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64 days, 6 nations, and 6 pairs of shoes

Secker completes Trans Europe Footrace

By [Pamela LeBlanc](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Monday, June 29, 2009

On the 65th day, Russell Secker rested.

That's a good thing, too, because for 64 days straight, the Austin runner pounded out an average of 45 miles a day, on his feet, as the only American competitor in the Trans Europe Footrace.

In all, he ran 2,800 miles, burned up six pairs of running shoes, endured hip and foot pain, slept on the floors of school gymnasiums and church halls, and lost nearly all his body fat as he crossed Italy, Austria, Germany, Sweden, Finland and Norway.

Secker, who turned 54 on the third day of the race, retired from his job as a vice president at Hoover's, which provides online information about businesses, and forked over \$8,000 to enter. He was the only native English speaker among 68 runners in the competition, which began April 19 in Bari, Italy, and finished June 21 in Nordkapp, Norway.

Secker is not new to ultra running. In 2005, he completed the Transe Gaule , running 725 miles across France in 18 days. Two years later he finished the Deutschlandlauf — 800 miles in 17 days.

But the Trans Europe Footrace is the granddaddy of them all.

Each day the racers ran the equivalent of nearly two marathons. Some stages stretched far longer. "These are hellacious distances on fresh legs — in our weary state, they are really daunting," he wrote about a 60-mile day in a blog he kept during the race. For Secker, who struck a conservative pace of 12-minute miles to thwart injury, that meant 13 hours of running.

He ran along buzzing highways and sleepy lanes, past fields of wildflowers and desolate fjords, through tunnels and over bridges. He ran in blazing heat, torrential rain, brutal headwinds and biting sleet and snow, stopping every 10K for food and water.

He crossed mountains, too. "Imagine running for 15 miles, then spending 3 hours at the gym on a stair stepper, then running another 15 miles," he wrote.

He cut the toe boxes out of his shoes to prevent blisters (he still got them) and sliced his socks lengthwise to ease pressure on his feet. At one point he developed an unconscious list to one side. Toward the end, his feet had puffed up an entire size, his ankles and calves morphing into what he dubbed "cankles."

The first 10 days were the hardest, but his body adapted as the race went on.

"The prospect each day of having to run all day is psychologically daunting," he said after returning to Austin on Thursday. "How I got to the end was running cautiously."

Each day the group strung out along the course. Secker set his own pace in the middle of the pack.

"I found after a while I had to be alone, I couldn't be with other people while I ran," he said. That way he didn't have to worry about keeping up conversation with anyone.

The highlights? Seeing the snow-capped Alps for the first time and running part of one stage with Mike Wilen, an Austin friend vacationing in Sweden.

At times it got boring. The course followed the same two-lane road for 19 days. The runners were exhausted and never saw a TV or newspaper.

"Reality does change," he said. "Nothing separates the days except it's one day closer to the end."

To fuel his odyssey, he gobbled more than 8,000 calories a day — much of it in bread, pasta, rice, gels, fruit, candy bars, cookies, peanut butter, salty snacks and soup. Breakfast alone consisted of two rolls with cheese, ham, salami and butter; two slices of bread with Nutella; a bowl of cereal; orange juice; a banana; and two cups of coffee — plus another roll with meat and cheese for a "second breakfast" after the first 5 miles on the road.

Some towns celebrated the runners' arrival each afternoon with oompah bands or folk dancers. One served up piping-hot pans of reindeer lasagna.

The best part of the day always came after the run, when he unpacked his things, took off his shoes and plopped onto his stomach to relax and read computer messages from his friends and family before dinner. Race organizers transported the runners' gear.

Nights were spent on the floor, where he and the other 67 competitors unrolled sleeping bags in rows. One night they slept on a ferry, crossing from Germany to Sweden. A medic known fondly as "Mr. Blister" accompanied the entourage, and the runners received medical treatment, MRIs and massages each evening. At 4 a.m. each morning the whole routine began anew, with packing, an early breakfast and a 6 a.m. start.

Twenty-three racers dropped out before the end, citing everything from shin splints to stress fractures to the inability to mentally face another day of long mileage.

By Day 52, Secker wrote that he was "desperately weary, and my feet are tenderized and sore beyond belief."

On Day 53, he crossed into the Arctic Circle. A husky followed him for 5 miles one day; a herd of reindeer ran alongside him another. The sun never set at night the last three weeks.

Finally, he crossed the last finish line.

"Some people got very, very emotional with floods of tears," Secker said. "I just felt relief. And dazed and confused, with a great feeling of, 'I made it and I can go back to Austin with my head held high.'"

It took a total of 602 hours, and Secker finished 30th out of 45 finishers.

One competition he did win? Body fat loss, as measured by the doctors who accompanied the race entourage. "I am now officially devoid of all body fat," Secker wrote in his blog. Amazingly, he didn't lose weight, because while he lost fat he gained muscle mass.

The next morning, he dumped all six pairs of worn running shoes into the trash and headed to the airport.

After a layover to visit family in England, Secker returned to Austin after midnight Thursday. His wife,

Claire, and two sons, who hadn't seen him since Easter, met him at the airport, congratulatory banner in their arms.

"It was Russ' dream for many years to take part in this race, and he worked very hard preparing for it," said Claire Secker, a triathlete herself. "It turned out to be a wonderful way for him to celebrate the start of his retirement."

By 9 a.m. Friday, he'd already downed two breakfasts. He sat on a sofa, looking thin but muscular, veins bulging from his arms and legs, recounting the odyssey. People always ask why he does it.

"I like the format, I like the fact you get to know the people you're doing this with rather than showing up for a marathon, running it and coming home," he said. "There's that social camaraderie and the extreme personal challenge."

But it's nice to rest, too. "It's blissful not to have to keep pounding my feet."

About 50 friends gathered at Secker's home Sunday to celebrate his return to Austin. They peppered him with questions and showered him with congratulations.

"I can't even imagine that," said Dick Beardsley, an Austin runner who finished second in the Boston Marathon in 1982. "It just shows you how much the human body can be pushed."

Now that the race is behind him, the Seckers plan to buy a home in England, near their grandchildren. They'll split their time between Austin and England.

While some outdoor adventures are certainly in store — including a five-day stage race across Germany with his wife — Secker vows to ramp down the intensity.


"I solemnly promise that I will never do anything this crazy ever again," he said.

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