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### Turning 70 on the run

By Matt Draper

**Jay Norman celebrates his birthday in a grueling expedition race in Costa Rica**

A marathon can be daunting, but what about a race that tackles more than five times the distance over six grueling days? Throw in a 1,700-mile trip to Costa Rica and a sweltering racecourse that varies from rainforest to desert, and you've got what most athletes would consider a mountainous challenge.

But that's how Jay Norman wanted to celebrate his 70th birthday in January. A racing veteran who has completed more than 200 ultramarathons -- continuous runs of more than 26.2 miles -- Norman competed in The Coastal Challenge (TCC), a 230-kilometer, six-day Costa Rican expedition race, in each of its three installments.

In addition to celebrating his birthday, Norman had some unfinished business. Though he crossed the finish line at each TCC, he had yet to make the mid-race cutoff, which dropped him from the full-length, 230k Expedition Category to the 130k Adventure Category on an abbreviated course.

The missed cutoffs grinded on him. And considering his birthday would fall on Day 4 of this year's race -- a long route that meandered through dry forest and ended with a water traverse -- how could he not attempt to conquer Costa Rica?

"I had decided after last year's TCC that it would be my final one, but how soon we forget about the pain and struggle," said Norman, a semi-retired businessman from Dallas.

Standing under the dripping awning of a sleepy coffee shop in La Fortuna -- a small town in Costa Rica's central volcanic region -- Norman joked with competitors as heavy rain pounded the starting line. He was excited. He was anxious. And he certainly was prepared. When asked how he trained for an intense expedition race in the tropics, he pulled a camera from his fanny pack and displayed a picture of an office stairwell.

"Twenty-two flights of stairs with 460 total steps," said Norman, who, in addition to trail running, used the stairwell in a friend's office building to increase endurance and leg strength.

Norman's thin-but-sturdy 5-foot-8 frame shuffled along in the middle of the pack when the field of 44 competitors from 10 countries stampeded out of town heading toward Arenal Volcano, which they would traverse later that afternoon.

He and his racing had come a long way. While going through a divorce in 1985, Norman took a friend's advice to start running to reduce stress and regain focus. After strong finishes in a number of marathons, he shifted to ultramarathons, and, after slaying some of the toughest long-distance events, still enjoys the physical test of expedition races (staged races lasting more than three days).

TCC's Day 1 proved quite a test, dishing up an ample helping of heavy rain and treacherous terrain. Racers climbed more than 3,000 feet during a 22k route packed with soupy, muddy trails that moved through lush rainforest hills and zigzagging mountain climbs. Norman trekked across a smoldering volcano, bushwhacked through dense brush, and darted between thick trees coated in lime green moss.

"I had a really good day. A bit sore but feeling good," said Norman, whose racing uniform looked like the "before" scene in a laundry detergent commercial.

He rose from his tent at 3:30 a.m. on Day 2 -- competitors are required to camp each night -- and settled into his morning routine: globbing "sports slick" on his feet to prevent blisters, packing up his tent and pinning on his number. He carried little with him on the course, leaving behind items he wouldn't need, including his hearing aids and glasses.

Despite the first day's success, Norman wasn't ready for a monstrous second stage packed with technical trails and water crossings that would knock out more than half of the Expedition field.

Day 2 required competitors to navigate five river crossings, jumping into waist-high water and moving upstream in measured steps. Norman made it safely through two crossings before slipping and plunging into the river. Though he quickly resurfaced, he struggled to keep a steady pace through the rest of the course that featured shoe-sucking bogs and windy mountain ridges.

"It wasn't long before the bog turned into a steep uphill climb that seemed to go forever. There was virtually no flat ground and the wind was relentless, almost blowing us off the trail," he said.

When Norman finally reached the 31k cutoff checkpoint in nine hours -- more than an hour over the time limit -- he, along with most of the Expedition field, was downgraded to the Adventure category and driven to the day's finish line.

"It's not a matter of being a year older, it's a matter of beating a very tough course. That's all I had in me today," said Norman, staring down at his mud-caked hiking poles. "The river current knocked me down. I got wet, but it was no big deal."

Attempting to shake off a missed cutoff and a few hours of sleep -- his tent collapsed the previous night due to whipping winds -- Norman hobbled to breakfast on Day 3, forking down a traditional Costa Rican meal of rice, beans and eggs before going through his morning routine, which now included applying extra sunscreen and pulling on shoe covers.

The 13k third leg was the race's shortest course, and Norman, eyeing a competitive finish in the Adventure category, shot out of the start. Moving into the country's hot and dusty Guanacaste region, he dashed up a steep hill at the start and sustained a quick, steady pace on a flat road to the finish.

"He's a real diehard," said Brigid Weifenburg, 44, an Adventure-category racer from Freiburg, Germany. "He was cruising on the road section. Just flying."

Norman had reached the race's halfway point. And just as the landscape had changed dramatically to dry and sparse, Norman's pace had undergone a seismic shift as he found a new bounce in his step.

"I'm getting in the groove," said Norman, summoning some of the fortitude from his seven years in the Marines. "Tight muscles are loosening up, breathing is getting easier, and my endurance is improving."

His comeback continued through Days 4 and 5. Norman, easily recognized on the course by his short, shuffled steps, rang in his birthday during Day 4's backbreaking trail ascent. He "celebrated" by running, bouldering and sleeping in a desert region frequented by bugs and snakes. And, according to TCC staff and competitors, he wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

"He inspires all those he touches with his easy charm, good humor and words of quiet wisdom about life, running and achieving balance," said race director Tim Holmstrom, who toasted Norman with a beer during his mini birthday bash.



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Norman conquered another colossal course of steep climbs and dusty roads on Day 5, trekking 28 kilometers further west. Battling temperatures that swelled into the 90s, he kicked up his pace across a trail that moved from brown, burnt earth to dry forest scattered with red and orange leaves. Norman finally caught a glimpse of the Pacific Ocean while summiting a hill at the end of the route, and trotted down a beach to the race's final campsite.

"I got my running legs," Norman said while watching the sun set into the Pacific before his last night of camping. "It turned out to be one the best days. I felt good and ran hard."

Day 6, the course finale, included winding country roads and a coasteering section where competitors navigated rocky outcroppings along a windy, crashing coastline. Norman hopped across jagged rocks and headed to the final stretch of beach toward the finish line in Bolanos Bay, a sun-kissed strip of dark sand below the Nicaraguan border.

Norman finished the 2008 Coastal Challenge in 30 hours, 20 minutes and 29 seconds. Though it wasn't his best time, it was his most impressive comeback and finish.

"I got over the initial aches and pains," panted an exhausted Norman, draped in an American flag and surrounded by applauding competitors, staff and volunteers.

"I hope I'm still getting after it and running when I'm older," said Hoyt Michener, 41, from Boise, Idaho. "Not everyone can sleep on the ground every day for a week while competing in an expedition race."

At the awards ceremony, the race crew clapped and cheered while watching a highlight video, and an image of Norman storming down the beach drew an eruption of yells.

"I'm much slower than I used to be and not as agile, but I'm still out there doing what I love to do -- running on trails, testing my will and enjoying the camaraderie of the other runners," Norman said while saying goodbye to racers and staff.

While most of the competitors headed to the beach or a resort after the finish, Norman celebrated in his own special way with another mountainous challenge -- climbing Costa Rica's tallest, Mt. Chirripo -- just three days later.

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