

Running the R.O.

Personal observations from inside the race.

BY ZOIE CLIFT

The Rouge-Orleans (R.O.) is a landmark race in Louisiana. It was the first official trail ultra in the state and also the first to use the Mississippi River levee as a race route. The point-to-point flat course hugs the river (the longest in the nation) as runners race atop the gravel-and-dirt levee 126.2 miles from Baton Rouge to New Orleans. The young race, created only three years ago, is timed to coincide with the Mardi Gras season each year.

At R.O., runners are provided with a visual tour of the state, running by not just the river but a smorgasbord of sites like historic plantation homes, sugarcane fields, farms, cows, swamps, a former leper colony, refineries, barges, and rural towns. You can take on the route with a relay team or solo.



© Zoie Clift

▲ The Mississippi River levee is used as the race route for the 126.2-mile Rouge-Orleans.

Among the solo finishers last year (February 8-10, 2013) were R.O. veterans Dan Brenden and Alissa Draper. For Brenden, what stands out about the race is the accessibility the crew has to the course. For Draper, it is the distance. Here is a look at their approach to the race and their race-day recap.

Dan Brenden, time: 31:42:17

Brenden, 61, has run R.O. the past two years and started running ultras 13 years ago. In that time, he has finished an impressive number of ultras, including a record seven Grand Slams—he planned to go for another in 2013 [which he completed]. His girlfriend, Huguette White, has been his one-person crew at races since 1999. Brenden and White live together in Phoenix, Arizona, and travel together to races around the world. White has one leg and moves ably on a pair of crutches. Nearly 60 years ago, she was given months to live after doctors in her native Lebanon misdiagnosed her rare form of bone cancer. She was 15 when her mother brought her to a hospital in the United States for a second opinion that led to the amputation that saved her life. At the end of each race, Brenden carries White over the finish line as a symbol of their completing the race together as a team.

His approach

“This one (R.O.) is interesting because a natural breakdown [of the course] is by thinking, *Do 100 miles and then let's do a marathon for good spirit*. Starting in waves and at night on a levee with the Mississippi River on one side and the ability to have my crew experience the adventure only a few yards away on the road below is a highlight.

“In most distance runs, a crew meets their runners a couple times during a race. This is significantly different since the crews are a much bigger part of the run. The crew is active and follows the runners (side by side) often [via the two-lane River Road, one of the oldest scenic byways in North America]. They get a feel for what it is like to be a runner and see similar scenery, face the darkness, tiredness and still must progress.

“Huguette is more than a crew—we are a team. There are only a handful of races we haven't done together. We have been through the Amazon jungle, the Libyan Desert. Since she speaks French and Arabic, she was instrumental in arranging for the Bedouins to search for me after I had been lost off track for 22 hours in the desert. That's a whole other story.

“Running it [the R.O.] takes the same muscles and the feet take a beating on the same place, leading to accelerated muscle fatigue and blistering, where in mountain running there is a variety of terrain and foot-strike patterns that spread the impact to different muscles and locations. I've found my times are consistently slower on the flat gravel surface and tough on my body. It only takes me around



▲ Dan Brenden running atop the gravel-and-dirt route of the R.O.

21 hours or so to do the mountains and Vermont Trail 100, and to do 100 miles on this course takes me around 25 hours—go figure that.”

The race

Experience to the first aid station at mile 28

“The most difficult part of this first section was waiting in anticipation for the start. Early in the morning we parked the car in the handicapped space near the *USS Kidd* next to the starting line. Starting at 8:00 at night is highly unusual for an ultra. Since I didn’t know if I was going to be able to finish, I opted to take the first wave to give me time to make my way—besides, I like running at night. To compound the matter, I had been battling tendinitis in my knee and for several prior weeks had not run, and the knee still hurt. Even 20 minutes before the race, Huguette and I were discussing if we should just drive to New Orleans, get a room, and enjoy Mardi Gras. We donned our reflective vests and headlamps and made our way up the grassy slope to the start. On the top we saw all the other runners. I was still uncertain of the wisdom of our choice, but the glow of the headlamp lights and reflective vests, the positive camaraderie of the other runners, pushed me.

ad

Denver Benton [race director] gave us a brief starting talk, then the ritual begins. I tie and retie shoes several times. I feel kind of like a schoolchild leaving as his mother shoves him on his way. I take one last look back at Huguette, and I am on my way. The atmosphere in this run—as with other ultras—is encouragement. The competition is within each runner. We learn the trail is not the competition; it becomes a friend.

“It’s kind of funny; after the first step, all the insecurities evaporate and you become a whole different person and feel you can do anything. The weather is beautiful. The night darkness becomes more pronounced. Headlamps are turned on brighter. I glance down to the road and with great confidence see a little red car with a red blinking light inside. I know it is Huguette passing by. I briefly put my headlamp on blinking—this is our way of identifying each other. There is a whole caravan of cars below. We are all on the move, and we are together, and it is a reassuring feeling.

“I hear the first sound of a barge horn and pass several people coming the other way on the levee. It is a nice warm night, and I am grateful there isn’t rain like last year, and I am just comfortable to not go fast. Just keep moving. I am getting into the mental state of focusing on footing—run on the left or right side of the track. Watch out for the cow grates. With not much else to think about, one can contemplate this dilemma for miles and never really come to a conclusion. After viewing a cow pile, a runner comments how that cow had serious digestive problems.

“Then I come to the lights of a casino, once again very magical. I felt like a young Dorothy approaching Emerald City in the Land of Oz. We had to come down from the levee at this section and onto River Road, almost as if giving honor to the great Oz. I maneuvered myself around the traffic circles, then out of the glitter and back onto the levee.

“One of the best parts is to see the first aid station in the distance—it’s almost as good as being there. I call out, ‘Is that you, Huguette?’ She responds, ‘Is that you, Dan?’ We repeat this at each aid station—the dialogue stems from a run years earlier, and we now affectionately repeat it. Later on a staff member said watch out for ghosts on this next section.”

To the second aid station at mile 55

“Nearby are the remains of an old leper colony [the former Carville Leper Colony, which is said to be haunted]. It is a beautiful section, the moon shining through tall old trees and casting their shadows on the trail, the moonlight dancing over the water patches in the bayou areas, an owl hooting, a distant train horn, barges shining their spotlights on the shore. It is very much like a setting for the next Harry Potter movie. I felt like I was a child and imagined dueling dragons shooting

their flames across the landscape, casting silver spirits on the land below and lighting up numerous silver-lined paths. In effect it was the moon's rays bouncing off the waterways. I am by myself during this section—there are no headlamps or taillights, cars or traffic below. At times I turn my headlamp off. Some may find it haunting—I found it wonderfully magical and almost spiritual. It was probably the most beautiful part of the run. From running 100-milers, runners look forward to the halfway point of mile 50. I looked at my watch and thought I was not doing good at all. Finally I got to the plantation [Bocage Plantation] and was happy to come down from the levee, then I learned I was at mile 55, not mile 50. That made a tremendous difference. I took off with a Huguette cheeseburger and a couple of handfuls of cookies.”

To the third aid station at mile 75

“I was looking forward to the next aid station. That bridge [Sunshine Bridge], once you saw it, just kept moving away. Could this be a mirage? The bridge seemed as though it was moving away, placed on one of those barges heading to New Orleans. Mile 75 is a major mile point since I am thinking I only have a 50-miler left, or only two marathons. I might actually be able to finish this thing. I prepared for my second night run although there was still plenty of light out.”

ad

To the fourth aid station at mile 102

“This is a good place to be when there is still daylight, running past the factories, wondering what the workers were having for dinner. You run past the small towns and you are just above them (on the levee), cars and people going to and from. Then I found a Mardi Gras string of beads on the path. I was so excited I could hardly wait until I saw Huguette to give it to her. At mile 80 I changed socks and shoe inserts. Had another cheeseburger again with a diet orange soda and was on my way.

“At about mile 85, Huguette and I replay a scenario that happened last year at the same spot. It starts by her stopping the car and calling out: ‘Dan, you need to eat something?’ My response: ‘I’m not hungry—I feel like running! Do you feel like running?’

“Her response: ‘Yes!’

“Me: ‘Well, get into the car, buckle your seat belt, and let’s go!’

“For us this signals the end of the run. The race now begins. I begin running better than I did all day. It’s a beautiful part of the day. It’s turning dark at this location, and there are runners in sight.

“I begin to pass runners along the way and then enter into the spillway area [Bonnet Carre Spillway, which plays a major role in protecting New Orleans from flooding]; it is dark, and I don’t have a good idea of what the spillway entails but I do remember to keep going. I find Huguette waiting for me at the top of the spillway and look forward to running on the path again. She says, ‘Run faster, Dan!’ I tell her, ‘I’m already running faster!’ I run past the barge docks all lit up like they are welcoming runners to the next stage, only a marathon left. I begin moving faster, and I see her little car close by. I then come upon a whole group of people on the path. Huguette calls to me, and then the group greets me and says the lead solo runner just left. I said, ‘Well, I guess I should get going then.’”

To the finish

“I was feeling good. This was a beautiful part of the run past homes, some very beautiful. I happened to look back after a few miles and saw what looked like a locomotive running up the trail. When the runner approached me, he said he was a relay member and not to be concerned. In the distance I could hear train horns and see the lights of New Orleans, but I just felt like running.

“Recognizing that I have a good chance of finishing, I began thinking of the end and how I would carry Huguette over the finish line.

“When I arrived at the final town, it seemed to go on forever. I wondered who were still in the bars. A cold, hard rain began. I bundled up my light jacket a little more and became concerned with the other runners out on the course. I turned off the levee and headed up the road to the park [Audubon Park] with Huguette right



© Beyond Limits Ultra

▲ At the end of each race, Dan Brenden carries his girlfriend, Huguette White, over the finish line as a symbol of their completing the race together as a team.

next to me in the car. She went ahead and found a parking lot. I saw the lights of the finish line. I stopped, asked her if she was ready, and she said, ‘Let’s go.’ I picked her up and for about the 113th 100-mile-plus finish carried her across the finish line, set her down, and kissed her. And then we were finished! We start and finish together with a kiss every time. For me, my motivation and my biggest award is the privilege of her allowing me to carry her over the finish line every time, no exception.

“The most memorable time of pretty much each section of the race is hearing the response to my call, ‘Is that you, Huguette?’ We have been greeting each other like this for 13 years now. Although she at 75 and me at 61, we are just beginning to race. So fasten your seatbelt.”

Huguette White: crew perspective

There have been only a few races that White, 75, hasn’t crewed for Brenden, including Leadville, when she fell and broke her hip the night before.

Why does she crew? “I think it’s love,” she said, laughing. “I just love him so much I want to make sure I am there for him and that he will reach whatever goals he has and whatever dreams he has. I feel like I am running with him.”

Her approach

“This race makes it easy for the crew [due to being able to follow River Road]. The most difficult part of crewing is getting lost and not being able to make it on time for the runner. This is like I am running with him—I am running in the car (laughs). I see every step. I am just right down below and watching him. To me this is exciting and beautiful to see the physical and mental strength working together.

“Along the route, security [police or from the refinery plants] would sometimes come and watch while they gave support or ask us why we were there. They have security cameras, and they know all the activities near the levee.

“Make friends before (the race) because that helps. At the beginning is always hard. Study the route and aid stations. Scope out the aid stations because at night it is difficult to see. It is good to have GPS.

“You eat all the time to stay awake (laughs). When Dan is running, I never sleep. I am used to it and I munch.

“I have everything he needs. Dan is very good at preparation and organization. We always go to the grocery the day before. We get him turkey, with cheese to spread instead of mayo because that gets bad. I get all this ready. I see him every two to three miles on the route, not like at other races. I have to be alert to see what he is doing, how he is running, what’s bothering him, and to remind him to take salt tablets.

“I keep a lookout for him. Like when he broke his ribs at Burning River in Cleveland. He tried Leadville with broken ribs and made it to 60 miles, but I had to stop him; crews have to because runners late in the night are sometimes not with it. You need to make some decisions for them. Sometimes Dan comes in sideways, tilting, and I make sure that he knows it. I pay attention to the way he runs and comes in (to aid stations), if he is OK, if he is not. It is very important to keep an eye on your runner and see how they are.

“Other crews helped me, especially to go up ramps to meet Dan since his knee was hurting. I was worried the whole time about his knee. When he got a little before 100 miles, he kept the same pace. I could see his feet from below (on the road), the same pace.

“This year he had a phone with him. Last year a friend of ours gave him an iPhone, but he didn’t know how to use it. Dan is not for cell phones. He did use it this year, and it was a big help to tell me what he needs because in R.O. there are just a few aid stations. We have to carry a lot of things with us.

“After we finished, we left the race to eat. We were amazed at all the ladders that people were putting up along the roads. We found out people put them up to see the parades. We couldn’t go back to our hotel because our car was parked on a parade route. We watched three parades and had so much fun. People saw Dan with his bib on. They asked questions and took pictures with him when they

ad

learned what he had done. By the time we got to the hotel, we had been awake for 60 hours except for an hour nap.

“Dan is very low maintenance; he heals fast. He is always happy and humble. I am the one who always brags about him (laughs). I am proud of him.

“The R.O. is a special race. It really is kind of mind-boggling to think—126 miles.”

Alissa Draper, time: 35:26:55

Draper, who is 23 years old, has been stationed in Germany for two years and began attending Louisiana State University in the fall of 2013. She has run every R.O., and the race was her first 100 and 100-plus in one. She was introduced to marathons and ultras during her deployment to Iraq with the US Army in 2010. She learned of the race while visiting her mom, who lives in Louisiana, the following year.

Her approach

“The best way for me to explain running such a long distance, whether on the levee or in Germany, is like Dean Karnazes said, ‘It’s not fun.’ In my own words, run-

ning is not really fun, especially for that long. It’s rejuvenating, hard, and somewhat selfish in the aspect that the completion only benefits one person. But it is the only place that allows for the most unique spiritual awakening; the terrain and sites atop the levee aren’t really a huge attraction for me—it’s the distance.

“One hundred twenty-six point two miles is far, and it’s easy to underestimate the challenge once you’ve already accomplished this race or as a seasoned runner—not myself in reference to that statement. It is easy to



© Zoie Cliff

◀ Alissa Draper has run every R.O. since it was created three years ago. The race was her first 100 and first 100-plus in one.

look at the terrain and think it won't hold much of a challenge, but the distance is relentless. Each year I've said and say the same to others: running the R.O. is like leaving family—it doesn't get easier just because you've done it before.

“Most 100s may offer major aid stations every five to 10 miles—the R.O. doesn't, and I have encountered many solo unsupported runners who have regretted not having a crew. The weather is unpredictable during the winter months of Louisiana, so having a crew is imperative given the temperature may drop to an all-time low since '82 (this happened in 2012), you may encounter tornado weather warnings (2011), or the weather can be remarkably humid and feel like desert heat (2013). These challenges alone, on top of not having large amounts of aid, can hurt a runner to the point of not finishing just by running out of water.

“Something simplistic I wish I was joking about is actually acknowledging there is a marathon left after 100 miles. The R.O. is set up with four major aid stations and, for solo runners, drop boxes between all major aid stations. The aid stations are 28 miles apart from one another, which leaves the last aid station before the finish at 106 miles. That is 20 long-winded miles before reaching the finish; most people assume if they tackle the first 100 at a specific amount of time, they can achieve an easy last marathon in a specific amount of time. Unless you're well versed in ultras, these calculations end up leading to a burnout, and most people drop between aid stations two and three, not even reaching the 100-mile mark.

“I was once told rock-plated shoes relieve a lot of tension by protecting your feet from the constant foot pounding of 106 miles of gravel—the last 20 or so are paved. If I ever remember who said that, I think I may kill them (laughs). Really, though, there is no shoe that can stop your feet from hurting by hitting the gravel. I've used the method of changing shoes at every [aid station] or every other aid station to get a different impact on my feet with different shoes. But I'll never use rock-plated again—they bruised the bottom of my feet. I believe you dance with the one you came with, so I go Nike Stabilizer (I pronate in on my right knee), and I've never been let down. I save one pair that are a half-size bigger than I normally wear for the pavement. This way they can accommodate any swelling at that point (since there usually is a little) and offer relief by letting my feet fully expand in the shoe.

“I have never experienced blisters. I have, however, experienced toenail issues. The simple solution is get them permanently removed. I have successfully done that to my right-side foot and will be getting my left done within the next couple of days. All that to say, if you have toenail issues that are actually affecting your race and you can handle it, just rip it off and slap a Band-Aid over it. The nail will grow back, and this way you'll feel a lot of relief because your toenail won't be aggravated by the constant foot pounding and uplift from your shoe.

“The R.O. doesn't offer many places to use a bathroom, and there aren't many places to hide.

“I wear a small CamelBak that doesn’t hold a lot of water and offers two pocket areas. The key to a running pack that has worked for me is how tight it’s strapped to me. Extra flapping around causes extra work from indirect pulling. I’ll pack three extra pairs of socks, baby wipes, antichafe (I highly recommend the rub-on cream), and maybe some ChapStick. I usually carry identification in my pack like a driver’s license or my military ID. Something I started doing is safety-pinning Ziploc bags of snack foods to the straps so I can rip off any refueling foods on the go rather than have to stop and dig in my pack. I usually carry sweets on one side and salts on the other. This is merely stuff to give me a little energy when I need it and stuff I might crave at certain miles. For the most part, my crew will always be within earshot in case I need anything.”

The race

The experience to the first aid station

“It is because of running the R.O. starting at 8:00 at night that I have learned I love running at night. There is a peace when all you see is a half-lit moon and full-light starry sky that embraces your surroundings. That is my favorite part and one of the most exciting parts I look forward to each year. I experienced the cows my first year, but they never chased me; they just hang out and watch me pass. I like to tell people that animals and even other people are more scared of me than I am of them. I mean, let’s face it, who the heck runs atop a levee at odd ends of the night? I’d be scared of that insanity too if I wasn’t the one running.”

To the second aid station

“I’m not too big on the main attractions of the race as I am on the running experience itself. More often than not, I am probably too out of it to even remember what plantation I just passed or chemical refinery, to be honest (laughs). I have a tendency to gravitate to the best feelings I get when running, and they are at night and when night turns to day. Between the first aid station and going into the second one, I like the feeling of encountering the sunrise. Though I’ve never seen it rise, I get to see the transformation between night and day and run straight through both, and that is by far the best feeling when I’m out there. My crew switches at aid station 2, so I always get excited to see my mom and dad. It’s exciting and refreshes me to see faces I know out there, especially after 12 hours of night running.”

To the third aid station

“There is nothing appealing to me about this section. It’s a rough section because I consider it an in-between, not far enough to be happy you’re almost done, but not close enough to still obtain some sort of comfort.”



© Zoie Clift

▲ During the R.O., runners are provided with a visual tour of the state, running by not just the river, but also sites like historic plantation homes and rural towns.

To the fourth aid station

“The spillway is where I hit my Wall. That is normally around 90 miles, and like every runner, this is where I encounter the runner’s Wall. It’s like hitting the end of strength and realizing you might be weak but having the ability to fight off the denial. I don’t think there are words for this—it’s just an experience that you have to persevere through and part of the reason we run such distances. You learn something about yourself in times like this—maybe the ability to keep pushing or the ability to run when all you want to do is sleep. I’m reminded of a passage out of a book each time I experience this part of the race: ‘If you quit now, you’ll make it easier to quit on something much more important.’ So I keep running.”

To the finish

“I make it through my Wall, but the last part of the race between the last aid station and the finish, I hit a different level of running, I hit exhaustion. This isn’t a wall, this is literally my body running on hours of no sleep and trying to figure out how to keep going when all it wants to do is lie down. My body is swollen, tired, and hungry, but nothing sounds appealing because I can’t find the equilibrium to

► The R.O. is timed to coincide with the Mardi Gras season. Dan Brenden and Huguette White (center) watched three parades after the race.



© Huguette White

keep from getting nauseous after trying to find some source of refuel. There is no advice or words other than put one foot in front of the other and keep moving. I've found that quick little five-minute naps will give an extra burst to keep going. But overall, your body is just exhausted. Remembering it's a race so it eventually has to end is the only thing that keeps me moving in this area.

"I remind myself of the reasons I picked up such an odd hobby to begin with and attach my thoughts to the very reason I persevere through such odd and self-inflicting circumstances. I am young and have only been ultrarunning for three years. So each race, I'm motivated by the opportunity to learn new things from seasoned runners. The best advice I was given was you never stop learning. If I am still figuring out what works, then I'm doing good because once you think you know [everything], you realize how much you really don't know at all. Each race holds new challenges."

Postscript: The 2014 Rouge-Orleans has been cancelled so that race staff can work on negotiating the permits needed to use the Mississippi River levee as part of the course. The Rouge-Orleans is a go for 2015, although the exact dates have not been announced as of yet. Until then, the race staff will be working with the state, property owners along the levee, and the levee board to create a streamlined process to allow the general public use of the levee for sanctioned events. According to race director Denver Benton, they will announce exact dates and open online registration in March 2014. Until then, those interested in the race can visit www.TheRougeOrleans.com for updates and general race information.

