

Catalina Country

Magnetic island marathon turns 30



Courtesy Pacific Sports

By Ali Noller

In many ways, the Catalina Marathon parallels the sport of running.

Both started small, with strong cult-like followings of dedicated disciples. Both began ruggedly with few modern conveniences.

The only tool runners have ever needed has been a sturdy pair of shoes, while those participants of the first Catalina Marathon 30 years ago depended only on the simplest necessities, camping the night before race day on a secluded part of the island.

While men have been running since the dawn of time and while Catalina Island has stood its own test of time, the event that would bring the two together is one that is unique and still growing, much like the sport.

This month, when nearly 750 participants lace up for the 30th running of the Catalina Marathon on March 17, four hearty competitors will toe the line for the 30th year in a row.

One of those athletes is Bill McDermott, an Iowa transplant who became hooked on the sport of marathon when he arrived in California more than 30 years ago. The life-long runner and athlete has become the face of the Catalina Marathon – a distinction he admires, since he considers Catalina the race most suited to his skills, talents and expectations for a race.

“In the beginning, we didn’t know much of anything about Catalina, and we exaggerated what we did know about the wild ani-

mals living on the island,” said McDermott, who has worked in the aerospace industry for 32 years. “I’ve always enjoyed going to first-time races, because there is something special about races in the beginning. Catalina has been able to maintain that small feeling, even though it’s a highly developed race.”

McDermott is a 13-time winner of the race, and started a blog last fall to chronicle his experiences at Catalina in the past 30 years. Race director Jack Caress said when he took over the race a decade ago it was important to maintain the familiar appeal the Catalina Marathon had become known for.

“This is a race that had all the elements to be a national destination race,” Caress said. “We really wanted to pay attention to the history of the event. The worst thing that could happen to this race would be to ignore the history and the legacy of it.”

When Bill McDermott joined the small field of runners – the official participant tally is 39 – in the first Catalina Marathon in 1978, the group camped at a remote Boy Scout camp before embarking on their early morning adventure across the island.

“I guess we were all trying to scare and intimidate each other about these perceived dangers,” McDermott writes in his blog about that first year. “The topics included the wild buffalo, the vicious goats, the killer pigs, the vertical climbs, the heat, the cold, the lack of trail, the risk of getting permanently lost. One thing was certain in our minds before

CATALINA MARATHON
March 17, 7 a.m.
pacificsportsllc.com



Legacy runner Bill McDermott

Courtesy asphoto.com

the race started. Avalon [the finish of the race] seemed to be a thousand miles away. We started the race the first year like it was an ultra, going out very slowly, fearing we might be there all day long."

In the beginning, the island was a mysterious place that held lore of wild animals lurking.

Not all of it was lore. McDermott said you can still find animals today alongside the 26.2 mile course.

"You're lucky to see the buffalo; it's more unusual to see a wild pig or a goat on the trail," he said. "You also might see a fox or a bald eagle."

For a race that *Runner's World* magazine recently named the "cult marathon of the U.S.," the Catalina Marathon is still successful at maintaining its unique feel.

"It's the anti-L.A. Marathon," Caress said, explaining that "there are no signals, no intersections, and almost all of the race is on trails. It's a logistical challenge, getting water to the water stations and shipping cases of Clif bars to an island. Almost everything has to be shipped in. That's part of the fun of it, and what makes it challenging and different."

Getting supplies and volunteers isn't the only challenge. The race itself is a hilly, rugged adventure.

"It's a hybrid race," McDermott said. "It is half road and half trail, and the combination of those factors makes it a unique race."

The race covers the interior of the island, an area that is often left unexplored by the thousands of tourists who visit the island each year. The population of Catalina is 20,000, plus the 200 buffalo that roam the island.

Runners will cover plenty of the remote portions, and will venture up and down for a challenging elevation gain of more than 3,700 feet throughout the course.

McDermott raced through high school and college, and immediately after running his first marathon, he knew he needed to perfect his ability in the 26.2-mile event.

If his standing course record is any indication, McDermott has achieved his goal, and doesn't see any end in sight to his running career. A daily 42-mile bicycle commute keeps him in prime racing condition, and running the hills near his La Habra Heights home has helped him to complete more than 1,000 races and 12 Ironman triathlons.

His wife will join him on Catalina for this year's marathon - in recent years they've made a weekend of the marathon, like many of the participants of the Saturday morning race.

Caress said this multi-faceted appeal is what makes the race alluring for competitors as well as supporters.

"It's a very unique place, because everyone is there and almost everyone stays there," Caress said. "You'll see the athletes out on the town, singing karaoke and wearing their finishers medal. It's a party waiting to happen."

To get a medal or a T-shirt, you have to finish the race - not simply enter. And repeat runners - there will be plenty of them out there on March 17 - can buy a pin to hang finisher bars after each race. That legacy even spawned a group - the Catalina Marathon Finishers Association.

As the Catalina Marathon moves forward into another decade, the history will not be lost. McDermott's writings may someday become a documentary or retrospective about the history of the Catalina Marathon, while Caress says his team will continue to work hard to spread the message about the race's 'destination event' appeal.

"We've been promoting the appeal of the island as well as the race," Caress said. "I'd challenge you to find a similar event. This tradition of this race includes more than 100 people who have competed in the race more than 20 times."

One of those runners will be "Buffalo" Bill McDermott, whose 2:39.58 in 1991 still stands as the traditional course event record.

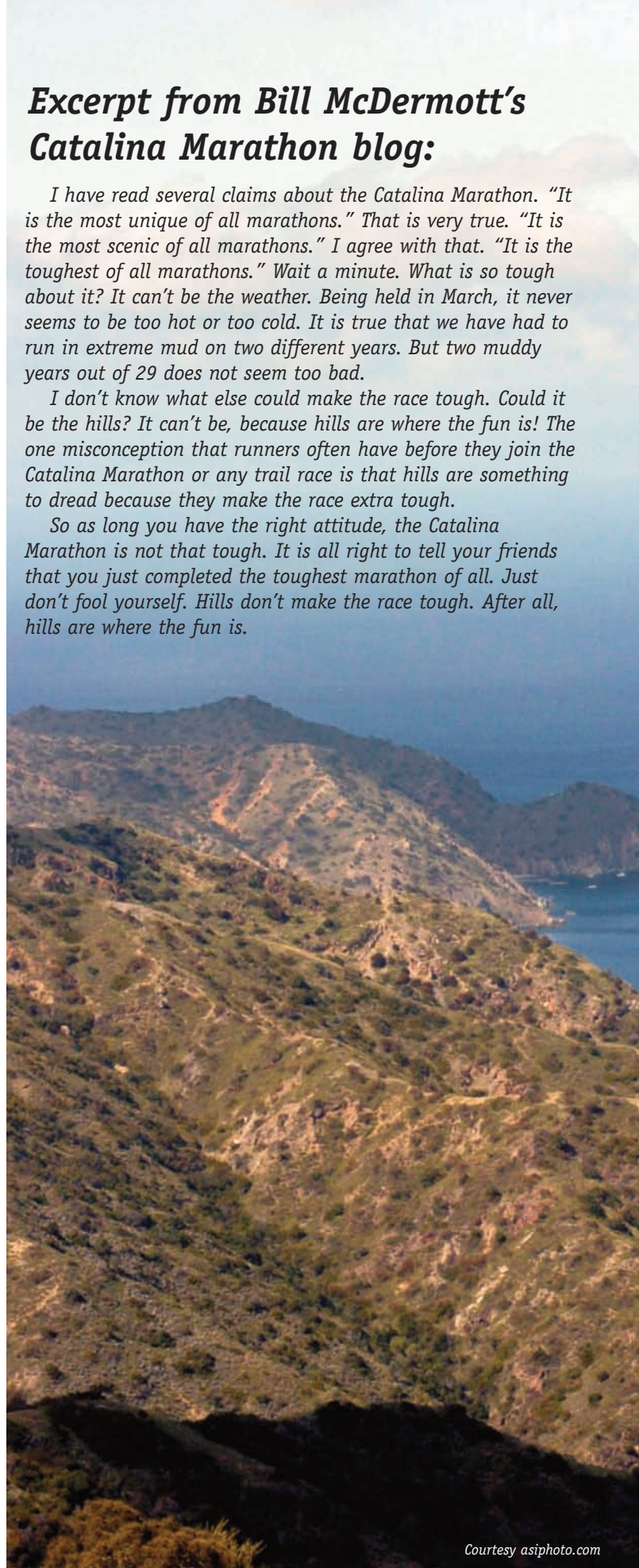
"Course records are going to keep getting broken forever," McDermott said. "But I've always just run for the fun of it." <<

Excerpt from Bill McDermott's Catalina Marathon blog:

I have read several claims about the Catalina Marathon. "It is the most unique of all marathons." That is very true. "It is the most scenic of all marathons." I agree with that. "It is the toughest of all marathons." Wait a minute. What is so tough about it? It can't be the weather. Being held in March, it never seems to be too hot or too cold. It is true that we have had to run in extreme mud on two different years. But two muddy years out of 29 does not seem too bad.

I don't know what else could make the race tough. Could it be the hills? It can't be, because hills are where the fun is! The one misconception that runners often have before they join the Catalina Marathon or any trail race is that hills are something to dread because they make the race extra tough.

So as long you have the right attitude, the Catalina Marathon is not that tough. It is all right to tell your friends that you just completed the toughest marathon of all. Just don't fool yourself. Hills don't make the race tough. After all, hills are where the fun is.



Courtesy asipphoto.com