

The Man in Red and The Woman in Blue

Outside — December 1991

by Ted Kerasote

IN THREE LONG LINES THE ENDORPHIN JUNKIES MOVE TOWARD THE REGISTRATION tables in the lobby of the Stage Coach Inn in West Yellowstone, Montana. On the walls behind the tables are hand-lettered signs: A-M, N-Z, and **NEW REGISTRATION**. Short and tall, male and female, the junkies appear to have one thing in common: lack of flesh.

The women are a Greek mother's nightmare: hollow cheeks, veiny arms, flat bellies, no hips. If the rest of American womanhood were to take after them, the bra would be but a footnote in history, *Cosmopolitan* mimeographed newsletter. The men, athletic but too lean to be tough, are the second half of "fight or flight," disappointments to the corporate ladder, TV sports, and the beer industry: no paunches, no jowls, no love handles, but neither any pumped-out pecs. All, men and women alike, wear digital watches with black plastic bands and those brightly colored warm-up tops that inevitably make people look healthy and upbeat.

Most of these people are mainstream-25 to 60 years old, teachers, nurses, engineers, lawyers, carpenters, doctors, park rangers, postal clerks-and every one of them has come here to go fast. So surely there will be some good old American place-jostling and minor one-upsmanship in the lines. But no. Everyone is cheerful and

considerate, ruddy-cheeked from the March cold, greeting old friends with hugs, introducing themselves to the newcomers, and happily paying their \$40 each for a plastic bag containing a racing bib, a ticket to the postrace spaghetti dinner, an "endurance snack" that tastes like chocolate-covered sawdust, a souvenir pin, and a T-shirt that proclaims, **12TH ANNUAL YELLOWSTONE RENDEZVOUS**. From all over the country these 200-odd individuals have come to ski 50 kilometers, a little more than 30 miles, in this seventh of the eight cross-country marathons that make up the Great American Ski Chase.

But that's tomorrow. This evening, as the skiers head up to their rooms or depart for other motels along the snowy street, the decidedly different folk who have made West Yellowstone the snowmobile capital of North America stand by in their lumpy black insulated coveralls and gawk at what they call "wood fairies." Writ large across their well-fed faces is the question any sane person would ask: Why do these wood fairies tear around the trails dressed in tissue-thin Lycra with frozen snot hanging from their noses? Why, when they could be really enjoying the great outdoors on a snow machine? Even an insane person-one who has trained for and paid \$40 to enter this race, who has even skied marathons before and so knows what kind of physiological horror show he may be in for if he actually "goes for

it" and tries to break his "P R" -has to ask, Why? Why again?

Saying you're addicted to the best legal recreational drug around, the endorphins that your own body produces during aerobic exercise and that give such a top-of-the-world feeling, is a poor answer. You can get an endorphin high by skiing 15 kilometers, without the side stitches, burnt lungs, and aching quads you get skiing 50, not to mention the chance of crumpling someplace around the 40-kilometer mark, where all the spaghetti, pancakes, and "endurance snacks" you so carefully carbo-loaded seem to drain out of your heels, leaving an enormous hole that endorphins can't fill.

Saying you came for victory-Churchill's "beautiful, bright-colored flower" and MacArthur's "no substitute for"-seems delusional, an answer given by those who have watched too many team sports-football, basketball, and war-and know nothing of competing all by your lonesome. One person, only one, will win the Yellowstone Rendezvous.

Of course, you can always pull out that old maxim, "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong," as you finish hours after the winner. Fine. The question remains: How swift do you have to be to know you skied your own good race?

Swift enough to believe that once upon a time you could have escaped a saber-toothed tiger? The Blackfoot, on foot, like John Colter? A rolling boulder from a booby-trapped Temple of Doom? Swift enough to score well on a graph of human potential represented by 200 other carbo-loaded, endorphin-soaked. . . wood fairies?

TOSSING IN ONE OF THE COLD ROOMS OF LEE LOFGREN'S Night of Torment Motel, I ask myself these questions.

Lee, West Yellowstone's tall, blond, square-jawed, 40-year-old chiropractor, looks like the good woodcutter in a fairy tale and lives over the Montana Cafe, which might help to keep his place warm except that the eatery shuts down in the winter. Lee's living room sports the poor man's Thermopanes-plastic sheets taped over the windows-a forlorn gray sofa, a wood stove, a ski-waxing bench, and a drying rack loaded with long underwear, socks, hats, and gloves. The four bedroom doors, closed now to keep the heat in the living room, are always open to friends who drop in from Bozeman, Jackson Hole, Sun Valley, and places in Colorado.

It's true. No matter how we skiers love our own little mountain nooks in the west, we have to make our pilgrimages to West. What can you say? West Yellowstone may be nothing more than a couple of neon-lit strips lined with greasy food joints and packed by roaring snowmobiles, cut out of the lodgepole forest between the Gallatin Mountains and the Yellowstone Plateau, but it has the bestgroomed nordic ski area in the Rockies. The course is buffed at dawn; there's a good mix of hills, flats, and curves; and God waves his snowy hands over this corner of Montana with great regularity.

Lee Lofgren, who aspired to the Olympic nordic skiing team in his twenties, has become a training guru, innkeeper, and maitre d'--cooking venison steaks for his friends, adjusting their aching backs, imparting waxing wisdom ("Start Green mixed with Swix Violet tomorrow"), and letting them roll out their sleeping bags in the freezing bedrooms of his digs.

Lee's windows overlook the spot on U.S. 20 where 18-wheelers shift down or up as they come in and out of town-about every 15 minutes-while a

blinking neon sign flashes through the blinds. There's also the periodic but never-stopping scream of snowmobiles heading toward the Idaho border. What can they possibly be doing out there at 2:30 in the morning? I wonder. At 4? At 6:30, when after perhaps an hour of the most miserable sleep imaginable I hear Lee throwing logs into the stove? Delirious, I stand up and contemplate tossing my skis back into the car and driving home to Wyoming, where I can sit beside the fire with a toddy and think about how next year will be soon enough to try the Yellowstone Rendezvous. But there's Lee pulling his clothes off the drying rack as I emerge, and there's my bib, number 357, lying on the sofa, and there are my waxed skis standing by the door, and there are those 500 kilometers I have skied in training since Christmas, and there's the sigh-why, oh, why, oh, why another race?-that still needs to be answered. Gentlemen, put on your Lycra.

A FEW BLOCKS FROM THE NIGHT OF TORMENT, WHERE

THE tall arch leads to the trails, early risers are already skiing back and forth. By 8:45, 15 minutes before race time, skiers are windmilling their arms, bending over to touch their toes, kissing children good-bye as if they'll never see them again, peeing against trees, adjusting the wrist straps of their poles, inhaling deeply, storing Os. The sun hasn't yet illuminated the course, and clouds of frost hang over the massed skiers, each clad in a one-piece Lycra suit: powder blue, silver, yellow, ruby red, a few deep purples.

Congratulating myself on just the right amount of long underwear beneath my Lycra (fuchsia with white piping), a comfortably empty bowel, and perfect timing for the 9 A.M. gun, I take a last pee and stoop to put on my skis about 250 meters behind the start banner. My watch reads 8:56.

At that moment the cannon booms; a hearty and resonant cheer goes up

from the crowd; and an anguished, desperate moan, followed by angry shouts, breaks from those of us who never expected the race to start four minutes early. Ripping off warm-up jackets, fumbling with skis, handing babies to husbands and wives, we frantically scramble to catch the fleeing few.

And yet, struggling with my pole straps as I skate toward the banner, I think, Hey, amigo, this is perfect. No last queasiness in the gut, no numb hands at the starting gate, no falling over the eager ones who have taken a header in front of me. I have nothing but an empty track and distant behinds to chase.

Within 500 meters, though, I'm passing skiers whose minds were too grandiose for their bodies. They got caught up in the boom of the big cannon, the roar of the crowd, the dazzling colors speeding away, and succumbed to that most heady and calamitous of race strategies: trying to follow the leader's pace, forgetting that while they might be able to ski one kilometer in about two and a half minutes, their chances of skiing 50 kilometers at that pace are absolutely zero. Disaster, of course, has ensued. Now these unfortunates are inching along, red-faced and gasping, trying to find a speed at which they can survive the next four or so hours.

At the first hill they're bunched up like rush-hour traffic. Those who are fast but got left behind by the early start try to weave their way through the bottleneck, skating over the poles of those ahead and jerking them off their skis, occasionally catching a tip in the berm at the side of the track and being brought to a standstill. One bearded individual, no doubt paying the price of some bad karma, has got turned the wrong way; now, trying to get back into the flow, he trips someone else, and both fall to the track, taking the next skier with them, and the next, and the next, like Interstate 5 in the fog.

To be honest, none of this is unusual at the start of big marathons, where adrenaline is high, prudence low, and respect for one's fellow skiers minimal. I promised myself to be careful here. And I am, because I never really entertain any thought of winning one of these things or even of being sucked along in the draft of the long, lean nordic heroes to finish perhaps in the top 20. No one would believe such a finish, especially me.

No, even on a good day I'm firmly in the middle-to-rear ranks of the aerobically committed. Today my late start, behind virtually everyone, is giving me the chance to feel an enormous and unprecedented sense of accomplishment as I pass scoreryone in front of me is skating just as fast as I am.

At such moments you can appreciate what the feudal world knew: your exact station in life. You can't catch up. You don't fall behind. Here I am, you feel, where I physiologically ought to be, kilometer after kilometer, into eternity, following the man in red and the woman in blue.

But we aren't of that static world for more than half an hour. We're of Copernicus's little planet on the edge of things, of Heisenberg's uncertainty, of Thomas Jefferson's equality, especially him and his all men created equal. We're of this experiment in democracy, opportunity, and potential, the first two letting us push the limits of the third. You start to think, Perhaps I can catch them, the man in red and the woman in blue, skating so effortlessly one behind the other. And if I catch them, I will be more than I thought I could be today. I will have done a little more than I thought possible. Isn't this what it's all about?

So I catch them and pass them and put them to bed. I go through the next aid station without stopping, but I stop at the one by the 11kilometer mark to

drink a cup of Max, the antifreeze-green fluid that's served along with water, cookies, bananas, and chocolate stars. Going down the next hill I pass a dyspeptic-looking man in his late fifties who glowers at me and shouts as I slide by, "What wax are you using?"

"Start Green!"

This makes him seem even more depressed, as if he will never recover from not having waxed with Start Green. Indeed, it makes him so depressed, or so angry, that as we climb the next hill he thrashes past me, never to be seen again.

THE PACK IS SPREAD OUT NOW, EACH SKIER IN HIS OWN LITTLE world of lodgepoles, snow, and hazy blue sky, her own little world of reverie, metaphor, cheerleading, and blame. I will eat two plates of spaghetti when done, I tell myself. If I can finish this race I will have the strength to do all that is hard in my life, I sincerely believe. Not bad, I congratulate, you had your feet operated on just three months ago and you've recovered-fit, if not really fast. And always, always, the clincher: If I had only trained harder, only given it more, I wouldn't be back here in the middle again.

Going past the start banner for the second time and heading into another 17-kilometer loop, I feel amazingly good. But after just two more kilometers the sun starts to shine over the trees and the snow becomes slow and rutted. On a moderate but depressingly long hill, I pass a woman who says, "Ugh! This is awful!" And it is. No skipping through the stratosphere this. This is spring cleaning and the law boards all in one.

And suddenly I'm alone, all alone. No one ahead, no one behind. I could be skiing on any other weekend in West Yellowstone. I look at my watch, calculate the distance I've come and

the time that's elapsed, and reflect on how erratic fate is. Lee and I skied 45 kilometers on this very track just two weeks ago. Then, after a month of little snow, the track had been icy and effortless, the kind of snow that makes you feel like a rocket. We turned in 3:45 kilometers, and I finished feeling not all that tired. Today I've been doing 4:30s, and my dream of setting a PR by finishing a ski marathon in under three hours-at last, at last-has vanished.

I think about this as I watch the snowcovered summits of the Gallatin Mountains slip in and out of the trees, as I watch the great Yellowstone Plateau sprawl away into the haze, its grizzly bears sleeping, its bison lounging beside geyser pools. Isn't it enough to have such a home? Isn't it enough to feel that you live in the center of a kind horizon? What does it matter if you go 50-odd kilometers on two pieces of slippery fiberglass in under 180 minutes?

Going past the starting line a third time, I feel content-keeping the pace. Then half a dozen skiers pass me, going hard in a pack and not doing the post-aid-station dawdle as I am. I passed every single one of them five kilometers before! Where did they come from? And what's wrong with me?

At the first hills, as I change stride and begin to climb, I know exactly what's wrong: I'm bonking. It's not so much physical weariness as a mental disinclination to be doing this anymore. There seems no reason to get into an aerodynamic tuck on downhill, no reason to give those extra double-poles that cut seconds off one's time. What are seconds at this point? And if one is honest with oneself-yes, I am talking to myself in the aloof third person-if one is honest with oneself, one has to admit that this is why one never breaks three hours in a marathon. The game loses its importance.

Then the calves and quads start to hurt, as well as the lower back, and there seems to be no energy in the core, nothing with which to push up those hills. Instead of skating them, I start herringboning them. On their backsides I don't even try to gain speed. What's the point? My wax is lousy! Why didn't I add Swix Violet to my Start Green, as Lee counseled? From out of nowhere-nowhere-the man in red and the woman in blue, whom I passed so long ago, skate easily by.

He is tall and well built, black hair, dark sunglasses, his red Lycra a little baggy in the rear. His timing is just a little off, too; not enough extension on his glide. (If you can't catch someone, you might as well criticize him.) She is short, with bobbed blond hair and turquoise earrings. She has an effortless skating motion-pole-glide, pole-glide, pole-glide-slightly marred by a dysfunctional but charming little flip of her left hand as it goes back. OK, give her equal time. A worthless little hand-motion that needs to be eradicated if she is ever going to skate well! The things you think of when you can't catch people! Turning the next corner, they disappear behind a screen of trees.

Then those invidious comparisons begin. Well! You were stronger than they for 38 kilometers! If only you had got more sleep! If only you had rested more during the last two weeks instead of going dancing! If, if, if... The ifs finally stop, and I just slide into the land of hypoglycemia, that wonderful place, so close to death, where stopping at the next aid station and asking for a snowmobile ride back to the start seems to be exactly what you want to do.

I coast down the hill to the 39th kilometer, drink six cups of Max, and eat a dozen chocolate stars. The jolt in my gut is like a lighter held to a pile

of crumpled newspaper. I go out and up the next hill, knowing I'll finish skating.

Ahead, climbing through a grove of aspen, the man in red and the woman in blue maintain their endless, steady pace. This part of the course, called Windy Ridge, is high and open and lets you see the track for hundreds of meters. For six or seven kilometers the three of us skate along, up and down, never gaining, never losing, the hazy cirrus descending, the wind picking up a little, my left side aching, the snot running down my chin and freezing where it falls on my leg. What more can you ask for on a Saturday morning?

A man in silver passes me. There he is, on my shoulder, saying so politely, "On your left." Then he's ahead of me, with a "How's it going?" Where he came from, I don't know. I passed him hours ago--hours. Where did he find the strength to ski so hard at this stage of the race, after being back there so long? And his good cheer! For a minute I feel anger well up in my chest at this silver android with those dumb iridescent sunglasses who's going to beat me and be nice about it. Yes, anger-anger at my body for not being able to imitate what I am witnessing. As he disappears over the next rise I give a huge, letting-go sigh and go back to concentrating on my rhythm: Pole-glide.. . pole-glide. . .

When all is said and done, and everyone who is going to pass you has passed you, there's beauty to be found in such repetition. You can give more to each stroke when the end is in sight and you've let your anger go off into the clouds.

Besides, I haven't given up. Rapidly approaching is one of my favorite parts of the West Yellowstone course. As you come out of the aptly named Dead Dog Loop there's a long uphill followed by a right turn

through large conifers. Then a modest climb gives way to a left turn and easy skating through open woods, where you can enjoy the race's last long views: sprawling valleys, big mountains, the Big Sky. The course then turns down into lodgepole, down, down, down nearly four kilometers toward the finish line, with only three short hills in between, all of which can be skated fast, giving you a last chance to really race instead of just survive.

On that long hill out of Dead Dog I close on the man in red and the woman in blue. I don't try to close on them. It just happens. For a minute or so I notice the decreasing distance between us as a mere fact. Then it crosses my mind: Catch them. But I know I can't. This last Dead Dog hill will turn me into exactly that. I skate 150 meters behind them, through the big trees and out into the open woods. Where the course starts its long downhill straightaway I step into the track. For some reason they stay in the skating lane. I double-pole and see that I am gaining on them. I am also plotting.

If you've skied the course many times, you know that this grade ends in a very hard right turn followed by a 70-meter uphill that at this stage of the race appears to be Himalayan in size. But knowing the course, you also know that at the top of this hill there is a slightly climbing flat, where if you can somehow suck enough as to skate hard, you can tuck into one of the most exciting downhills of the entire race. At its bottom lies a right bend, which looks likely to throw you into the trees if skied at top speed but which can be turned handily in a tuck, flat out-if you don't lose courage. This turn leads to a smooth dip. Going fast through that dip, you feel your stomach sink into your shins with g-forces and then exit through your skull as you lift over the next rise-the sensation of going into orbit.

Skated in this fashion, the 47th and

48th kilometers allow you to blow away skiers who don't know or who have forgotten the course, who can't ski downhill, or who don't have the tenacity to follow you up that first climb. This is my strategy as the sunlight and shadow whip by my visor and I doublepole on the slight downgrade leading to the hairpin. Sagging with tiredness, I'm also thinking that at this point it really doesn't matter which one of us crosses the finish line first. It's all so much folderol in a game that has lost its charm, that has been crushed by exhaustion.

The man in red and the woman in blue grow larger, and at the turn they elect to stay left. Error. I slip right and come even with them. We go up the hill abreast. Then the player that's in so many of us, that's in wolves and lion cubs and young antelope, pushes harder up the hill. And the man in red and the woman in blue, they go harder, as if drawn by a magnet. And I go harder, pushing off my poles, all the while wondering where this energy is coming from and knowing for certain that it's the two racers by my side, straining to keep up, who are pushing us up the hill.

Almost indiscernibly, their tempo decreases. Maybe they've forgotten the approaching downhill, on which they could rest. Or maybe, at this point, our minor game isn't as important to them as it is to me. Or maybe they got even less sleep than I did. Maybe... Maybe we race to speculate on these variables, to see who we are on any given day, and on a very few of these days, when we're at the top of our game, to create moments that are both lovely and coherent. But no one thinks about that climbing a hill. The man in red and the woman in blue slow down, and their slowing makes me go faster, not thinking at all, just feeling the universes of power we win by inches.

On the other side-sweet gravity. I tuck, rattle through the fast turn, and don't glance back until two hills later. It would be too depressing to see them right on my tail! When I do look, I see no one. No one! All right, hit it now! Skate, skate, skate through the fast trees. Left at the last checkpoint, up the broad avenue where we started, past the crowded snowmobiles, and down the long home stretch toward the blue finish banner.

How hard to push now, so close to the end? I look back. Three hundred meters behind me, the woman in blue is leading the man in red! Well done, Ms. Blue! Kick it in! On the fumes, I skate under the banner, four hours and a few minutes after I started. I slap the outstretched hands of the Wyoming contingent and pat the shoulder of the man in silver, who came from nowhere to pass me and who's now bent over at the waist, coughing out his guts.

"Good race," I say, meaning it, and he says, "You, too."

I take off my skis-yes, wondrous wings-and watch the woman in blue beat the man in red under the banner by 25 seconds. Her name is Liz, his John. We have finished 121st, 122d, and 123d, with 79 people still on the course, skating it in toward their own PRs.