

Texas Hill County

It's a Big Country, so you'd expect John Wayne, dusty roads, grim faces and smoking guns. Bandera, the city close by refers to itself as *Cowboy Capital of the World*. But instead of carrying guns, the Wild Bunch of trailrunners has armed itself with hydration packs. A wise choice, because our opponent in this duel is the heat.

Welcome to Cactus Rose Trail, which exists since 2007 in three flavours: 50, 100 miles and relay (4 times 25 miles). The course itself is a 25 mile lap which you run two to four times – depending on the order you had placed before. To avoid boredom, the race directors have decided to change directions after each lap.

Every 5 miles there's an aid station with water and ice – yes, Cactus Rose is self-supported. Thus Francisco Moreno and I have dropped well-equipped bags at two stations. And verily, verily I say unto thee, they were splendid bags, having contained dog food in their previous lives.

I'd been spontaneously fascinated due to them being light, large and waterproof. Convincing Francisco to use them for our athletic adventure in Hill County. Runner's meals with dog's motives.

By the way, I had forgotten to register myself for the race although the date at which Cactus Rose was held determined my holiday. Try that: plan your trip from Germany to the U.S. with a race date in mind and forget to register.

But no problem, the supercool race directors Anne, Joyce and Joe accept registrants until a few minutes before the start.

Of course, being a late registrant, there would be no T-shirt for me.

Or would it?

Sure it would!

At half past four in the morning (which means ninety minutes after getting up, 30 minutes before the start and four hours before waking up), when I pick up my bib, Joyce asks for my size: *We want you to have a shirt. I'll take care of that when the shop is open.*

Wow.

Keep 'em happy seems to be the organizers' motto, Cactus Rose is driven by idealism. Would anyone wonder why so many runners come every year?

But, I might ask whether people like Joe Prusaitis are some kind of secret sadist? Nice, careful, helpful in any regard – except for when it comes to the route itself. He spares no viciousness, but includes everything that may have a runner suffer.

That's how we want it.

Trailrunners are secret masochists.

Would we call it an ultratrail without being certain of having gone beyond ourselves? Without enjoying victory over pain and weakness? Who would want to come home thinking *Now, 'twas easy*.

I may conclude that it's more fear than sadism that determines a race course. Imagine disappointed looks in faces if a nasty hill had been spared. *Hey, what were you thinking when you took us around that wonderfully steep hill? On a gravel road? I could plant my feet on flat surface for nearly ten minutes!*

Consequently, Joe and his team ensure that only the Good, the Bad and the Ugly cross the finish line.

Indeed, trail runners are a kind of their own.

If it doesn't hurt, they feel pain.

Which means they like it when someone has them step over stones. And forsooth it was a long and stony way. Single trails, Rolling Stones. Stones large and small. At roughly 1,000 feet of ascent per lap the course is comparatively flat, but fierce ascends and descends take their toll. Plus Rolling Stones. Enjoy after dark.

And then there are *Sotols*.

There's lots of them in Hill County, they are lovely to look at and have long leaves with thorns. What's it like to run through them for a day?

Well, I've heard of people who cut themselves on their forearms.

That's what Sotols do to runners' calves. Being stroked by Sotols feels harmless at the early stages of a race. Later on it get's nasty.

Is it possible to harden oneself against such inconvenience?

I think you can. Train daily with a wire brush.

Do I hear someone say „long pants“? That was a good idea, were the race in, say: Greenland. We had 90°F in the shade. And no shade. Soon after High Noon the sun was burning down Unforgiven, and the mere thought of long trousers made me shiver. Shiver? If only... Then I learned to worship the ice boxes at every aid station. Put a few in my hydration bladder, add water and I could refreshen with ice water until the next station. Now salt pills form a foundation of everybody's nutrition, and while slowing me down the heat didn't bother me too much (Yes, I suffered. A lot. But I kept moving).

Later on, the sun was setting, Jason Schwertner is on my side. We are walking and talking. There's a, say, interesting moment when we stroll along a single trail. Sotols left and right, crickets play their tone to a peaceful night until Jason, who is walking behind me, asks

Harald, you're aware you the snakes, aren't you?

...eh...

Rattlesnakes are a common sight in this area as are Coyotes (we could hear them during morning hours)

Rattlesnakes, oh my. Naive tourists from Central Europe think that deadly animals live in the movies. And nowhere else.

Later on, we happily cross the finish line. That is: I'm happy, Jason slightly disappointed. Why?

Let me explain a neat aspect of Cactus Rose. He who pays a Fistful of Dollars to go 50 miles, may spontaneously add two further laps For a Few Dollars More, thus competing for 100 miles. Those who register for 100 miles and quit after 2 laps find themselves in a separate list, after the 50 milers who ran what they had registered for.

Cactus Rose is like life: tough

And wonderful.