

The Bad News Bear of Ultrarunning

By Rebekah Trittipoe

I would be willing to bet that most everyone remembers the movie entitled “The Bad News Bears. The antics of a bunch of discombobulated kids thrown onto a baseball team are delightfully chronicled. Anything that can go wrong does go wrong, Murphy’s Law being intact and functioning. In the end, the kids with few apparent skills and little organization morph into a really good baseball team, winning key games, silencing nay Sayers, and learning valuable lessons in living.

Over the past seven years, I have come to see myself as a one-man team that could rival those kids in terms of bad stuff happening. Those of you who know me are aware that there is hardly a running injury known to man that I haven’t experienced first hand. There have been nine metatarsal fractures, a femoral neck fracture, a medial malleolus fracture, a tibial aponeurosis that lifted off the bone, multiple ankle sprains, anterior tibial tendonitis, and IT band problems. Add slice and dice surgery to both my feet and one ankle and you have down time in terms of running of about 50% over the last seven years. Countless rounds of sidelining injury, rehab, cross training, and striving to regain fitness occurred. Sometimes I would rise again to race well and other times the results would be less than perfect. Moods would be as variable as the weather and expectations of ever regaining former stature would parallel the attitude. I gave myself a multitude of glorious motivational talks, trying to will myself to greatness. Then came the spring of 2001.

It wasn’t like I broke anything. It was worse. I developed some weird anomaly that no one fully understands to this day. I’ve seen every type of medical specialist there is with the possible exception of dermatology. I can’t count the number of times I have heard the phrase, “Wow. I’ve never seen anything like this.” Lots of really bad stuff has been ruled out but no reasonable explanation for the confusing clinical data and symptoms has produced a solution. “A solution to what?”, you ask. Well, the pesky problem involves numb and tingling fingers, hands, feet, toes and face, tetany, shortness of breath, chest pain, difficulty in swallowing, hoarseness, intestinal colic, extreme weakness, and ultimately collapse. Not exactly key ingredients for success in ultrarunning. It does appear to be related to a rare calcium absorption/receptor problem that also effects Para hormone levels. Several different drugs have been tried and then abandoned. And up through June of 2002, the result was only one race finish since February of 2001 without an accompanying trip to the emergency department or treatment by the medical director of a race.

Nevertheless, there is a bright side to this story. When I stopped the last of the drugs that I had been told would be a lifelong habit, I decided to take a laid back approach to training. Up until then, every workout was recorded and miles carefully tracked. High and low heart rates were recorded and fitness scrutinized. But I decided to train when I could and according to how I felt. I would also start to once again use my bike as transportation rather than driving. My log book quickly gathered dust rather than statistics. And it seemed to be working.

In early June and on a whim, I decided to drive to Pennsylvania to run the Laurel Highlands 70 Mile Trail race. I had learned one of my brothers was running and figured it would be a good excuse to see him. Except for one six or eight-mile stretch starting at about 26 miles, and a few periods of lightheadedness, the day was glorious. I ran not to win but to finish standing up. The terrain was varied, technical and rocky in some places and smooth in others. With mile markers planted by the side of the trail, progress could be easily tracked. Soon, a human train was formed as we ran the hills and valleys of this ribbon of a trail. There were four of us, including my brother, which ran the last forty miles together. Since I was the appointed engine, they walked when I walked, ran when I ran. We cheerfully crossed the finish line, fourteenth place overall and me as the second woman. I was tired but happy, knowing in my heart that had this race been one hundred miles instead of seventy, I could have completed the journey.

Upon returning, I wasn't really even sore. I was so encouraged that I did not end up on the ground. However, being the bad news bear that I am, the bottom fell out upon the next week's end. All my major symptoms came roaring back. Bummer. But, I continued to do what I could, when I could. And guess what? Although I still have difficulty on some days, I'm once again feeling better. I've managed several long runs in the mountains, two with my fourteen year old son, and have ridden to work and many errands all but two or three days since May. I am also running consistently during the week, feeling on most days more like a runner than a wounded deer. I think there might be hope once again.

My string of years without a fracture is at an all-time high of three years. The black bears I have encountered on several runs have not eaten me. The snakes I have seen have not struck. The rocky trails have not been the undoing of my ankles for quite a while. Even as I stood on a trail two weeks ago looking at three deer just ahead, I was protected. On the dead calm day, a huge branch right above my head let out that eerie crackling sound, foretelling that the limb was about to come crashing down. As it broke loose, I took several bounding steps forward, only to have the fifteen foot, six inch in diameter limb plummet to the spot I had just vacated. A close call, to say the least. But, it still missed!

I feel like there is a chance I may be able to run respectably in a couple of fall races. So, it is to that end that I run and ride. I will do my best to prepare myself for the task at hand. I would absolutely love to feel once again the freedom of running with swiftness and agility on mountain trails. I would love to cross the finish line closer to the front of the pack than the back. Dare I even dream of again winning something, somewhere, someday?

Too bad my bike and I got hit by a car today and catapulted into the next lane of traffic. The flying part wasn't too bad but the landing left something to be desired. Can you say "another setback"? But hey, I get to retain the title of Ms. Bad News Bear.