couldn't have accomplished what you did without them (Jimmy.) And guess what? Now you're stuck on the moon but that's okay because your ground crew can get you back. It was one sweet ride.

Jimmy, thanks!

Caesar Cepeda

While training for AC 100, I went to Jim with my schedule and told him that I didn't think I could do the scheduled mileage for the week-90 miles! He looked at me funny and asked why? I told him that I felt tired all the time now that the mileage had gotten heavier. He said "let me see your schedule, and when you get back from the track workout, I'll modify it for you." At the end of track, I got my schedule and went home. Later when I looked at it he had modified it alright — to 87 miles for the week!

After a long weekend of running 75 miles between Friday and Sunday, I talked to Jim explaining that my knees hurt during my runs. He asked, "what do you mean hurt?" "Well, I feel pain, but I can't pin point it"



Lauren and Caesar Cepeda, 1998

I said. Jim then went on to explain that there's a big difference between "pain" and "discomfort". And that an ultra runner will have to learn the difference, because there will always be "discomfort". One will cause you to stop, the other will just annoy you. Then he gave me that look that made me feel like I was weak. So I've learned that my discomfort level can be very very high!

Ian Torrence

I never saw Jim the runner, only Jim the RD and coach. An awesome RD. Always organized, cool courses! Good times.

Jim was most hospitable, inviting me back to his races year after year. I owe him huge. He helped inspire me in my younger ultra years. Jim got me to try something new, helped test myself here or there. He was always ready with a quick smile and pat on the shoulder for a job well done.

Thanks Jim!

Julian Jamison

In 1990 I was at Caltech, where Jim was the cross-country coach. I'd run a couple of very slow 10k's many years earlier, and since Caltech is not exactly known for its athletic prowess, he decided I would be perfect for the team. I declined, to concentrate on my studies.

Several good friends did join and they all had a blast. The only running I did was the annual KELROF, a 24-hour relay. But I heard rumors that Coach O'Brien ran 20 mile training runs every morning and participated in ultra-distance mountain races, about which I knew nothing. This appealed to me even then, although I didn't seriously consider following through.

Fast forward to 2006: I'd run a few road marathons without much training, and I'd been hiking/mountaineering for years. I decided I needed to try trail running and do an ultra. I'd heard about WS and Badwater



Ian Torrence, 1999

and Hardrock, but it all led back to Jim, although I still had no idea that he was at all fast. First trail marathon in Oct '06, first 50k in Feb '07, and I signed up for AC in Sep '07. Got the racebook, and wow! there was Coach O'Brien, record-holder and hero!

I'm so glad that that was my first 100-miler, and I'm so glad that he (unknowingly, I'm sure) planted the seed that got me hooked on this wonderful sport.

Larry Gassan

It took me three years of ignorance and a painful DNF to come to my senses and get with Jim. I'd run Wasatch in '92, then started AC six days later. I dropped at Chialao, just after Hal Winton passed me, towing a line of runners in his wake.

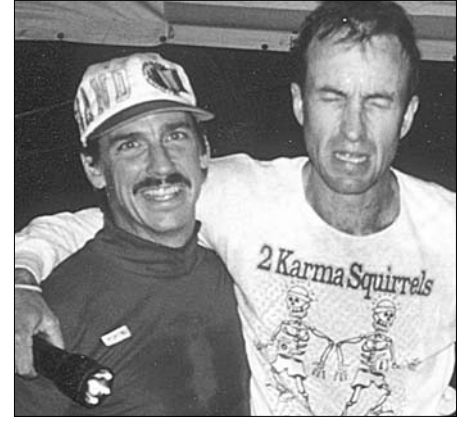
I joined the O'Brien program — hard work and no BS. I got to train with remarkable men and women; 5 & 10k bullets, marathoners, and Ultra Bobs-n-Betties.

Jim had a knack for framing a concept. One heinously hot late-summer day in '96, at the track, Jim noted that because of the heat, we could all add a couple of seconds to our 400m repeats. We all guffawed. Jim just smiled and shook his head. We hit the line hard: running.

After four years of O'Brien schooling I was gaining on my goals. Progress was hard-won. All was not rosy—the '95 100-season was a complete shut-out due to injury and 2 DNFs.

I resolved that '96 was my buckle year—and asked Jim to pace me from 75-100. I did not want to waste his time.

That summer I camped out weekends on the AC100 course. Somehow I also managed to stay awake at work. The first five 100+ mile weeks were daunting. By late summer I began to feel the love. Labor Day weekend I ran the course in 3 stages: 40/35/25. I was rehearsing a symphonic score, with a lot of



Jim O'Brien with Larry Gassan, 1996.

help from my friends.

Race Day: Fast for the first 30 miles, sagging in the middle, but recovered by 75. On the way up Wilson I puked my guts out, hard. Then we jammed down to IdleHour. We were on the bubble, and I was gasping... "So Jim, howdja meet your wife?"

Even talking he was kicking my ass. We cleared Sam Merrill, on the bubble again. Coming into the Echo Mountain technical switchbacks, my quads blew up.

"Jim! My quads! Got any ibuprofen??"

His reply: "Keep going! There's *nothing* you can do about it!"

I felt like somebody'd thrown an anvil overboard. I was giddy with clarity.

Jim was right. How many races have dissolved from trying to solve a discomfort? He said it, I did it, that settled it. If I had time to argue, I had time to race. That night was the Master Class of Running.

I crossed in 23:50. I only had 6 seconds per mile of leeway.

Since then, my regard for Jim has only grown. As Jennifer Johnston noted earlier, the joy he got from the accomplishments of his runners was enormous. That is why I treasure the picture of me blank-faced and woozy at the finish line.

Jim also set a very high standard for coaching and personal conduct. He never once coached for dubious personal gain or glory. All of his students learned from one another. Nobody was lesser than the other. That was his greatest gift.

The earlier interview first appeared in the September 2003 UltraRunner. You can read it at <http://larrygassan.com/gassan-media/gassan-media.html>