

Three days I will never forget....



Lake Tahoe Super Triple Sept. 28-30, 2006

After 3 days of measured energy, emotional control, 24.5 hours of running & 124.6 miles of pavement **Dave Yeakel Jr.** reached the goal.

Marathon #1 - 4:03:27

Marathon #2 - 4:09:53

72.2 miles around the lake ---
16:11:31 (1st 50 miles in 10:23)



This is my story

Several years ago I stumbled across the Lake Tahoe Marathon website and my attention was captured by a race they called the Tahoe Triple. The “triple” consisted of a marathon three days in a row resulting in a circum navigation of the lake. I was interested but the time was just not right for travel, crew or personal experience levels.

In 2005 I met Jack Healy thru the Reston Runners E-mentoring program for the JFK-50. It was Jack who rekindled the thought of attempting my first multi-day event in Lake Tahoe and it was he who kept asking if I had signed up yet as the spring months rolled on.

Finally, a decision had to be made. After two 100 mile runs early in the year I found myself weighing the pros and cons of yet another 100 miler at the end of August or holding out for the Tahoe Triple with more of a “vacation” feeling to the event. I went to the website one more time and was greeted by the description of a new event called the “**Super Triple**”. Two (2) marathons on back-to-back days followed by a 72.2mile run around the lake just 12 hours after the 2nd marathon finished. **Super Triple...**those words leapt off the page describing a truly unique event that would test the limits of my abilities and provide a fun environment in the days prior to the run, I registered almost immediately before I could change my mind or have saner friends redirect my thoughts.

Late May and June were difficult as my legs felt tired, combined with work and vacation to Alaska conspired to keep me occupied and away from running. Finally July was upon me and in typical Dave fashion it was time to get serious again. In other words, how few weeks training can I do and still survive the event with respectable times. Training consisted of quite a few night-time promises that I would run in the morning only to hit the snooze alarm and promise myself I would run that night. Repeat again and again, miraculously I did actually get into training mode and string together a few respectable weeks with

committed 3-4 back-to-back training days. Mind you, while I felt good about running 8-15 miles 3 days in a row Jack H and Dana McBride a fellow Tahoe Triple runner were putting together huge mileage #'s running 20-20-20 to simulate the triple.

I quickly realized that the training window was not big enough to put in serious mileage without risking injury. Instead I would need to rely on prior ultra experience, 6 years of "base" training and putting in three good efforts @ 50 Kilometers (31miles) during a five week period so that my legs and body would be forced to respond.

July 29th – VHRTC Catherine's "Fat Ass" was 8 hours of gasping for air and rocks but produced solid mental comfort in just finishing.

August 13th – Turkey Swamp 50k held in New Jersey resulted in a 4:38 Personal Best following Jack and Dana's steady pacing all day long as we ran in a "train" exercising diligence @ the walk/run method. Dana won the women's race and aced both Jack and I.

September 2nd – Was an informal run with the Reston Runners – meeting @ 5:30am for 10miles on roads before the regular club run and another 20 miles on trails. I finished feeling good and back to normal conditioning mode.

These three key events along with regular training provided the mental comfort entering Tahoe with a feeling of reasonably adequate preparation. In the final two weeks prior to departure I focused on packing & planning for three days of running. This was a new experience and raised my anxiety level as I pondered what clothing to utilize, what nutrition to pack, what shoes to wear, etc, etc, etc. I really wanted to take everything but the airlines would allow me only two bags '~'

Sept. 25th – arrive Tahoe! Felt great to be on the plane and finally approaching the race. The lake itself was beautiful as my father (Dave Sr.) and I drove from Reno to Incline Village @ the north end of Tahoe. Immediately we were in race mode trying to identify potential feeding zones for the last portion of the run when he would be up all night crewing for me. Dave Sr. attended my first JFK-50 and has seen me mid-point at two 100milers, but he had never seen me run on the dark side (over 50 miles) so 72 miles would be a new experience for him.

Sept. 26th – 5:30am wake up call for hot air ballooning over Tahoe, a highlight of the trip for both runner and crew. Lunch and shopping with Jack and Dana along with promises that I plan to run a few miles to loosen up...this never happens.

Sept. 27th – sleep in till 5:30am then coffee at Starbucks and spend a few dollars in the slot machines with Jack supporting the local economy. A wonderful breakfast of blueberry pancakes, eggs and bacon (hey, I was carbohydrate loading) – A trip to Virginia City site of the second largest city west the Mississippi during the silver rush. Late afternoon packet pickup, starting to get anxious, followed by the best pre-race dinner ever as it was the Horizon's regular buffet.

After the dinner the Super Triple runners gathered to get a few extra questions answered. With only 5 persons registered for the Super, it was hard not to think about the possibility of winning an event and I quickly identify Peter Lubbers as the primary competition based on a quick interpretation of his body language, height, fit appearance, and knowledge that

he was a repeat offender of the regular triple. Later I find out that I'm the only one attempting a multi-day event for the first time so technically I'm disadvantaged.

Typically, I never think about beating a particular person in a race just improving on personal times and placing within a certain percentile and above all else, finish the event. I've come close several times to a DNF (Did Not Finish) but have been able to elude the monster so far. Anna Bradford, the person responsible for inciting my extreme event madness, once told me that a DNF was only a matter of time as any athlete continues to push personal boundaries. In reality I knew this event was going to sorely test my skills, as prior 70+ mile race times were 1½ hour's over the 16-hour guideline for the final event. Yes, those prior runs were on trails without good footing but I hadn't run two consecutive days prior to attempting them either. The standing joke for two months prior to the event became that every time I wanted to skip training my father would look at me and say "don't embarrass me" meaning don't DNF. All in all this was going to be quite the adventure.

Thurs. Sept 28th – No turning back! Out of bed @ 5am going thru the normal pre-race routine. Trying to console myself that it's only a marathon today. Contacts, toilet, eat, shower, toilet, eat, get dressed, lubrication to avoid chafing, Aleve as a pre-emptive strike mostly for the mental aspect, toilet one last time. Remember...normal race prep. It's cold outside probably 40^{sh} as we drive to Inspiration Point and the start line.

The first day was everything and more with an excitement in the air and fresh legs the primary concern was too not run too fast. At the start line I had tried to identify the other four Super Tripler's positions and quickly saw Peter careening downhill. Immediately I thru the pre-race plan out the window and picked up the pace not to catch him but to stay close. Around mile 5 Pete & I ran and talked for the first of many times during the next three days.

The next 14 miles provided plenty of entertainment chasing geese in a park, running through the downtown section of South Lake Tahoe and meandering up the east side of the lake while dodging construction barricades and road traffic...all the while the race ebbed and flowed as short walk breaks were taken and I fueled myself with GU every 40 minutes. My father performed crew duty better than I anticipated (in actuality) and we had several chances to interact but it was primarily short sentences or non-verbal communication of how I was feeling and whether I needed a water refill.

The final seven miles of the first day were all uphill to the highest point on the course @ Spooner Summit (elevation 7,100). After going back and forth with Peter the prior 23-24 miles I passed him on the steepest part of the hill and just kept moving. It seemed apparent to me at this point that we were fairly evenly matched, Pete was faster downhill, I had the edge going uphill, while the flats were anyone's for the taking.

At last I crested the ridge, turned left into a long parking lot and took my last walk break before anyone from the finish line could see me. As I crossed the timing mat the clock read 4:03 placing me 12th of 66 finishers on day one. "That may have been too fast," I commented to the timer as I headed back down the course to talk with other finishers and wait for the crew to arrive.

On the way back to the hotel, Jack, Dana & I along with spouses, friends and Dave Sr. stopped off @ Zephyr Cove to soak our legs in the ice-cold lake for 15 minutes and refuel with hamburgers, potato salad, coke, & coffee. Everything felt surprisingly good and I knew today was the day to enjoy the afternoon as tomorrow would be chaos. Once back @ the hotel I rubbed my legs with Icy Hot and tried to massage the quads back to normal.

Friday Sept 29th – Sleep till 5:30 as today's event starts 45 minutes later. Day #2 begins @ Spooner Summit and even though we are starting later it's colder because of higher elevation and early morning shadows. Before the race I'm feeling pretty good having climbed the trail behind the start line to commune with nature and running back down – I knew the first 13 miles were down hill to Incline Village and fully expected the first few to be rather uncomfortable as the legs got warmed up. Roll call provides the first glimpse that the triple has already claimed it's first DNF's as several people never show up for day # 2.

Once again I try to start slow, the downhill grade is not steep but it just keeps going and going. Once again I see Pete pulling away out front. It's fun to watch the group spread-out and the scenery is even prettier today as there are no major cities to run thru. It is several mile's, a few hundred feet drop in elevation and directional change in the sunshine before it warms up. Pete and I bounce back & forth this a.m. and we spend much more time in close proximity talking until just after Incline Village when it appears he has pulled away from me for good. Today's run is pretty uneventful other than one long stretch where I'm looking for my dad and getting very hungry & thirsty and several unexpected hills in the last 5 miles that tax my legs.

It's in these final hills of day #2 where I make contact again with Pete, then about 3 miles from the finish on an uphill section I pull away – definitely pushed a little hard in the final two miles because I misjudged the downhill roll and the distance to the finish which caused an unexpected walk break to ease the pain...encouraged by someone else's crew to push for the finish line I crossed the finish in Tahoe City just as the clock read 4:10 placing me 17th of 63 finishers for the day. Once again I contemplate what could I have done differently, did I utilize too much energy or will I be "ok" tomorrow? Day 2 is supposed to be "easier" but with the bulk of the miles going downhill I knew my legs had been taxed so I headed to the lakeside beach and began to ponder the ultra that would start in less than 12 hours.

Immediately my head began to spin thinking about icing the legs, what to eat, how much to eat, getting some sleep and making sure that Dave Sr. was ready to help but not pressured and able to have fun. In the next 12 hours I ate ½ pound of roast beef, ½ pound of chicken salad, gummy bears, Starbucks coffee, ½ turkey sub, lots of water, one bottle of ensure, a banana, and an ice-cream cone from McDonalds. In hind-site less would have been more.

We had 45 minutes back to the hotel, another brief meeting for the Ultra, then restocking my running supplies and switched gear for the ultra as I planned to run independent except for major refueling every 15 miles or so. This was exactly opposite of Pete's strategy to run without water bottles or fanny pack and solely relying on his crew. This provided him with less weight to carry – ultimately a very smart race system, which had never crossed my mind before I saw Pete & his crew on day 1.

Starbucks is not your friend when you want to sleep in the middle of the afternoon. It took me almost 2 hours lying in bed to fall asleep, ultimately watching a little TV and sleeping approximately 4 hours until 10p.m. When I woke up the nerves were in full swing and the legs felt like tree trunks permanently attached to the ground. My right calf was a tight which concerned me but there was little to do about it except chew on some Tums and eat a banana.

At 11:15pm we drove to the start line and with several other runners still couldn't locate the exact starting location. Ultimately, we arrived @ the start with just 5 minutes to go – I had opted to run in shorts, short sleeve t-shirt, lightweight Patagonia long sleeve, and my running vest. Additionally, I had a headlamp, handheld flashlight, water bottle, and fanny pack loaded with my “essential” ultra gear such as aspirin, eye drops, Tums, gels, toilet paper, band aids etc, etc.

Twenty-eight (28) runners toed the line for the “Midnight Express Tahoe Ultra” including all five of the Super Triple runners. Like most ultra's I've participated in there was not much fanfare as a simple “GO” was the only indicator the race had begun. Those first few steps were agony but I knew it would get better, and worse, before the night was over. My original plan had been to run as much as possible and utilize the coolness of the night to my advantage. However, it became evident that even the slightest uphill would forced me to walk so I settled in to my traditional 7/1 run to walk strategy.

It was amazing how many 1st timers were attempting the 72-mile ultra. Unfortunately, several of those never made it to the finish line regardless of the encouragement offered. One such runner named Chris, in his early 20's, fried his legs going up Spooner Pass in the first 15 miles and had nothing left on the other side – he was also being crewed by his father and the last time I saw him was several miles before Incline Village. With 28 starters only 22 made it to the 50-mile mark and of those only 16 crossed the finish line (57% completion) with yours truly being the last official finisher, but let's continue the story.

Incline village had been a mental target in my head as it represented half way and it was here that I really started to feel the fatigue of the prior days. A critical mistake I made was switching brands of nutrition gel from GU which I used on the marathons and every other ultra I've ever done to E-Gel which I believe is good but after only 1½ packs and 1½ hours of running I could not stomach any more. I switched to bananas, and Cliff Blocks but in hindsight it was the beginning of the end, slowly starving myself of critical nutrition, as I just didn't absorb enough calories. I did use Succeed (electrolyte pills) to help loosen up my right calf but it never got better and has taken a massage and nearly two weeks without running to feel normal again.

As I passed thru Crystal Bay and focused on Tahoe City, where the regular marathon was starting my time began to slip. Instead of knowing I would cross thru Tahoe City approximately 8:30 I kept re-adjusting my mental outlook until eventually I met Dave Sr. at our pre-determined spot about ¼ mile from Commons Beach but a full 45 minutes behind the regular marathon. I encouraged him to go relax after caring for me all night. My disposition had turned a little sour and I wanted him to go, figuring that I would be ok and utilize the marathon aid stations. Thankfully he did not listen.

As I ran thru town to begin the final 26-mile journey it was like a Stephen King novel where everyone has disappeared and all I had to follow was empty gel wrappers and layers of clothing discarded by the crowd in front. The sun was becoming intense even at 9:30 in the morning and unfortunately, I did not realize the mental challenge of being left behind. I crossed the 50 mile mark with little fanfare in 10:23 feeling good that those miles had been covered just 1¼ hours slower than my personal best on fresh legs...all I had to do was maintain a decent pace and I would soon be sitting at the Popes Beach finish eating hotdogs and drinking diet coke.

It had been miles and hours since I last saw any other runners and I knew that I was trailing the ultra runners with fresh legs but leading the Super Triples as I had last seen Pete & his crew around mile 15 heading up to Spooner Pass.

Relentless Forward Progress...between the slow starvation and increasing heat I was thankful that my father had declined my urges and was now providing water to me every 2-3miles. It was a dogfight as the aid stations had been dismantled in front of me and the road reopened to vehicle traffic. I had held grand visions of running down the middle of the road these final 26 miles instead of the horrible canter on the edge which helped develop a deep blister just behind my toes on the left foot. The slow death march began.

Even though I hadn't seen any runners for hours I knew several were close as I saw their crews with increasing frequency which meant I was slowing and they were closing the gap. But I just didn't have any more to give on this particular day. In one short section of road about mile 58, it happened. A glance over my shoulder exposed two runners just 100 yards back then a few minutes later I glanced again to see Pete looking fresh and running strong. We exchanged a few words before he ever so politely asked if he could cut to the inside and utilize the downhill to his advantage. What do you say? I wanted to run with him and couldn't, I wished him well and watched him disappear. Fifteen minutes later another Super triple runner (Keenan Follis) passed looking strong as well, my emotional energy plummeted. Then I did the math for the prior two days and knew I just needed to stay close to Keenan in order to retain 2nd place overall.

From there to the finish one more person passed me as I fought my way up and down the hills around the lake...frustrated that I looked like a cripple as people driving by were offering what sounded to me like mock support..."you can do it", "good job", "almost there" over and over as I imagine they think I'm just running the marathon vs. finishing 125 miles. In the last 8 miles I'm forced to challenge oncoming cars for running room, staring the drivers down and not budging from the white line as I try to stay off the edge of the road, which seriously antagonizes the blistered left foot and stresses the right calf more. My back is aching and I want nothing more than to be done. Finally the road levels and I know I'm close to the finish, probably no more than 3-4miles, which translates into a full hour. I check the watch as I've done over and over the past 15 hours measuring my speed and the 16-hour finish guideline.

16-hours comes and goes I'm close but still ½ mile away. My body has played with me the past hour, tempting me to shortcut the course, which would have guaranteed a faster finish but my mind would have none of it...knowing that it would haunt me forever. Even if they disqualified me for finishing after 16 hours I was going to finish. Finally, the entrance to Popes Beach and the finish line, I start the long run down the road and can see my father

where the course turns to the right. I ask the inevitable question for the first time...how far is the finish line after the turn. The answer is not what I want to hear...as far as this road that you've just run.

As I turned the corner it was hard to decipher where the finish line was as it looked like a ghost town. Crowd control fencing is lying all over the ground as if to present an impromptu obstacle course and I can't really see where to go with all the trucks and workers dismantling stuff. "Please," I think to myself, "let the timers still be there recording time". I burst into a "sprint" as I see what looks like the chip-timing mat but as I cross there is no chirp that I've become accustomed to hearing at a finish line.

A woman nearby rushes forward and points another 50-yards saying "UP THERE" and takes off as if to lead me to the Promised Land. A moment of mental frustration sets in as I've already stopped my personal watch and my running legs but both need to be restarted in a flurry of energy. I do manage to "sprint" the final yards before receiving my finisher's medal in 16hours 11minutes with a personal best for 72 miles. A survey of the finish area tells me I just made it and I quickly ask about food. (Yes, I did indeed collect 2nd place with only 3 of the five Super Triple runners finishing).

The situation of finishing dead last of any runner for the day was strangely surreal and just as Dave Sr. headed off to get me some food I felt a very discomfoting lightheadedness and nausea. Quickly I call three times with increasing loudness & anxiety but no response. I'm about to lose it and I can't even lie down because my legs can't take me there unless I just collapse. Luckily, Dave Sr. and several workers converge on me, help me to lie on a table and start feeding orange slices to boost my electrolytes while dumping cool water on my head. Almost immediately I've become super chilled and start uncontrollable shaking – I've seen this physical reaction before from my body and it's usually not good. The workers wrapped me in a moving blanket from one of the trucks and instruct Sr. to bring the car over in front of me. As my body slowly recovered, my mind was already in full swing, and now I just want to get the heck out of Dodge feeling a little sheepish about such a week finishing performance and half afraid there going to call an ambulance or something causing me to miss the awards meeting and my reunion with friends to be held in just about 1 hour.

I don't remember much of the ride back to the hotel except for McDonalds where I consumed my second ice-cream cone in just about 24 hours. As we walked from the car to the hotel I sensed someone staring just a little and chuckling a bit so I can't resist but start some small talk that "I usually don't look this bad but"..... The person in question happened to be Johan Oosthuizen from South Africa who ran the regular triple and set the Guinness World record for running the fastest three consecutive marathons on 3 different courses in three days. His official time was 8:10:07 breaking the prior record in existence since 1988.

His words of advise were no running for six weeks. Needless too say, I'm a little dense so I took two weeks off and have already begun planning the next grand adventure.

Tahoe taught me a lot about multi-day events, provided new friendships, & offered insights to my personal abilities. In the end, my primary goals were accomplished – don't embarrass my father & have fun - which gave me **Three days I will never forget...**