

## Ultrarunning in Death Valley

By **Jessica Belasco** Updated 5:42 pm, Monday, July 8, 2013



### IMAGE 1 OF 5

Parvaneh Moayed, a local race director and ultrarunner, is training for the Badwater 135 ultra race in Death Valley on July 15.

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When extreme heat caused the cancellation of the Running with the Devil marathon near Las Vegas in late June, Parvaneh Moayed, who had traveled to Nevada for the race, didn't return home to San Antonio. Instead, she gathered a few other runners and ran the course anyway.

For Moayed, 49, the hotter, the better. She's training to run in the Badwater 135, a grueling ultramarathon from Death Valley to Mount Whitney in California that's often called the world's toughest foot race. The 135-mile course begins July 15 at 282 feet below sea level — the lowest elevation in the Western Hemisphere — and travels through desert and three mountain ranges before ending 8,360 feet above sea level.

The temperature often hits 120 degrees or higher, and the asphalt can heat up to 180 degrees, hot enough to melt running shoes. The runners have 48 hours to finish the

degrees, not enough to melt running shoes. The runners have 48 hours to finish the race.

“This is the ultimate challenge,” said Moayed, who traveled to Badwater in late June and ran five miles in 136-degree heat to get a feel for the course. After that, she's confident she will be able to finish the race.

**Moayed and U.S. Army Capt. Matthew Doellman**, a registered nurse at **San Antonio Military Medical Center**, are two of six Texans registered for the race and the only two coming from San Antonio.

Ninety-seven elite runners from 18 countries are registered for the event, which requires an extensive application process “to make sure you can finish and not die,” as Moayed put it.

High temperatures won't put a halt to this race.

“The Badwater 135 is intentionally held mid-summer, in anticipation of high heat. The runners train and their support crews prepare accordingly,” race director **Chris Kostman** said in an email.

Competitors at Badwater often become dizzy, lightheaded and nauseated; some runners hallucinate; many are unable to finish. Runners risk heatstroke, altitude sickness and organ failure. Not to mention serious blisters.

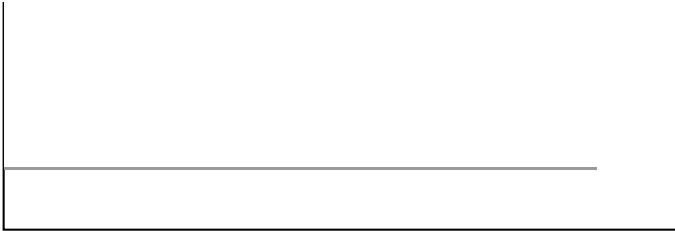
### ***The toughest challenge***

Moayed considers Badwater her toughest running challenge yet — and that's saying something.

She has completed more than 300 marathons and ultramarathons, which are races longer than 26.2 miles, including nearly 60 races this year alone. She has run marathons in all 50 states and on all seven continents. She has completed the Pikes Peak Ascent and Marathon. She ran 17 marathons in 17 days last winter, which she said set a record for the most marathons run by a woman in consecutive days (she's waiting for confirmation from Guinness World Records).

**More Information**

She has finished a race on a



broken foot and run races with a broken arm, ribs and nose.

“That's part of the challenge. You're going to get physically

hurt, but you just keep going. That's how crazy I am,” she said, smiling. “My orthopedic surgeon doesn't even try to stop me anymore.”

Moayedi, who emigrated from Iran in the late 1970s when she was 17, began running marathons while working at **Compaq Computers** in Houston 14 years ago. Her first race was in San Antonio. Eventually, 26.2 miles wasn't enough.

Intense endurance challenges, such as running 100 miles or more, are all about mental toughness, she said.

“Anybody can train their body to do anything,” she said. “The big challenge is to convince yourself that you can do something.”

Coming to the United States alone as a teenager without family support, attending college and bringing up two daughters helped give her confidence to accomplish her running goals, she said. Last year, she started her own race management company, **I Ran Marathons**.

Moayedi has been training for Badwater by running from sunrise to sunset in black clothing.

A crew of friends will help her during the race by making sure she's drinking and eating enough and staying on pace.

“My plan is to go at an easy, consistent pace and just get to the finish,” she said.

### ***'So much suffering'***

Running ultramarathons puts other challenges in perspective, Matthew Doellman said.

“I think if everybody in the world could do at least one 100-mile race, they would

experience so much suffering that it would actually make every other day that much easier,” Doellman, 29, said.

“My hardest day in the emergency room has never even been a fraction of the difficulty of a 100-mile race. You can get smoked doing your regular job, but it's not like being on your knees, throwing up at mile 80.”

Doellman, who hung a poster-sized map of the Badwater course in his office for inspiration, has been training for the race since 2010.

For the last month, he has been doing two workouts a day: 90 minutes of Bikram yoga — a form of yoga practiced in a room heated to more than 100 degrees — in the morning and a run around 5 p.m.

Runners in cooler climates often resort to training on treadmills in saunas, but heat training is easier to come by in San Antonio.

“I can walk out my front door and be in 100 degree-heat,” Doellman said. “I'm a little spoiled down here.”

Doellman, an Illinois native, was a casual runner when he entered the Army, then met a marathoner at Fort Riley in Kansas who urged him to race.

“At the time, I thought it was crazy to try to run 26.2 miles,” Doellman said. “I got tired after four miles.”

His friend coached him, and Doellman did so well, his friend couldn't keep up. A couple of ultramarathoners then showed him the ropes of running longer races.

“I've always been one of those kind of people, if you tell me I can't do something, I've gotta do it,” he said.

“The best way to describe ultrarunning is, your body's kind of like a car, and as long as you put in the proper fluids and maintain it, you can drive a car really, really far without it breaking down. You'd be surprised how far you can really go if you wanted to. You just have to suck up all the pain.”

He has completed eight races of 100 miles or longer, including the Rouge-Orleans

Ultramarathon & Relay, a 126.2-mile event from Baton Rouge to New Orleans along the Mississippi River levee.

After that one, his feet looked like “giant, mangled fruit” and he couldn't walk for nearly three days. Badwater, he knows, will be even worse. And then there's the psychological challenge.

“With ultrarunning, it's real mental,” he said. “It really breaks you down to a very primitive state. It's just, move forward, eat, drink, and sometimes you're not even thinking straight. You're like a machine.”

As part of Team Fisher House, Doellman accepts donations to the Fisher House Foundation for every race he runs, including Badwater. The foundation provides lodging to families of service members receiving treatment at military medical centers (go to [active.com/donate/teamfisherhouse/ultraholics](http://active.com/donate/teamfisherhouse/ultraholics)).

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