

Skagerberg Wins Trans-Continental Race, By Just 16 Minutes

by Nick Marshall

The morning of July 10th saw the Lou Gehrig Race for Life wind up successfully in New York City. After crossing the George Washington Bridge into the city the previous afternoon, Marvin Skagerberg and Malcolm Campbell topped off 91 days of hard-fought competition by jogging a token 6 miles together to the official finish line in Riverside Park. Throughout almost the entire trip, the two men had toiled down the nation's highways alone, without the benefit of company; but on the homestretch they shared the climax to their accomplishment with the handlers who had aided them so loyally during the trip, plus a phalanx of Skagerberg's teammates from the Millrose AA.

What they had completed was the first race across the United States in 56 years. The number of days involved from the April 10 start at Anaheim, California, to the finish in New York made it the longest competitive footrace ever in terms of duration. Measuring in at 3,559 miles, it was second in length to only one race in history - C.C. Pyle's 1929 transcontinental had followed a route totaling 3,635 miles.

Besides its monumental length, the event was remarkable for its closeness. As the contest unfolded through the Mojave Desert, climbed over the Rocky Mountains, wended

its way through the Great Plains, and then rolled past the farmlands of the Midwest, the scenario that unfolded was one that both racers had dreaded might occur. To wit, neither man was ever able to establish a commanding lead at any point during the many, many weeks of the journey.

Before it had begun, Malcolm and Marvin had each expressed the hope that it would not be a close race. Facing well over 3,000 miles of roadway, the last thing they wanted to look forward to was a mad dash over the closing stages into New York. Most observers had assumed that any such hard racing at the conclusion would not be necessary. Though the two athletes had backgrounds showing them to be very evenly matched in ability, it seemed most likely that due to the extremity of this particular undertaking, the outcome would be determined by one runner being more hampered than the other by injuries. I couldn't tell which man would fall prey to such serious trouble first, but I felt fairly certain that we could count on one or the other eventually breaking away, so that they'd be 15 or 20 hours apart in cumulative time at some point before they approached hailing distance of the East Coast. Such a margin would still be respectably close for the trailing runner,

yet would relieve both individuals of the unpleasant need to race very hard at the very end. As Marvin and Malcolm shadowed each other through the western half of America, I kept assuring people that there was still more than half a continent to go, that they both couldn't keep running as well as they were indefinitely, and that someone was surely bound to crack sooner or later. It wasn't until they hit the Mississippi River in early June, only 82 minutes apart after 2178 miles, that I began to think a genuine battle to the tape had become a real possibility.

That's how it turned out, too. The darned fools swapped the overall lead 11 times. The biggest margin anyone ever had was 3:40:06, and that was a gap carved out by Campbell in the first 9 days of the race, as it traversed the California and Nevada desert country. At the first rest day, April 27 in Salt Lake City (778 miles), Campbell still had a cushion of 1:56:47, but Skagerberg dominated through the Rockies to go up by 2:15:36 the day after Denver (May 11 - 1,314 miles). The duel evened out after that. During one 10-day span in the wide open stretches of eastern Kansas and Missouri, neither guy could get more than 1/2 hour ahead at any point, and after six of those days, the total margin between them was less than 10 minutes.

It took a rainy Illinois in early June to open things up again. Winning 7 out of the 8 individual stages going into Indianapolis (2,415 miles), the American Skagerberg built up a total lead of 2:41:48 by that city. Then it was the Englishman Campbell's turn to roar. As the route turned northwest for four days in order to touch Chicago (to the dismay of everyone in the entourage, this indirect zigzag in the course added substantial mileage without getting us any closer to New York), Malcolm came alive and outran Marvin on all but one of the next dozen stages. Skagerberg had a particularly shaky period nearing Detroit and by June 22nd (Day 74; Fremont, Ohio - 2,932 miles), he had slipped 1:07:51 behind Campbell.

With "only" about 600 miles remaining, it was beginning to feel like the homestretch. The crunch was on, and by the Pennsylvania border, Skagerberg whittled the gap down to 37 minutes. As he was plotting his subsequent strategy, though, disaster struck. Three miles from the finish line for Day 80 in Pittsburgh, Marvin disappeared from the course. For 3,143 miles, the two guys' handlers and I had managed to keep both runners from ever going astray. Now, Skagerberg suddenly veered over the wrong bridge in downtown Pittsburgh and none of us knew where he'd gone in the midday congestion.



Crossing "flat" Kansas.

He eventually found his way to the finish, but lost about 90 minutes in the process. It cast a pall over the race to realize that after three months' effort on the part of each man, the race might be decided by one confusing intersection. With the winner of this race clearing \$20,000 and the runnerup getting \$10,000, it looked like Skagerberg had fallen prey to what could turn out to be one of history's most expensive wrong turns.

(I bear responsibility for the snafu. Although we had a written itinerary, the fact that we travelled a new section of the country every day week after week meant that there was little time for much scouting ahead. I knew the stretch in Pittsburgh would be complicated - our advance team had gotten lost both times they drove it - but I never saw the problem area until an hour before the runners got there. My own vehicle was a 28-foot motor home that was quite unwieldy in city traffic, so I opted to park it and tried guiding the runners on foot the last 6 miles. But they were 8-10 minutes apart, so it meant dashing back and forth between them, while also trying to keep their handlers on the right track - Malcolm's van promptly got lost anyway. The fateful turn for Marvin came right after I'd ferried him through what I judged to be the most confusing spot. As I turned back to pick up Malcolm, I gave Marvin some hurried verbal instructions which I thought he understood. He was to ignore the next three bridges crossing the river and stay straight for several more miles till the Birmingham Bridge; by then I'd be up there with his van to direct him to the day's finish. I was relieved

that things seemed under control, but it shows how inadequate and misunderstood hurried descriptions can sometimes be. Instead of keeping straight, within a quarter mile of leaving me, Marvin immediately took a sharp left turn across the very first bridge he came to.)

His immediate reaction to getting lost was an understandable one - deep gloom. Malcolm was running consistently well, so an unexpected setback of 90 minutes seemed an almost unbearable handicap to overcome. What ensued was the hardest running of the whole transcontinental, by both men. Even as he spoke of Campbell as being uncatchable, Skagerberg launched himself into a grim pursuit of the leader. Surprisingly, though it lacked the high altitude of Utah and Colorado, U.S. Route 30 in western Pennsylvania featured terrain that was about as hilly as any the runners met all trip. With Campbell and Skagerberg starting every day together at 7 AM and running to a predetermined finish for each stage (with the standings being calculated from the cumulative daily clockings for each man), it was necessary for the guy in the #2 position to break contact with the overall leader day after day across the Keystone State. Daily, that is exactly what Marvin did, killing himself with a fast start before Malcolm could get warmed up, then trying to pull away even more once he was out of Campbell's sight. It was a case of going for broke, morning after morning.

For the most part it worked. The day he left Pittsburgh he was 2:04:44 behind Campbell. Convinced that he had to win every single day from then on, Skagerberg hammered the pace all the

way to Philadelphia. Although he faded from his jackrabbit starts toward the end of some of the longer stages, over 8 straight days he shaved between 4 and 22 minutes off his deficit.

By then Campbell's lead had shrunk to only 11 minutes. It was apparent we were witnessing an example of the tortoise-and-the-hare fable, but with an ironic twist. For this was a case where the hare woke up in time to overtake the tortoise. Campbell upped his tempo impressively as Skagerberg came charging after him (despite the hills, Malcolm averaged 9:25/mile between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia), but the 50-year-old simply did not have quite the range of speed available to the 47-year-old. He couldn't match Skagerberg's fastest gear, which yielded a 9:02 pace during this crucial 295 mile stretch. Thus, the City of Brotherly Love marked the last hurrah for our British visitor. Soon after that the tide shifted for the final time, shortly before the racers crossed the Delaware River into Trenton, N.J., at 3,460 miles. By the end of that July 7th run into Princeton, Marvin had moved out to an advantage of 10:32. He added 5:56 the next day into Morristown, N.J., then coasted along beside his rival the final two days into New York City.

The resulting statistics show what an outstanding exhibition of ultradistance prowess these men put on. After 3,559 miles, exactly 16 minutes separated them. That's a minute's difference every 222 miles. Skagerberg's winning time of 647 hours, 8 minutes, and 5 seconds works out to an average pace of 10:54.44 per mile. Runnerup Campbell averaged 10:54.71 a mile. Despite the immensity of the race, the difference in the competitors' times at the end came down to hundredths of a second per mile!

It was a single ultramarathon, but of course it ran longer than any previous race. Over the 92 days, the men ran on all but 6 days (getting breaks at Salt Lake, Denver, Kansas City, St. Louis, Detroit and Cleveland). Seventy-two of the 86 running stages were longer than 50 kilometers apiece. On 18 occasions, they had to go over 50 miles. There was the rub. Beyond the sheer miles involved, what made it more difficult than any solo run across the U.S. was that these fellas were in a series of shorter ultras that ultimately added up to the coast-to-coast biggie. Racing against a human opponent every day meant they had to compress their 40+ miles daily into as short a time as possible. They couldn't afford the luxury of interspersing their mileage with rests throughout the day, which is how most solo, go-as-you-please transcontinental runs have been managed. Matched against each other, and with the clock



Skagerberg recuperates in his RV after another day's work on the roads.

ticking from 7 a.m. till they reached each day's finish, Campbell and Skagerberg did an impressive series of separate ultra-length runs, rather than innumerable short workouts adding up to a very long distance.

An event of such elongated proportions naturally yields some unusual statistics. Skagerberg "won" April by being in the lead by 16:49 as the calendar flipped to a new month after they'd gone 909 miles. Marvin also took May by a small amount, covering the 1207 miles in that month 13:17 faster than Malcolm. June belonged to the Englishman by a healthy 2:10:39 over its 1078 miles. But then Skagerberg took the climactic 10 days of July, thundering the 365 miles into his hometown 1:55:23 faster than Campbell. Breaking America down by daily segments, they tied only on the very last stage. Prior to that, Marvin won 46 individual stages, while Malcolm captured 39. In states, they see-sawed back and forth. Campbell was king in California, Nevada, Kansas, Indiana, Michigan, and New York; while Skagerberg claimed honors in Arizona, Utah (the longest state--552 miles by an indirect route requiring 13 days to cross), Colorado, Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, crucial Pennsylvania, and New Jersey.

The only place they did any substantial amount of walking, or took more than brief rest breaks,

was early in the race during some of the long desert stages. Later, after they'd settled into a real routine, more often than not they simply cruised ever onward, regularly clicking off their miles at 10 minutes per, or slightly better, for hour after hour.

Naturally, the men had some physical woes, but each seemed to strike a bargain with his body, keeping the hurt within manageable boundaries. Campbell's tended to be surface ailments like nasty-looking feet, mysterious skin eruptions on one thigh, and badly blistered lips causing him to wear so much ointment around his mouth that he looked like a jogging Al Jolson for weeks at a time. Skagerberg's aches were rooted more in the interior--the mounting leg and foot pains one could expect from the grinding overstress of a 40-mile run every day for weeks on end.

The key to survival and success was damage control. Remarkably (I saw it with my own eyes), these two men were in better shape when they ended the trek than when they'd started. (Considering the number of multi-day ultras Malcom runs, he has always amazed people by his relative portliness. Well, by golly, at the end of this one, for the first time since I've known him, he was beginning to almost look sleek....) It was sort of a make-or-break proposition, and when they didn't break in the first third of the U.S., they simply became more proficient at handling the physical demands of what in essence had become their full time jobs. They'd wake up early, hit the road for about 8 hours' work, then be back at it again the next morning. And like any manual laborer who doesn't burn out immediately when tackling a strenuous new job, Marvin and Malcolm became steadily more proficient as professional full-time runners.

Obviously, it wasn't quite that easy. These workers needed regular attention from a pair of handlers each, and certainly didn't do much except try to relax between stages. Even so, they exceeded the expectations of almost anyone familiar with them before the expedition commenced. Each had extensive experience in 6-day racing and definitely ranked among the world's most durable and reliable ultra men. For a pair of guaranteed finishers, the National ALS Foundation could hardly have picked better candidates. To watch these stalwart pluggers go pounding down the highway at a gradually increasing pace through June and into July, though, was a revelation.

* * *

I know many ultramarathoners around the country have been disappointed that the several trans-

continental races announced in recent years have not come to pass. For that reason, the fact that Campbell and Skagerberg managed to get sponsored to do a 2-man match race of this sort may make them the envy of some readers. All I can say is, they acquitted admirably their roles as pioneers in the endeavor. No one should feel jealous that, "It should have been me in that race, instead of those guys." My own observance of their performance left me wondering how well I could have endured the Lou Gehrig format. Early on, when they weren't really going all that quickly, I recall thinking, "If I were running this race, I'd be way ahead of these guys." It was only around the middle of the United States when I honestly had to begin changing my tune. While I was gradually getting tuckered out just going along as a driver/referee/timer, the two racers were literally looking better and better. As they took state after state in good stride, I found myself admitting, "Forty four miles today, after 51 yesterday; and 38 tomorrow... and they're not slowing down at all - I don't think I could keep up with these guys any more."

Oddly, the experience seemed not to be one lending itself to grand philosophical observations. From the very beginning, there was scarcely any meditational musings. Rather, the competitors related to it first and foremost as an athletic event. Instead of looking at the trip as a unique way to see America, they treated it more as a unique dual versus a close friend and rival. When I asked them for a summarizing comment as they were midway through Missouri, both guys chose to focus on the very down-to-earth dynamics of what they were so heavily involved in, rather than spouting any inspirational paeans to the wonders of nature. Campbell said, "What started out as my good leg is now my bad leg." For his part, Skagerberg could only emphasize that this was in fact just another ultradistance race for him, albeit one which was quite unlike those he'd encountered in the past. As Marvin observed, the difference was one of scope: "It's tough being in a race where, when you hit a bad patch, it can last for half a state, and the state is Kansas."

Inasmuch as these two men began and ended the race as friends, and are obviously so evenly matched in ability, it was perplexing that they rarely ran together. While the aggregate times they were amassing were similar, they were almost always apart during the individual stages. Although each got the human contact provided about every three miles by their respective support crews, neither ever used a walkman at any point, so for the great bulk of each day,

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they were usually alone with only their own thoughts and worries... and the highway stretching ahead to the horizon, all day long, in what was a true "cross-country" run.

* * *

Since the trip ended, it's been hard to get a grip on what we went through. The cliché of most cross-country travellers is to marvel how vast the United States is. Oddly, that wasn't my reaction. True, at times it seemed like the trip was endless. Yet there was also the realization that we were making steady progress across the continent. Every day we were knocking off a sizable chunk of real estate, until about halfway through the trip it struck me that America really isn't that huge a place. Heck, give yourself enough time and you could even run across the nation--I was seeing two guys do precisely that, and they weren't looking too much worse the wear for it!

Counting the runners, there were 16 people who came along in an official capacity at various times on the trip. Generally, the travelling crew included 7 support personnel--two advance people, four handlers, and one official. Malcolm's son, Martin Mills from Australia, and Dana Kahler, a cousin of mine I'd recruited to handle for Marvin, were the only workers who were on the job for the entire duration from LA to NY. I was on hand the whole way except for a 5-day break in mid-June when Dan Brannen took over for me.

Fortunately, all our personalities proved to be pretty compatible. The closest thing to any serious strains emerged in the latter part of the race when a haggard and harried Skagerberg became irrationally demanding of his handlers at times. He suffered one major blowup when things were going badly for him in Michigan, and relations were chilly for a while after that; but friendships were repaired by the end of the trip, and everyone wrote that episode off to the understandable stress everyone was feeling after being on the road together for more than two months.

Otherwise, the tour group displayed great congeniality under circumstances that were sometimes trying (living out of a different motel every night for week after week can become an endurance test of its own). Even two romances had flourished by the end (neither involving me, unfortunately). What helped, of course, was our avocational feeling for the project. We had an interest in the race as a significant ultradistance happening, and wanted to see it succeed. But of course it was a big project, generating a lot of expense and

involving more than just ultra aficionados.

Thus, besides the on-the-scene race crews who related to the experience strictly as a long distance run, there were additional people (an event management firm; a couple PR organizations; and the National ALS Foundation itself) who lacked any running background, but had a professional interest in how it turned out. In temperament, orientation, and goals, the two groups did not necessarily always have a lot in common. Nevertheless, the simple physical separation between us tended to downplay any potential conflicts that might have arisen otherwise. As it was, the races crews were generally happy that we stayed relatively isolated on the road. We became vaguely aware after a while that there was a good deal of wrangling going on over a lot of matters back at the NY/NJ headquarters, but luckily we were able to avoid becoming embroiled in them.

Our priority was to see that the runners made it across the U.S.A. in good shape. By that criteria, the Lou Gehrig Race was a great success. As a publicity and fundraising vehicle, however, the results were more mixed. When proposed fundraising dinners fell through in major cities, and some PR people seemed to be working at cross-purposes, recriminations started flying and eventually a couple business contracts were cancelled and wound up in litigation. Out on the road, we received only the sketchiest info on these disputes and could not tell who was in the right or the wrong; but I bring up the topic merely as a cautionary note: with many ultrarunners eager to be involved in a transcontinental, everyone should go into such a project aware that they are complex organisms. They last a lot longer than any other race you've dealt with, and require much greater financial backing to organize. For that reason, they are likely to have more potential for personality clashes, as it is possible for a sponsor's priorities to be at great variance with the athlete's best interests.

Having mentioned this caveat, however, I hasten to add that in this case what problems arose were not serious. The ALS Foundation, under the direction of Rochelle Moss, supported the race in a manner that enabled it to be wholly successful as a sporting venture, and left the runners with discretionary control over those aspects affecting us on a day-to-day basis. And although it was deemed less of a success as a public relations vehicle, the charity seemed satisfied that it had made enough splash in that way that there was already talk of repeating the Lou Gehrig Race, perhaps in a somewhat different form, again in 1986.

7

Siletz 50 Mile

Siletz, Oregon
5,000' climb

May 11, 1985

1. John Coffey	6:10:09!
2. Jim Sapp	6:49:11
3. Victor Harris	7:26:57
4. Jeff Dean, WA	7:44:30
Del Scharffenberg	7:44:30
6. Barry Martin	7:54:57
7. John Bondeer, WA	8:02:26
8. Milt Scholl	8:09:42
Red Fisher	8:09:42
10. Chris Batteate, CA	8:23:10
11. Ed Liddiard	8:28:55
12. Phil Edmunds	8:34:33
13. Doug Henderson	8:44:32
Stan Nakashima, WA	8:44:32
15. Mark Clement	8:51:05
16. Kent Fathergill	9:07:04
17. Howard Brows	9:21:06
Miles Paul, BC	9:21:06
19. Jim Watkins	9:28:32
20. Lanty Rippert	9:34:10
21. Phil Hicks, SD	9:41:33
22. Rene Casteran	9:49:36
Peter Keep	9:49:36
24. Mow Christensen	9:50:38
25. Rob Volkenand	9:52:30
26. John Henderson	10:01:07
27. Rob Ross	10:06:00
28. Wynne Leigh	10:29:06
29. Sandra Stepp, CA	10:43:00
30. Paul Lee	10:52:00
!=course record 38 starters	

Oregon's Coast Range mountains provide the state with an abundant supply of forest products. Hence the logging industry has cut roads throughout the rugged mountains to provide access to these timberlands. These roads provide an ideal venue for a rugged trail-type ultradistance race. John Henderson founded the run to initiate an event on his favorite training routes through the mountains. The race was held for the second time in May, rather than October (the date of the first running), to fit in with more runners' training patterns.

The course combines plenty of steep, rugged elevation changes with long, gentle forested sections along the beautiful Siletz River. Other than a few fishermen at their secret posts, the course is untraveled on weekends. All except the weekend of the race, however, as 38 runners started the race. The course was generally well marked, but a few became lost near some obscure markers.

John Coffey, on a roll this year in mountain and trail ultras, notched the win, pulling away from Portland's Jim Sapp after 20 miles. The course was lengthened by three miles this time, to bring the distance up to 50 miles. The race appears to have won 30 recommendations for the future, as everyone completing the course was impressed with the organization and the scenic coast hills.