

THE UNDERDOG



KARLY HERN

Why does the Angeles Crest 100 dwell in the shadows of Leadville, Western States, Wasatch and Hardrock? Good question. A look at the 20th running of a lesser-known Western classic.

BY RENNE GARDNER • PHOTOS BY LARRY GASIAN

Los Angeles in the fall: Santa Ana winds, wild fires, NFL football on TV and, oh, a little footrace in the Angeles National Forest, the Angeles Crest 100. On September 16, 2006, 111 primal men and women lined up in the mountain resort community of Wrightwood for the 20th running of the race. They were hunting for a finish, a buckle, perhaps even for a championship trophy. Among them nine runners from Oregon, one of the strongest women's fields ever, two runners going for number 20 and four former race champions.

Wrightwood, at nearly 6,000 feet, is generally not a place for shorts, especially at 5 a.m. in the fall. But the Angeles Crest 100 runner knows that the climb out of town will warm them up in a hurry. Although the temperature is

frigid, only a few runners wear tights. Runners chat and laugh nervously, review final crew instructions, take photos and gulp last-minute coffees and energy drinks under the oversized start banner strung up across Park Avenue by the volunteer fire department. Anything to keep the anxiety about the tremendous task at hand—traveling to Pasadena on foot within 33 hours—to a minimum.

Assistant Race Director, Andy Morehead, alerts runners to the imminent start. Ten minutes, five minutes, then the fire engine horn sounds and they are off, briefly through town and up the Acorn Trail toward the Pacific Crest Trail, the frontrunners at a gallop, the middle-of-the-packers at a trot and the back-of-the-packers at a brisk walk.

OLD SCHOOL HUNDRED

After being denied in the Western States lottery on several occasions in the early 1980s, Angeles Crest 100 race founder, Ken Hamada, decided to create a Southern California 100-miler. He and fellow ultrarunner, Del Beaudoin, set about designing a course in the rugged San Gabriel Mountains.

"I wanted a course more difficult than Wasatch," says Hamada. "A tougher course is a lot more respected."

The Angeles Crest 100 is certainly respected. Runners love the diversity of terrain and the large amount of single-track. The race is considered tougher than Western States due to climbs during the last 25 miles; the last one-third of WS is primarily downhill. "With two huge climbs at the beginning and two huge climbs at the end," says Oregon's Hal Koerner, "there really isn't another race like it."

The course runs from the San Gabriel Mountains resort community of Wrightwood at the eastern end of the Angeles National Forest to the Los Angeles suburb of Pasadena, about 12 miles north of downtown Los Angeles, and has 92 miles of trails and six miles of dirt road, including portions of the Pacific Crest Trail. Despite the proximity of the finish to the Los Angeles basin, poor air quality has been increasingly less of an issue due to stricter state air-quality rules. However, runners finishing late Sunday morning or early afternoon generally have to deal with heat. There are 21,610 feet of cumulative elevation gain

and 26,700 feet of loss. The highest point runs near Mount Baden-Powell at 9,210 feet. The kicker? Over the final 25 miles, the course punches through Chantry Flat and up and around Mount Wilson—with approximately 6,000 feet of climbing.

"If you have a course that can capture the imagination of the runner and the volunteers, then the race will prosper," says co-designer Beaudoin. Since 65 runners first entered the race in 1986, Angeles Crest has evolved each year. Runner feedback prompted race management to increase the quality and number of awards, there have been a few minor course improvements and the race now requires runners to perform volunteer trail maintenance on the Angeles Crest trail.

Probably the most significant upgrade was moving the finish line from the Rose Bowl to Johnson's Field near Cal Tech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. The old finish at the Rose Bowl was congested, and there was little shade. The new finish area has plenty of room, grass and shade. According to Hal Winton, co-race director and U.S. Forest Service trail-maintenance volunteer coordinator, the finish line is the most impressive of all the 100-mile runs, with all-night food, breakfast in the morning and hot showers.

"The very best change over the years is the mobile hot shower set up at the finish," says 19-time finisher Garry Curry. "It feels so good after running 100 miles."

Some of the best ultrarunners in the country have challenged the Angeles Crest course. In 1989 former Leadville course-record holder Jim O'Brien set his untouchable AC course record of 17:35:48. San Diego's Ben Hian and Evelyn Marshall ran off a string of wins in the 1990s, and Marshall still holds the women's course record of 22:01:16, set in 1995. Jorge



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"The race is special because it is very 'old school,'" explains Curry. "It has changed little over the years, and is still low key, just like the good old days of ultrarunning."

Pacheco has owned the course over the past several years, with wins in 2001, 2003 and 2004 (the race was canceled in 2002 due to forest fires). Other notable Angeles Crest runners have included Western States champ Scott Jurek, former Leadville course-record holder Juan Herrera and former Badwater course-record holder Gabriel Flores. During the last decade, Tarahumara Indians of Mexico's Copper Canyon have run Angeles Crest each year to raise money and awareness for drought and famine conditions in their homeland.

Two runners have completed all 19 previous races. 1990 and 1991 race champion Jussi Hamalainen, 59, of Agoura Hills, California, and Garry Curry, 52, of Boulder, Colorado, will be the first to be awarded the Angeles Crest Grizzly for 20 straight finishes if they make it to Pasadena within the 33-hour time limit. Curry returns each year to visit with old friends, who have crewed and paced him over the years. He sends in his race application each year around Christmas time when he's itching for some warm weather and to get back on the trails. "The race is special because it is very 'old school,'" explains Curry. "It has changed little over the years, and is still low key, just like the good old days of ultrarunning."

When Curry applied to run the first Angeles Crest 100 in 1986, his entry was denied because he had only run a couple of road marathons and no ultras. The telecommunications worker had grown up in Wrightwood and was living in Manhattan Beach at the time. "I ran a 50K race on a



track a few months later," he says, "then resubmitted my entry and was accepted. I got into the habit of running the race and, like many participants, vowed never again many times."

In addition, three recent race winners will toe the start line in Wrightwood: defending champion Guillermo Medina, two-time winner Tom Nielsen and Pacheco. Nielsen was fourth at the 2006 Western States.

Oregon's Hal Koerner is here to redeem himself from a Western States DNF. With a best of 17:17 at Western States in 2004, when he finished third behind Scott Jurek and Dave Mackey, his 2006 Western States was tripped up by dehydration on the climb up Devil's Thumb, 48 miles into the race.

At this year's race, one of the strongest women's field ever is led by defending Angeles Crest champion Julie Finger

of Granite Bay, California. Hoping to dethrone Finger are two-time Hardrock winner Sue Johnston, Carol O'Hear, 2004 Western States and Vermont 100 third-place finisher, and the always-strong Stephanie Ehret, Francesca Conte, Stacy Bunton and Leslie Bardessono.

The youngest runner in the race is 26-year-old Ashley Idema, a fifth-grade teacher in Upland, California, who grew up in Corvallis, Oregon. Two years ago she was injured and under-trained and suffered through a Western States finish with ice bags duct taped to her knees. Even with a couple of ultra wins, at the 2006 Lake Hodges 50K and the PCT 50 Mile, she is intimidated by the strength of the women's field. "When I got to Wrightwood and saw the list of women entered, I thought I would have to have the race of my life to place even 5th," she says.



FAST TIMES AT THE ANGELES CREST 100

MEN					WOMEN						
#	CONTENDER	AGE	STATE	TIME	YR	#	CONTENDER	AGE	STATE	TIME	YR
1	Jim O'Brien	36	CA	17:35:48	'89	1	Evelyn Marshall	37	CA	22:01:16	'95
2	Hal Koerner	30	OR	18:37:48	'06	2	Kathy Britcliffe	34	CA	22:36:57	'89
3	Ben Hian	25	CA	18:39:48	'94	3	Suzanne Brane	41	CA	23:08:47	'99
4	Ben Hian	27	CA	18:50:24	'96	4	Sherry Kee Johns	42	NM	23:18:00	'97
5	Jorge Pacheco	35	CA	18:52:24	'03	5	Jennifer Johnston	34	CA	23:28:43	'98
6	Jorge Pacheco	33	CA	19:05:06	'01	6	Ashley Idema	26	CA	23:29:08	'06
7	Ben Hian	29	CA	19:05:35	'98	7	Susan Gimbel	43	CA	23:37:05	'90
8	Tom Nielsen	40	CA	19:07:50	'99	8	Evelyn Marshall	36	CA	23:39:37	'94
9	Tom Nielsen	41	CA	19:09:04	'00	9	Vicki DeVita	38	CA	23:46:56	'91
10	Jorge Pacheco	36	CA	19:10:26	'04	10	Jennifer Johnston	35	CA	23:51:57	'99

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAPS

ANGELES CREST 100'S COOPER CANYON, MILE 30 TO 37

This map of the Cooper Canyon area was created with National Geographic's TOPO!® Software.



"Angeles Crest runners have to survive Cooper Canyon. Located on the Antelope Valley side of the San Gabriel Mountains, the canyon absorbs the full brunt of the rising desert heat."



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MAN ON A MISSION



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"Jorge is an amazing runner," explains Koerner. "He had the performance of the year at Rocky Raccoon 100-miler [near course record in 13:16] in Texas, and he always goes out hard. I knew that if I wanted to win, I had to work with him."

At Islip Saddle, mile 25.9, Pacheco leaves the aid station a minute ahead of Koerner, a full 12 minutes ahead of O'Brien's pace. "I ended up running behind Jorge," says Koerner, "because I wanted to respect his pace on a course that he knows so well." The question is, of course, can they both maintain such a torrid tempo?

Between miles 30 and 37, Angeles Crest runners have to survive Cooper Canyon. Located on the Antelope Valley side of the San Gabriel Mountains, the canyon absorbs the full brunt of the rising desert heat. Although there are lush, shaded areas courtesy of stands of Jeffrey and sugar pine, alder and oak, much of the course here runs above the verdant creek on open, sun-exposed trails. Pacheco takes a three-minute lead on Koerner at Eagle's Roost, the mile-30 aid station, perched on Angeles Crest Highway and increases it to six minutes at mile 37.5, Cloudburst Summit. He has fallen a couple of minutes behind record-setting pace, but looks strong. Koerner drops a few more minutes behind when he misses his crew at Eagle's Roost.

Cooper Canyon is difficult for Idema. "I don't do well in the heat," she says. "I couldn't eat anything solid after 25 miles, so I was hoping to get enough calories from drinks to keep me going. I tried not to worry about how far behind I was." She maintains a fourth- or fifth-place position, and is within striking distance.

A well-known but sometimes unheeded adage at Angeles Crest is that the race begins at Chantry Flat. Many runners push the first 75 miles too hard only to fade going up and over Mount Wilson via the Winter Creek Trail. From Chantry Flat, they must still cover nearly a marathon over several mountains, climbing 6000 feet.

On this day, however, the race seems to begin at mile 59, the Shortout Saddle aid station, a chunk of asphalt where the Angeles Crest Highway intersects the Silver Moccasin Trail. It's three in the afternoon, the hottest part of the day that, fortunately for the runners, has been cooler than normal. Here, Koerner emerges first, with a five-minute lead over Pacheco. The race, it seems, is on.

The runners now leave the high country of pine, fir and cooler temperatures for southern California's foothill environment, typical of the local ecosystem below 5000 feet. Although there are still sprinklings of evergreens, the vegetation includes oak of the benign and poisonous kind, chaparral like toyon and Manzanita and desert plants such as agave and prickly pear cactus. The frontrunners descend into Big Santa Anita Canyon where leased-cabin sites dot the canyon floor. Runners approach Chantry Flat, a popular entry-way into the Angeles National Forest. Chantry Flat is located just six miles from the Los Angeles suburb of Arcadia.

(Continued on page 60)

ANGELES CREST AT A GLANCE

DATE / September 15, 2007
ELEVATION / 21,610 feet of elevation gain and 14,700 feet of loss
WEBSITE / AC100.com
WEBCAST / Last year's Angeles Crest 100 webcast drew rave reviews. Says 2006 Angeles Crest 100 finisher Nancy Burns, "I have tracked runners at various 100-mile races including Western States, Badwater and Leadville. The Angeles Crest webcast was the best, almost real-time reports of the runner's locations."
AWARDS / Bonuses given for sub-24 hour finishes and bonus trophies (including a Second Success trophy for finishing between 24 hours and the second sunrise), winners are awarded finely detailed bronze animal trophies in a unique handicapping structure, where a 30-year-old man win the 30-and-over award, i.e. a runner in the 30-39 age group who beats all the 30-39 year olds will win the 30 and up age group award. One year 44-year-old Tom Nielsen beat all the 30-year-olds finishing second overall. Nielsen was the cougar that in a traditional age-group award structure would have been awarded to the 30-year age-group winner. "The unique structure of the awards," says Winton, "really draws out some excellent running."
 Angeles Crest also awards the Bronze California Century to the runner who wins both the Western States and the Angeles Crest 100 endurance race, finishing first overall in the same year (there are no gender divisions). A solid 14-karat-gold buckle is awarded to anyone who breaks the overall course record.



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RESULTS | ANGELES CREST 100
SEPTEMBER 16-17, 2006

#	CONTENDER	AGE	STATE	TIME	#	CONTENDER	AGE	STATE	TIME
1	Hal Koerner	30	OR	18:37:48	10	Craig Thornley	42	OR	23:11:47
2	Tom Nielsen	38	CA	20:23:12	11	Ashley Idema	26	CA	23:29:08
3	Nyla Hoang	35	CA	20:35:49	12	Brian Polley	35	CA	23:32:13
4	Guillermo Medina	31	CA	21:05:25	13	Devin Corcoran	49	CA	23:40:56
5	Jeff Riley	37	OR	21:08:55	14	Jussi Jamsalainen	60	CA	23:43:18
6	Osbaldo Nava Lopez	34	MEX	21:14:47	15	Adeberto Mendoza	54	CA	24:07:51
7	Roperto Romero	42	CA	22:00:39	16	Stacey Bunton	43	OR	24:10:47
8	Carlos Herrera	21	MEX	23:04:10	17	David Coblenz	43	NM	24:43:42
9	Angel Perez	35	CA	23:11:26					

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By 5:30 p.m. at Chantry Flat, the mile-74.5 aid station, the frontrunners have not yet arrived. The aid-station volunteers here are still setting up trays of fruit, sandwiches and cookies. Soup and vegetarian chili are being warmed. Last year the frontrunner didn't arrive here until 6:30. In fact, it is so early that the course between Newcomb's Saddle and Chantry Flat isn't completely marked yet.

Over the next 25 tough miles, says course director Hal Winton, East Coast runners often suffer because they're not used to the climbs. Winton, a hale 75, finished

the Last Great Race (five 100-milers) in 1992. "I have often used my history to prod young runners who want to quit at Chantry Flat," he says. "I ask them, 'Can you please tell me what you did wrong here? When I was 60, this was my fifth 100 of the year.'" According to Winton, runners so admonished get pissed off enough to rally and finish.

At 5:43 p.m., Koerner makes the big climb out of Big Santa Anita Canyon and is the first runner to arrive at Chantry Flat. He steps up to the scale to gauge his hydration. He seems confident and unrushed, and needs no admonition

from Mr. Winton. He straps an LED light around his waist and, as he heads out with his pacer, says a big "thank you" to the aid-station volunteers.

The question is, "Where is Jorge?" Pacheco's crew is ready. Chairs, nighttime running gear and water bottles are laid out. Minutes turn into an hour. Still no Jorge.

Suddenly shouts about an approaching runner stir volunteers and crews to action. However, the second runner is not Pacheco. It's the ever-consistent Tom Nielsen, over an hour behind Koerner. Three more runners arrive before Pacheco

trudges into the welcoming arms of his crew. A five-minute deficit to Koerner at mile 59 has turned into an hour and a half just 16 miles later.

Pacheco explains to his crew that he has no legs left, no energy. He had pushed himself hard at the Bulldog 50K in the Santa Monica Mountains only a few weeks earlier, and may have run too many races this summer. "This is the passion of the frontrunners," says Winton. "They can't not do it."

If anyone has a chance to catch Koerner now, it is 47-year old Nielsen, of San Diego. The two-time Angeles Crest winner was fourth at Western States this year and takes pride in his ability to push past runners during the final stages of races. But Nielsen loses ground to Koerner at each checkpoint over the last 25 miles.

The key for Koerner over the final 25 miles? "I got myself a good pacer," he says. He has working flashlights this year, and is listening to some favorite tunes on his Nano: Michael Franti, Hendrix and Bob Marley. In 2004 when he finished AC in 20:59, Koerner didn't have a pacer and went through four flashlights in the final 20 miles. At the finish, he was sporting

a five-pound clunker light borrowed from an aid-station volunteer. Being rested coming into the race doesn't hurt either. "Opening the new running store [Rogue Valley Runners in Ashland, Oregon] has been taxing," he explains. "But it let me get some much needed rest."

Idema was anxious coming into the course's last quarter. "I was very intimidated by the last 25 miles, because I have had so many bad experiences there during my training runs," she says. Approaching mile 75 she is passed by Oregon's Stacey Bunton and is the third woman into Chantry. "That woke me up," she says. "All of a sudden I felt like a new person."

Idema passes Julie Finger and Bunton on the climb up Mount Wilson. "When we saw headlamps ahead, I could not believe it," she says. "I was nervous to pass because that would make me the one being chased. After passing Julie we just kept powering up the climb and to me it felt like we flew."

Koerner and Idema both fly. Koerner wins the 20th Annual Angeles Crest 100 in 18 hours 37 minutes, the second-fastest time ever. Idema becomes the youngest

women's champion with the sixth-fastest women's time. Hamalainen and Curry finish and win Grizzly awards for 20 straight finishes. Six runners from Oregon finish. Of 111 starters, 81 finish within the 33-hour time limit.

Both Koerner and Idema say they'll return to defend their titles. Koerner is targeting big efforts at both Western States and Angeles Crest this year. Idema may alter her training somewhat. Instead of racing or training seriously this past summer, she got married in Oregon, visited her new in-laws in Minnesota, bought a house and spent her honeymoon on the John Muir Trail. "I think hiking the JMT was the best thing for me," she says. "It was rough and required long days on my feet hiking at elevation."

"I have never run the same race twice yet," says Idema, "so I would like to come back and see if I have improved."

Renne Gardner finished the Angeles Crest 100 in 1996, and returns regularly as a pacer, volunteer and spectator. He also writes about outdoor issues for regional and national publications from his hometown in Southern California.

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