

Meeting the Tarahumara at the Leadville 100

By Micah True.

The summer of 1993:

I awoke in Boulder Community Hospital after a severe bicycle accident. My helmet had been split in two and numerous cuts around my eyes had required many stitches. The last thing I remembered was flying over the handle bars of my bike while speeding downhill at about 35 miles an hour and hitting a patch of gravel on the long, paved descent.

I would not let them [the hospital] keep me over-night. I had no health insurance, and a horse has got to eat! I had them call my good friend Robin, who came to the hospital to take me home and nurse me. She would tell me later how delirious I had been, and how she had nearly returned me to the place I had been so adamant about leaving!

After a week or so, I could move around without too much pain, so, decided to celebrate being alive by entering the Leadville 100. I had run a 22 1/2 hour Leadville some six years earlier, gotten 10th place while running very cautiously because of not running for the couple of months between the Western States 100 and Leadville. I had run over a cliff at a switch-back early-on during the Western States 100 mile run, seriously spraining an ankle, and ran on it until the doctor made me stop at the 85 mile point, when I could barely pick up my elephant-like swollen foot to step on the scale to be weighed. The following year, I had been in the very best cardiovascular condition of my life, having run 170 mile weeks and winning a couple of fifty milers, so, had gone for it at Leadville, only to suffer a stress fracture in my tibia and tendon damage from running too much and too hard on my bum left ankle, having to retire at the half-way point. After that run of assorted foot injuries and disappointments, I had stopped racing all together and had cut back quite a lot on my running

Here I was, five years later, with a good month to train, ready to celebrate my good fortune of being alive.

That '93 Leadville run was when the three Tarahumara of Mexico's Sierra Madre mountains and deep canyon country had traveled north to literally run for food. There had been a severe drought in their homeland, people were hungry, malnutrition was rampant among the children; they were starving. The Tarahumara people were cursed with an extremely high infant mortality rate. The Tarahumara runners had been promised bulk food for their villages if they would travel with a 'gringo' sponsor up to the states to run, so they did.

While running that year's 100 mile race in the mountains of Colorado, I ran very cautiously, and smoothly for the most part, having some friendly interaction on the trail with old Victoriano, the 55 year old Raramuri who had started slowly and gradually gained ground, moving as smoothly and gracefully as the afternoon storm clouds on a typical Rocky Mountain summer day, passing the rest of the runners to win the race. Cirrildo, who was from the same village, finished in second place, and Manuel Luna finished in fifth place. I got 28th, in not too bad of a time of a little over 24 hours. I was happy enough considering how I had felt a month earlier.

The next year I was all set to greatly improve on my Leadville performance, having been very healthy and training for a year, ready to roll. The only problem was, the race had filled within a week of entries being

accepted in early January, when I had been in Chiapas and Guatemala entertaining Mayan-Chamula revolutionaries after having had a head on collision with a cow on a mountain highway a few days before the January 1st, 1994 Zapatista revolution. The happy Indigenous spectators had butchered the unfortunate bovine on the side of the road, while a few of them were helping me to repair my truck enough to make a get-away before the police came, or the army who were stationed near-by, or the wealthy land-owner of the cow. We had straightened out the fan-blades enough to keep them from knocking into the bashed radiator that was streaming out water faster than I could pour it in, then they told me there was "mucho aqua" in a stream near to their village. We threw some of the meat and Indians in the back of the truck and three of the Chamula crowded into the front seat with me. The normally very darkly serious Chamula could not help but laugh when I cursed with a smile, "Pinche vaca; no bueno para nada!" [Damn cow; no good for nothing!]. "Good to eat!"-- they chorused. We then drove near to their mountain village where they feasted and I was treated like some kind of hero, albeit, a very frazzled hero horse, filling up all of my water containers, and then some, before leaving and driving my beat-up truck back to the camp-ground on the outskirts of the town of San Cristobal De Las Casas, arriving in a cloud of steam, with whistling radiator and screaming engine block singing in disharmony. I had felt an urgency to get my truck out of the mountains of Chiapas, to drive it to the coast and park it at my friend's coconut plantation five hours away. I worked on the truck steadily for a few days before driving it out of there on New-Years day morning. Upon arrival at the coastal village of Puerto Arista, the whole town had been gathered around the television, watching the Zapatista revolution occurring live in the streets of San Cristobal!

"Well, shucks; I really want to run this race, and am an old time, loyal friend of this event; won't you let me enter?" I had pleaded with the race director, who did not even remember my name, or who I was, even though I had run the "family" like race four times. No chance; the race had grown big now, and entry was at a premium. The "New York Times" and many publications had written the story of the 55 year old Mexican winning the race. Leadville was now a huge spot on the ultra-running map! The race and their corporate sponsor, a shoe company, had benefited considerably from all of the publicity, the feel good story of the impoverished Indians running for their communities; and not JUST running, but winning; and a 55 year old in sandals at that! A deal was made with the 'gringo' promoter who had driven the Tarahumara north, to bring another team of seven Raramuri to the '94 race. I think that part of the deal was to wear the race-sponsor's shoes for a photo op.

I received a phone call from the gringo sponsor/promoter of the team of Raramuri. He was looking for help, someone who could run and knew the course, to pace some of "his" runners. "Sure, I'll do it, providing I can run the whole 50 mile return with the runner of my choice." "They tend to run faster as they go; you think you can keep up?," he challenged. "If I can't keep up, then they don't need me," I confirmed.

Of course, almost anybody can run with anybody after the second anybody has already run 50 miles at an average elevation of over 10,000 feet!

I had driven my infamous cow-killing camper truck from my cabin in the mountains near to Nederland, Colorado, up to Leadville to meet the seven Tarahumara runners and their sponsor. Instantly upon meeting the runners, a good-looking Raramuri [who looked kind of like me :] and I made eye contact and each broke out in huge grins, picking each-other to run with. The gringo sponsor was amazed at the immediate communication between Martiniano and I; especially since the 'gringo' showed obvious disdain for me, at first. He would later open up considerably, being much friendlier and showing much more respect to me, this other, kind of 'loco' gringo who had introduced himself to the Tarahumara by the nick-name "Caballo Blanco."

I had been given this nick-name by the Mayans who inhabited the highlands of Guatemala, where the trail-running man had run the slopes of many of the country's high volcanoes, interacting with the smiling villagers

along the way; and the not-so-smiling military during a time of civil war. While spending a few winters circling the volcanic crater lake of Attitlan, I would run into a village, greet the Indigenous people, buy some tortillas and bananas, then move on from village to village in this way. When I tired, I would get a room for about a dollar, jump in the lake to bath, relax and munch out on tropical fruit and an assortment of other goodies the rest of the evening. It was a rough life! After awhile, as I would be entering the outskirts of each village, the women and children would line the streets calling out "El Caballo Blanco," and the kids would follow me, laughing. Kind of sweet; so I carried this name with me throughout my travels in Latin America; and I think that the image of a caballo blanco must be rather endearing to Latin and Indigenous people, because I have always been greeted warmly, bringing a smile when I introduce myself.

While in the mountain cabin where the Indians, gringo sponsor, and I were staying, I was addressing the runners; "There is a woman who will be running the race; a very special woman runner who has great powers, como una bruja" [like a witch]. She has a very good chance of winning this race! The Raramuri were talking frantically among themselves; "A woman win?". At that, the gringo's eyes rolled back in his head and the now familiar scowl had re-appeared on his face. The only word I understood of the fast and quiet-speaking Raramuri, was "bruja"; this word being repeated softly by all of them; "bruja....bruja.....bruja".....like, did ya hear that? bruja! "The best way to run this race," I continued in my gringo horse Spanish; "is, do not PASS la bruja until near to the end; run her down like a deer." The Raramuri were chattering very briskly; the language sounding like a flock of birds, with maybe a little martian thrown in; the gringo sponsor scolded me with an intense glare. It seems the Tarahumara believe in both brujas and space-men.

It was too late for the sponsor to shake me. The Raramuri had taken to me, this caballo loco; and besides, he needed me to run with the leading Raramuri as they liked and trusted me.

Mr. Promoter kept the Raramuri as isolated as he could; at least, isolated from anybody when he was not around to protect them from the outside world that he had brought them to. A television crew was in Leadville to televise the race event; the town buzzing with it's usual pre-race excitement; and even more so this year. "La Bruja"-- Ann Trason, was widely known in ultra running circles around the world as being the best woman ultra-distance runner on the planet, having won many a race among top women AND men; a living legend. There would be a very strong field all around for this race, a breakthrough year for Leadville. Many of the American runners had begun to complain about the presence of the Raramuri. Also, many of the American runners were thrilled by the return of these beautiful and unique people. It was a mixed bag. Mr. Promoter would strut around town with "his" runners in tow, making sure that nobody would get too close. It seemed to me, that although shy, the Raramuri also enjoyed interacting with friendly people. Who doesn't appreciate a smiling face showing kindness and respect? Certainly, not all of the faces were smiling.

There was a tension building between the promoter, race officials, and the race sponsor. It looked like the Raramuri promoter was going to pack them all up into his van and take them back to the border. It seemed there was an argument about some payment. I don't know; I was just having fun visiting with the Raramuri in the cabin, while telling stories and showing them the decals of animals on my infamous camper truck, pictures of the Oso [bear], leon de la sierra [mountain lion], and Pescado [actually, a big salmon that I don't think they have ever seen or have a word for]. The night before the race, it looked like the gringo promoter was going to take his Indians and leave.....too bad. Then, at the final moment, apparently a deal had been struck between all concerned who had been arguing.

I don't think that anybody asked the Raramuri what they wanted to do.

Guadajuko [Tarahumara word meaning: cool!] Vamos a correr [we are going to run].

4 a.m: Let the games begin.

Over 400 runners were lined up on sixth and main street to start the Leadville 100. Most were stretching and shaking off the pre-race jitters. A group of seven runners in colorful blouses, wrap around skirts, and home-made tire-tread sandals were standing to the side, totally relaxed, performing their Tarahumara stretching routine that consisted of doing nothing. It was too cold in the mountains at 10,000 feet, and there were no big rocks near the street to accommodate the usual pre-race practice of laying around on rocks; so, the Raramuri just stood there, showing no signs that they were about to depart on a 100 mile race through the mountains of Colorado, competing with some of the best Ultra runners in the United States.

The shot-gun sounded the start of the race.

This year, there were a few younger Raramuri, including 25 year old Juan Herrera, who went out much faster than had the team of older Tarahumara that had come to Leadville the previous year. There were many more runners than usual in this year's race, that had filled up beyond the entry limit, in very large part due to the presence of the Raramuri. The first six or seven miles of the race were on pavement before merging onto a single-track trail around Turquoise lake. For the runners wanting to be among the leaders, a strategy is to be sure to start fast enough so as not to be behind too many people when running on that single-track trail in the dark, early hours of the morning. Of the seven Raramuri running this years race, five were all from the same mountain village of about 500 people. The gringo promoter had found them simply by asking around in la Sierra Madre, where did the best runners live. Juan Herrera and My friend Martimiano Cervantes were favorites among the Raramuri to win. Juan had told me that the 41 year old Martimiano was the best runner in their village. Juan was very confident, almost cocky. Martimiano just grinned; he was cool and confident.

During the early stages of the race, I was just hanging out near to the mountain cabin in my camper truck, reading and resting. I would meet the runners and promoter in Twin Lakes, at the 40 mile mark. Pacers were allowed to begin running with the racers at Winfield, the 50 mile mark, just a few hard miles after descending the mountains from the high point of the race, crossing Hope Pass at 12, 600 feet.

The first runners coming off the Colorado trail into the village of Twin Lakes, at 40 miles, were "La Bruja"-- Ann Trason, and Matimiano, who had made the mistake of passing la Bruja, and another Tarahumara runner who had also passed la Bruja. Juan had arrived just after the others in the lead pack. Everybody in the lead pack was setting an incredibly fast pace on this beautifully sunny Rocky Mountain day. Just before entering the aid station in Twin Lakes, Ann had re-passed Martimiano and the other Raramuri who had passed her. "Ask them how it feels to be passed by a woman!," snarled la Bruja. "Learn Spanish and ask them yourself," I smiled. She was intensely competitive. "I hate them," she was heard to have said.

I jumped in the promoter's van to ride around the mountain to meet up with the runners where they would be arriving at the dirt road after running over the mountains and crossing Hope Pass. Here they came, descending the mountain, in almost the same order that they had arrived the last I saw them; la Bruja in first place, this time followed by Juan, Martimiano, and the rest of the Raramuri, then a large gap before the other top Americans began to appear. My man, Martimiano, arrived at the dirt road with that usual big, peyote eating grin on his face. I grinned back, and a spectator handed him a cold bottle of Coke. Martimiano downed the coke in a second, then began to run the three miles on dirt road to Winfield, the turn around point of this out-and-back course. I trotted across the road from him, where I was excited to begin pacing him at Winfield. I knew that with Martimiano, I would get a good 50 mile run in! Half way to Winfield, the Indian was doubled over, holding his belly, groaning. The carbonation from the Coke had caused a huge gas pocket of a stomach ache; Martimiano was hurting. He hobbled the last couple of miles into Winfield, seeing la Bruja and Juan strongly running back on their return trip to the trail that would take them up and over the pass again, in the early stages of their return trip to Leadville.

At the 50 mile turn-around in Winfield, Martimiano was taking his time, trying to barf, unable to get anything out but a loud, musical "brrrrp". It was not looking good for the cool Raramuri with the handsomely chiseled features, lean muscular body, and almost perpetual big grin. He was not smiling now! I made him eat a banana, grabbed his hand, and said "andale huevon!" [move on big-balls--a Mexican term for lazy]. He laughed and reluctantly came with me, walking back up the dirt road until I got him to trot, then run back to the trail, seeing a handful of other runners headed for the turn-around, in closer proximity to us. I verbally drug him up the steep trail leading us towards the ominous Hope pass; telling him that this is where I had always wanted to quit, feeling crappy, too. I told him that when we reached the mother mountain of "Esperanza" [Hope], mama Esperanza would reward us by blessing us with power, and send us on our way down her gentler side with speed and grace. Sure enough; she did! Martimiano had recovered. We had lost a great deal of time battling his illness, but, he had returned from the near-dead, and we were flying with the grace of Esperanza, dancing over rocks on the long descent to the lake-side town of Twin-Lakes, still in third place, with nobody near behind us, and La Bruja with the stalking Juan ahead of us.

Up ahead, after his arriving at Twin Lakes, Juan Herrera had been joined by his pacer, a very talented distance runner from San Diego named Jamie Williams. They were tailing la Bruja and her pacer. Whenever la Bruja would pull over to tie her shoe, take a pee, or whatever, Juan would stop until she was ready to continue, being sure to follow my advise: "Don't pass la Bruja." I would later read an account of the race by La Bruja, Ann Trason. In her account, she had said how un-nerving it had been that Juan would not pass her, as if to say that he could pass her whenever he wanted.

Martimiano and I were enjoying the smooth and roller-coaster like section of the Colorado Trail between Twin Lakes and Half-Moon campground. I told him that we would caminar [walk] the steeper ups, and run the downs and levels. When we hit an up-hill, Martimiano would say "arriba [up]; caminamos [we walk]". "You call that an arriba?! Andale, huevon"; I would crack the verbal whip at the laughing, lazy Indian; and we would run the hill.

We were on the roll again, up and down the roller-coaster, coming out of the wooded trail and into the Half-Moon campground aid station, where a film crew was waiting; the camera-man rudely pushing the camera into the face of the uncomfortable Martimiano; the commentator announcing; "Coming off the trail in third place, at this, the 70 mile mark, is a Tarahumara runner, Martimiano Cervantez, and his American pacer, Colorado's Micah True. Micah, can you tell us; is there any kind of secret to the amazing endurance of the Tarahumara's.....what do they eat?" I did not want to hang around long, as Martimiano was clearly uncomfortable, but I answered the question; "Why yes, that would have to be the three P's. The Raramuri eat the three P's every chance they get." The commentator was excited to have the scoop. "Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to hear it, exclusively on this station; the nutritional formula that is the secret of the Tarahumara! Micah, What are the three P's?" "The three P's, are: PINOLE, PISTO, and PINOCHA". We turned to run away as the commentator loudly repeated into the camera, the secret nutritional formula of the Tarahumara. Martimiano wanted to know what was so funny, as I had an even bigger than normal grin on my face. He wanted to know what I had told the television commentator. The three P's, according to Caballo Blanco, were: PINOLE [corn powder]--PISTO [hard booze]--PINOCHA [slang word for female genitalia]. Please excuse me. I had to pick the laughing Indian up from the trail, because he had been laughing so hard.....Andale [move on]!

We were running at a fast enough pace to cover the long dirt road section between Half-Moon campground and the Fish Hatchery aid station in the daylight. After Fish Hatchery, which is a medical check-point, begins a long jeep-road climb that seems to go on for-ever, up over Sugar-loaf pass. When Martimiano would start to get too serious, I would remind him to eat his three P's. We would laugh and lightly hike the long climb.

It was after crossing the pass and running down the other side, that Martimiano and I began to have an

extended conversation about 'La Bruja'. My Spanish was definitely limited, and so was Martimiano's, as he is a very traditional Raramuri who speaks the Raramuri language and very little Spanish, yet; our communication, under the full moon, and during our whole race journey, had been very good. We understood each-other completely. Sometimes, laughter speaks much more clearly than words. We spoke of how much respect we had for La Bruja and her amazing performance ahead, and how we were going to tell her so later, after the race. We were going to present her with "Korima" [a gift].

It had been on this section, the descent from Sugarloaf pass before arriving at May Queen campground, when Juan had finally over-taken La Bruja, flying by her in the night with his pacer, Jamie, letting out a loud war-hoop! Jamie could barely keep up with the blazing Juan, who picked up his pace to arrive in Leadville, the winner and new course record holder, taking almost 30 minutes off of the previous record; finishing in a time of 17:30. Ann had run the third or fourth fastest Leadville 100 ever, with an amazing time of 18:04! This time shattered the previous women's record, that I believe she still holds, and most likely, always will.

Martimiano finished 3rd place in a time of 19:40.

4 of the first 5 finishers were Raramuri.

The 7 Raramuri all finished in the top 11.

At the awards presentation, I gave a speech honoring the great runner, Ann Trason; saying how Martimiano had been very impressed with her, and had made her a gift [korima]. "On behalf of my Tarahumara friends, we would like to present Ann Trason with this gift." The Nike sponsored athlete came forward to receive her gift, a pair of hand-made huarache sandals.

The Tarahumara were never invited back to run Leadville, even though standard race policy is that ALL past champions are invited automatically. This rule did not seem to apply to the Raramuri.

May the Raramuri and all of us continue to run free.