

# VERMONT 100 DUAL DUELS IN THE SUN

by Zeke Zucker

*I knew it was my duty  
as Jack's pacer to test his  
strength and tolerance for  
pain by constantly pressuring  
him to run a little farther up  
the next hill before walking;  
to run a little faster on  
the downs and spend no  
more time than absolutely  
necessary in the remaining  
aid stations.*

Springtime and early summer in Vermont had been just downright wet and cloudy most of the time. Everyone was hoping that the pattern would change come July, but things only got worse. Friday night after the pre-race briefing and delicious pre-race meal, runners headed off to their hotels, motels, inns and camping tents. All hopes that the nighttime hours would be dry were sadly dashed at about midnight and the rains kept up for several hours. As everyone gathered in the massive Silver Hill Meadow tent at just after 3:00 a.m. there was still some light rain falling and everything - roads, trails and grass - was really soaked. The temperature hovered around 63 degrees and the humidity felt like 120 percent, but the mood was upbeat and the runners were ready to compete with the course, the clock and Mother Nature.

Everyone counted down the last ten seconds together and the sea of runners, with bobbing headlamps and flashlights, began streaming off into the darkness. Two Brians (Schmidt from Virginia and Rusiecki from Massachusetts) were tabbed pre-race as potential heirs to the champion's throne, but neither had competed at longer than 50 miles. I willingly boast that I had tabbed Jack Pilla, 51, as my pre-race favorite. In four previous Vermont 100s Jack ran 18:22 for sixth (2005), 17:51 for fourth (2006), 16:30 for third (2007), and 16:41 last year for another third place. Jack obviously knew the course well and had the psychological advantage over Brian and Brian of familiarity with the 100-mile distance.

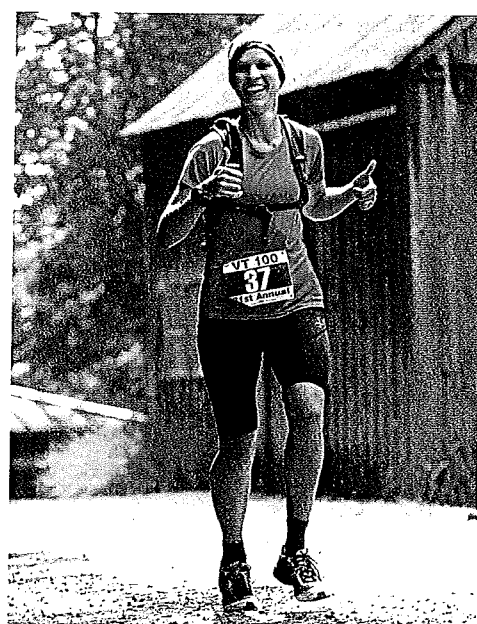
Pilla arrived at the 30-mile aid station with Schmidt and Jason Lantz in hot pursuit. By this time the rain had completely stopped, the sun was breaking through, the temperature had climbed to about 70 degrees, and the humidity was still up around 85 percent. At Camp Ten Bear, some 17 miles later, a dark horse somehow appeared before Jack and Jason arrived. It was Jim Sweeney, an accomplished runner, who had passed the two leaders just before Ten Bear, having decided to push the hills in order to get a good lead. By 2:00 p.m. the sun was bright and the skies were clear and blue with the temperature steady at 80 degrees where it remained for the rest of the afternoon. Vermonters, weary of the excessive rain all summer, could hardly believe what a gorgeous day had developed. The order remained basically the same through the next two aid stations, but Jack told his crew that Jim appeared to be struggling a bit on the downhill. Sure enough, Jack passed him on the 3.5-mile "slide" back down into Ten Bear, arriving with his ever-present smile, which lit up the spectators. Jack picked up his pacer, Joe Carrara, and they moved out just a couple of minutes before 28-year-old Jason arrived. Jason caught the lead pair after only about 15 minutes and the three

of them eventually walked together up the steep driveway to the 77-mile aid station at West Winds. The trio headed back out rather quickly, charging on into the wooded section to Duling Road. They were still fairly close together at Bill's (mile 88.6).

(See Pilla sidebar for how the lead runners got separated).

Joe cracked a heavy whip on Jack and spurred him on to the finish in 16:36:21. The victory for this 51-year-old gent represented the first male Vermonter win in the 21-year history of the event. Jack may also be the oldest ever race winner for a major U. S. ultra.

So with one duel completed, let's look at what the females were up to. The pre-race favorite ap-

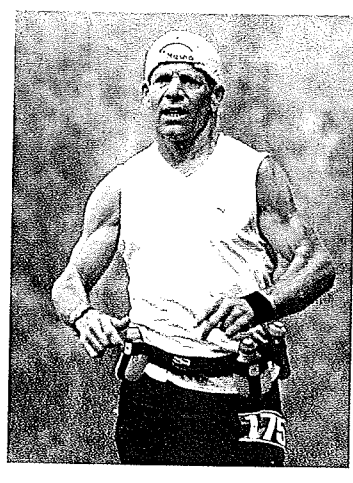
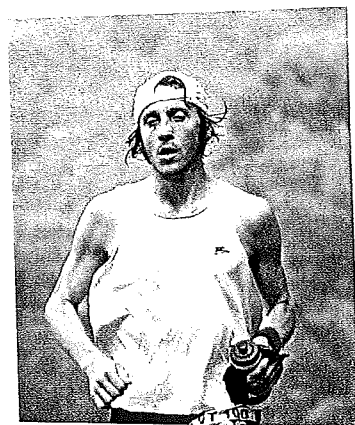


Stephanie Case - thumbs up at her first hundred

peared to be New York's Jill Perry, who shattered the Umstead 100 course record with a blazing 16:02 back in April of this year.

(See Perry sidebar for a look at her pre-race preparations).

Annette Bednosky of North Carolina, sporting significant credentials, including membership on the 2009 USA Ultra Running Team, couldn't be counted out of the running. What eventually took place, however, was anything but predictable. At Pretty House aid station (mile 21) Jill was in 13th place overall, and Annette was the second female through, just five places behind her. The gap between the two widened as Jill continued inching her way up to ninth place, while Annette slipped back from 18th to 22nd. In the meantime, Stephanie Case, a 27-year-old Canadian lawyer living and working in New York City, was inching her way slowly up the ladder. A volunteer at Lincoln Bridge aid station told her that she was



Jason Lantz, part of a strange eclectic group (top), Jack Pilla's experience and hard work pay off (bottom)

SPECTRUM PHOTOGRAPHY

## SECOND PLACE MALE FINISHER, JASON LANTZ

I was honored to have the chance to run with Jack for most of the course. I'm fairly new to the 100-mile scene, with Vermont being only my third one. Prior to this I ran Old Dominion the past two years. (Note: Jason won this year's OD, on the sixth of June, in a time of 18:35.) Each time I've been involved in one of these races I come in contact with the strange eclectic group of individuals an event like this draws. Jack is an amazing athlete. I picked his brain off and on for about 88 miles regarding his training, lifestyle and how he got started running. I like most how he explained his running and racing as just going out and having fun. I'm still trying to figure out how he kept smiling over the entire 100 miles. I really, really wanted to win but when the race was over I said that I think it is okay losing to Jack because it is basically like losing to a god. When it comes to the Vermont course, it is amazing. Vermont is a beautiful state and in a race like this you get to experience it up close and personal...almost too up close and too personal. I certainly plan on returning and hope Jack comes back.

## JACK'S PACER, JOE CARRARA

This was my fourth year as Jack's pacer at the VT 100. I feel partially responsible for Jack's venture into ultras because it was six years ago that I coaxed him into running the VT 50 Mile and that was the first and last time I ever outran him. Jack thus started his ultra career later than most (at age 45) and he keeps getting faster with age.

I rendezvoused with Kelly (Jack's handler and significant other) at Margaritaville (mile 62.2), to develop our race strategy based on where Jack was in the pack. He arrived in third place and looked good despite the heat and humidity. We then boogied over to Camp 10 Bear where we were surprised when he arrived in first place to a cheering crowd. The other pacers waiting for their runners wished me good luck in trying to keep up with Jack and I was indeed concerned with my ability to pull (not push) him along. Just a few miles out of Ten Bear I noticed a young buck (Jason Lantz) closing on us rapidly. Jack appeared moderately weary from the mileage but basically at ease. Jason, on the other hand, was stressing at the late arrival of his handlers and was looking a bit rattled. We three amigos then headed out together and stayed that way all the way to the next handler station, Bill's. There Jack rapidly changed his socks, refueled and med-checked. I saw Jason step into the porta-potty and that was our cue to get out of there. We hoped to build a quick lead and get out of sight, making it tough for the youngun (as Jack put it) to catch up.

in the top 25 and the third female. In Stephanie's own words, "He told me that the first female was WAY ahead and I'd never catch her, but I had a shot at overtaking second place. Holy crap!" As it just so happened, Stephanie managed to pass Annette somewhere between Lillian's and the first visit to Camp Ten Bear (mile 47.2). Jill was holding onto ninth, then eighth, while Annette, suffering from pain in her left ankle, continued to drop back in the field. Stephanie, now sitting in second place for the women, was inching her way up and was 16th overall by the time she picked up her pacer at Ten Bear. Off in the wings, first-time 100-miler Serena Wilcox, another Vermonter, had methodically moved from 64th place at Pretty House, to 29th at the Ten Bear 70 mile point. Things began to get very interesting by the time the women started entering West Winds/Spirit of '76 Station at mile 77. Jill was the eighth runner through, followed by Stephanie in 14th and Serena now in 18th, while Annette pressed on bravely in 32nd place. At West Winds, Jill was obviously dehydrated and trying to get fluids down in order to keep the "engine" fueled, but it was a struggle. Between Bill's (mile 88.6) and Polly's (mile 95.5), Stephanie and her pacer Cat, in the company of Tim Roy, a seasoned 100-miler

from nearby New Hampshire, saw two runner headlamps just ahead of them and thought they looked to be females. After scouting ahead, Tim's pacer returned to report excitedly, "It's her! You caught up to her!"

Said Stephanie, "A ripple of excitement went through me. I looked at Cat and said, 'don't say anything.' She knew immediately what I meant: Stick to The Plan. Remember my priorities."

Stephanie told me that she had three priorities going into the race: (1) don't get lost, (2) finish, even if it isn't before the official cut-off time and (3) try to buckle as a bonus. She finds it really helpful to identify her goals ahead of time because then no matter what happens, she can always bring herself back to these goals and stay on track, without losing her head and blowing the whole thing.

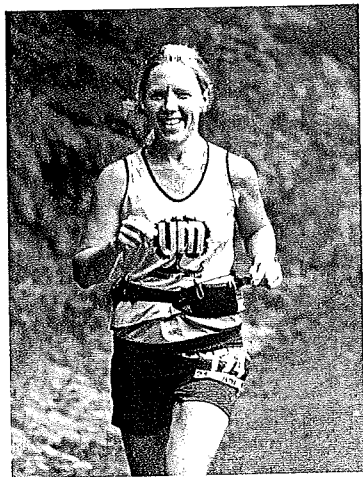
They pushed up the hill, cheerfully saying hello to Jill, who was now struggling just to maintain her forward momentum. Now the second-guessing began. Was Jill following close behind? Was it going to be an ugly, gut-wrenching race the last seven miles to the finish? Case admitted to starting to think about victory at around 95 miles, but Cat silenced her with "STICK TO THE PLAN."

"Yes," Stephanie thought, "I guess it doesn't

matter how fast I go if it's in the wrong direction. Priority #1: don't get lost!"

So now we have a new leader and what do we know about her? She lives in New York and this is her very first 100-miler. She followed a phenomenal training plan from Ray Zahab, a respected ultrarunner in his own right. Her longest run was eight hours just two weeks before the race where she covered 51 miles. She had planned a pace that would have her finishing in 22.5 hours, thinking it to be "a good number to shoot for" and leaving a 1.5-hour cushion to still earn the coveted buckle. In her post-race comments Stephanie said, "I remember (at the pre-race dinner) seeing a few seasoned, gray-haired men with pants pulled up around their armpits, walking around wearing giant, shiny, glorious belt buckles. I decided that the silver belt buckle was the little black dress of ultrarunning and, damn it, I wanted one."

At about mile 98 Stephanie, knowing that Cat had never run more than a marathon distance and was tiring, decided to surge ahead on her own. She pushed to the max up the hills, reaching mile 99 with confidence that it was in the bag, "Screw my priorities - I was going to WIN!" After she crossed the finish line, in 18:38:42, she

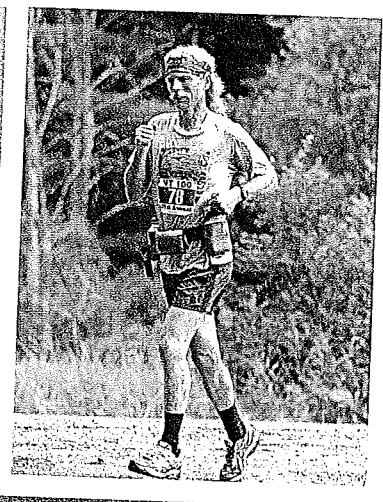


Jill Perry's MO: Rest, Hydrate, RUN

SPECTRUM PHOTOGRAPHY

## SECOND PLACE FEMALE FINISHER, JILL PERRY

The Vermont 100 is a beautiful course, however, it is challenging and a bit muddier than I thought it would be. The humidity was high and that's what can sneak up on you. I was out in Death Valley, California crewing a friend in the extreme heat at the Badwater 135 from Monday until Thursday, then took a red-eye flight to Syracuse, arriving Friday after noon. I hopped in a car and drove to Vermont for the check-in. As such I was really subject to dehydration and it certainly happened. One thing I've learned from ultras is to just keep putting one foot in front of the other. Try not to stop at all, even if it's a slow walk. The walk can turn into a shuffle, the shuffle to a trot, trot to a run and you're back in the game. My tank was low but I was working on hydrating and moving. In spite of my having to struggle a bit, I loved the views, the single-track trails, the friendly horse riders who were always encouraging and smiling. I loved the aid stations. When I finished, I even loved the medical staff who administered three bags of fluid due to severe dehydration... A word of advice for anyone doing these endurance runs: two to three days before the race: REST, REST, HYDRATE, HYDRATE.

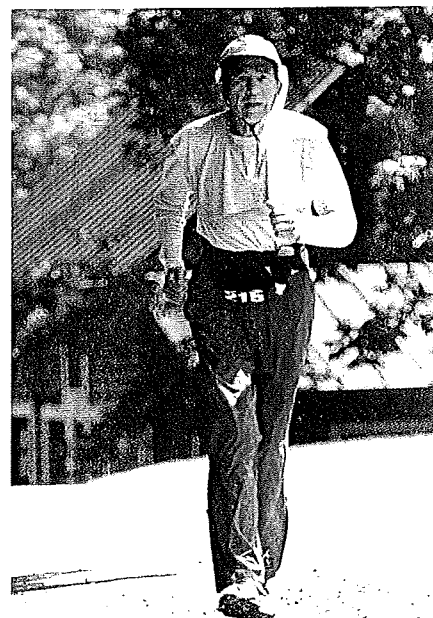


King of the Mountain, John Geesler, with 17 Vermont finishes

SPECTRUM PHOTOGRAPHY

## NEW LONGEVITY CHAMPION

Fifty-year-old John Geesler, from New York State, took over as King-of-the-Mountain. His 17th Vermont 100 finish eclipsed the 16-times mark previously held by long-time ultrarunner and Gilly's Athletic Club super-member Jeff Washburn. Jeff, who suffered a disabling stroke a few years ago, was in attendance again this year, cheering on his compatriots from numerous vantage points along the course. He is an inspiration.



Karsten Solheim with time to burn...

focused immediately on a stack of full pizza boxes, but learned that they were for the volunteers. Somewhat disappointed, she returned to the finish line to cheer Cat in. A few people asked Stephanie if she was Jill Perry, and she cheerfully responded, "I'm nobody!"

Case won by almost an hour, placed ninth overall and earned a very special Top Ten buckle for her great performance. She told me that it had been a tough year of training leading up to Vermont. A pelvic stress fracture in January, followed in the spring by a distal tibia stress fracture, but she was able to get back on track in

time to put in the necessary training. She admitted to being disappointed about one thing - not hallucinating the way she'd been told she might by so many other runners.

"At least I had all of those Canadian Geese stationed at the end of every driveway from 80 miles on. Cat said they were mailboxes, but I know better."

One other special finisher of the race just has to be mentioned. Karsten Solheim is now officially the master of intense drama, three times over. Back in 2007 he kept us all on pins and needles, finishing with eight minutes to spare.

What could he possibly do to top that one? year, in a true nail-biter, with pacer coordinator John Bassette personally escorting (make nudging and cajoling) Karsten, the rascal across the finish line with ELEVEN SECONDS left in the 30-hour cut-off. When I spoke with the 72-year-old Arizonian just prior to the race said of last year, "heck, I still had some time to burn." So he gave us a three-peat, a whole more leeway this year, reaching the finish with a 4-minute-20-second cushion. He enjoyed the Vermont scenery longer than any other finisher really got his money's worth. ■





COURTESY: SCOUT

Stephanie Case and pacer Cat Hirbour, not hallucinating about a Vermont win

### STEPHANIE'S HANDLER & PACER CATHERINE (CAT) HIRBOUR

Driving to Vermont I was a bit apprehensive about my duties as a pacer, but seeing the rolling hills, I started looking forward to running through the beautiful landscape and meeting ultra runners.

Meeting Stephanie at the first two handler stations, she was all business and basically blew right through both of them. I therefore had some waiting time and met such nice people and the time seemed to fly. When Stephanie got back to Camp Ten Bear the second time, we headed out and not 15 minutes into our chatty travels together, we thought we had taken a wrong turn. Although we kept seeing signs (yellow arrow plates), we had no idea if we were supposed to have followed the riders back at the last split point. Here I was, thinking that I'd led my runner astray right off the bat - very stressful. I ran ahead and met a fellow runner who told me we were still on course - the split had been where the horses go to a hold point and their veterinary checks. Around the 90-mile mark we met up with another runner and his pacer and it was nice to be in the company of a pair of seasoned ultra athletes.



PHOTO BY GLENN TACHIBANA

Horses are part of the picture at the Vermont 100

### JUST HORSEING AROUND

A truly unique and exciting aspect of the Vermont event is the interaction between the horses and riders. This year, 111 equines tackled the 50-, 75- and 100-mile courses, up from the average 80 - 85 horses. An important part of the pre-race briefing involves easing the minds of apprehensive runners who have never run with horses. We tell them that the horses are prey (not predatory) creatures, and have no desire to run over them. We also explain that it's very important that they talk with the riders, especially after dark, because until the horse hears a human voice, they are a threatening creature, whose presence it can readily sense. Passing a horse on tricky terrain is easily accomplished by conversing with the rider, who gives the okay when it is safe to do so. Conversely, the riders are great about alerting sometimes tired and nearly comatose runners, when they wish to trot by the two-legged creatures.

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ULTRARUNNING, SEPTEMBER 2009

### VERMONT 100K

This was the second year for the companion 100-km event. This time, instead of starting at 4:00 a.m. with the 100-mile runners, participants waited until early afternoon to begin their trek. They joined the longer race at its 43.5-mile point and ran the identical course from there to the finish at Silver Hill Meadow. Michael Thornton from Harvard, Massachusetts, won the 100-km in 12:01:25 while Graham Varty, of Greenwich, Connecticut, took honors for the women, posting a time of 12:52:09. Based on runner feedback, the race committee is working on moving the start time back earlier to reduce the amount of nighttime running for the competitors.



DOUG TRIBOU, NPR'S ONLY A GAME

The Venga Ramon crew ready to party as their runner goes sub-24