

My Adventure at the 2023 World's Toughest Mudder

By Whitney Tilson, November 8, 2023

This weekend, I ran my seventh World's Toughest Mudder, a 24-hour obstacle course race, which took place from noon Saturday to midday Sunday in the desert in Granbury, Texas, about an hour from Dallas. The goal is to complete as many five-mile laps as possible, each with 20 obstacles, including mud, freezing water, electric shocks, monkey bars, crawling under nets and barbed wire, over walls, etc.

I had a very good race, completing 13 laps/65 miles and roughly 200 obstacles, which was good enough for third place among old geezers 55 and older (I turned 57 last week). Here I am getting my medal:



More importantly, HUGE thanks to the more than 50 friends and readers who donated more than \$22,500, mostly on a per-mile basis, to motivate me and support my Ukrainian friend Artem, who's fighting on the front lines to defend his country (I wrote about him [here](#); it's not too late to donate – you can do so here: www.taps.org/Tilson).

I shared a pit area with four of my buddies, all WTM veterans: former SEAL Mark James (I've run all seven with him), his son Orion, Tom Millerick and William Phillips. Mark did 55 miles and Tom and William both got 50, so all four of us got brown 50-mile bibs, and Oey dusted us all, earning a coveted silver bib by completing 75 miles – and also clinched the “Holy Grail” for most cumulative miles run at all eight Tougher, Toughest and World's Toughest Mudders this year. We were supported in the pit for 24+ hours by the amazing Alan Chan and Nick Parsons, who after each lap fed us, helped us change into our wetsuits, etc.

Here's a picture of us (minus Oey, who was already at the start line) just before the race – from left to right: Alan, Mark, Nick, William, me and Tom:



While Mark and I only earned 50-mile bibs this year, in the past we've both run 75 miles – two of only four people over age 50 to do so in the 13-year history of the race. I set the all-time age 50+ record nine days after my 50th birthday in 2016 (you can read about my first four World's [here](#)), Mark matched me in 2018, Joe Perry (face painted) matched us in 2021, and John Castle did so this year (at age 56!). Here's a photo of us at the finish:



I paid a price

I'm proud of my race, but I paid a price...

As you can see in these pictures, my feet were waterlogged, hands chewed up, back of my legs bruised, and take a look at my left hip!



The hip injury could have been much worse... It happened on Twinkle Toes, which is a simple balance beam comprised of two 2x4s bolted together over a pool of water – you just have to walk across:



While it looks easy, it's not because the wooden beam starts to shake when you get about halfway across. My strategy was to slowly and carefully walk about halfway and then, as it started to shake, make a run for the other side.

On maybe my 6th lap – it was dark – I was on the right beam and as I lost my balance, falling to my left, I lunged for the other side. My foot hit the slick black tarp sideways and slipped out from under me and my left hip came crashing down on the bolt anchoring the balance beam next to mine – in the picture, you can see four

of them anchoring each end of each beam, with tennis balls over them, which is surely what saved me from a fractured hip.

My headlamp went flying and I just lay there, stunned, as the volunteers were freaking out, asking if they should call medical. It hurt like crazy and I initially thought my race might be over, but after a few seconds I told everyone I was okay, gingerly got up and kept walking. I was limping a bit for a while, but then it didn't affect me the rest of the race. In fact, I had totally forgotten about it – just one of 100 aching parts of my body – until I got out of the shower yesterday and saw the hideous bruise!

The race

Here are some pics from the start of the race (the female and male winners are in the lower left picture – Kris Rugloski with 90 miles and Austin Azar with 105):



Here's Oey cruising on the first lap:



We got super lucky with the weather –the night before the race it dropped to 41 degrees, but only hit a low of 57 on Saturday night and it wasn't too hot during the day. This plus the relatively flat course led me think (wrongly, it turns out) that racers would be putting up big mileage. Here's the course map, showing all 20 obstacles:



All of the obstacles are closed for the first hour and then open 1-3 per hour (as noted on the right side of the map). That means racers really want to hustle the first few hours to rack up a lot of miles while most of the obstacles are closed and the sun is out.

So that's what I did. As you can see from my lap times, I slow-jogged the first two laps with Tom in about an hour each (12-minute-mile pace), with a very short 3:15 pit stop in between to grab a Gatorade and banana:

#	Pit Time	Lap Time	Total Time
1		55:48	55:48
2	03:15	59:55	1:58:59
3	04:43	1:19:41	3:23:24
4	05:47	1:24:08	4:53:20
5	06:19	1:28:41	6:28:20
6	05:56	1:33:20	8:07:38
7	04:31	2:01:30	10:13:40
8	10:38	2:13:59	12:38:18
9	27:27	2:22:15	15:28:02
10	14:28	2:05:44	17:48:15
11	05:20	2:12:20	20:05:55
12	15:14	2:01:52	22:23:02
13	07:31	2:08:13	24:38:47

Given that I hadn't had much time to do a lot of running training before the race, I expected that I'd stop running after two laps and power-walk the rest of the race and get 65 miles like I did last year, but to my surprise I was feeling good so kept jogging most of the next four laps, all of which I did in 80-93 minutes.

So, only eight hours into the race, I had already completed six laps/30 miles, hadn't failed an obstacle, and was thinking, "Holy cow! I think I can get another silver bib!"

And then lap 7 crushed me...

I failed Grappler, which had a brutal nearly-one-mile penalty walk, then Spunky Monkey, which I'd nailed the first time, but I slipped off the very last (muddy) rung, which added another half mile, and then Hangin' Rough due to the absolutely impossible banana holds, which was another half mile. (See descriptions of these obstacles below.)

With my dream of a "clean" race – not failing a single obstacle – shattered and having walked nearly two extra miles extra, the lap took an extra half hour and really demoralized me.

I took my first longer pit stop (10:38) to change into my warmer neoprene top, as the temperature was dropping fast and the water obstacles were opening, and wolf down a big cup of Ramen – my first real food after 10 hours of Coke, Gatorade, Crustables (PB&J), Pop Tarts and bananas.

Lap 8 was another slow one, as I was still chilled and failed another three obstacles, so I then did my longest pit stop of the race (27:27) to change into my full-body 5/4mm wet suit and eat some hot mac and cheese. (Getting lots of calories, salt and sugar into my body is key to maintaining a high energy level during such a long race like this.)

Lap 9, which began just after 1am, was the longest of the race at 2:22. My wetsuit was too hot in the first part of the course, which had fewer water obstacles, it's weight slowed me down, and I didn't even attempt a few hard obstacles, figuring why waste my limited grip strength if I was just going to fail them anyway?

But then, to my great surprise, things got better...

On lap 10, I tried a couple obstacles I'd failed or skipped earlier – and completed them! It turns out that I had gotten chilled on laps 6 and 7 because I wanted to run light and fast, which had killed my grip strength. But once I warmed up in my heavy wetsuit, it returned and I started crushing all but 1-2 obstacles per lap.

Also, after every lap starting on lap 5, you get a rubber wristband that allows you to skip an obstacle, so by lap 10 I'd accumulated five of them and was strategically using them to avoid obstacles I might fail that had nasty penalties.

So, after the awful 2:22 on lap 9, my last four laps were all 2:01-2:12.

I had done the math in my head in the middle of the night and realized that I had no chance of 70 miles, but could easily get 65 with an hour to spare. I also saw long before the end of the race that I wasn't going to catch the two guys ahead of me in my age group, nor was the fourth-place guy anywhere close to me, so with nine hours left in the race, I didn't feel any pressure and just cruised.

I walked parts of laps 12 and 13 with Trevor Cichosz, who won the race in 2016 and 2019 and whom I'd never met. He's a super nice guy and it was a treat for a nobody like me to hang out and do obstacles with a legend. Then I caught up with Mark James and we did the last few miles and finished together:



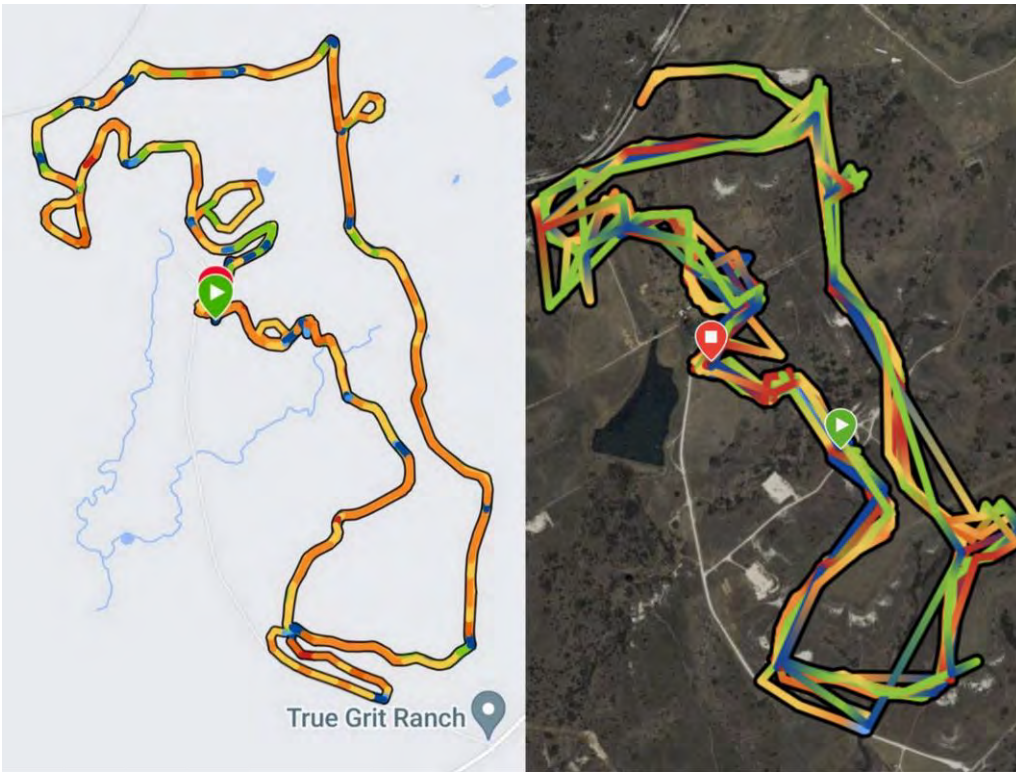
Penalties

When Mark and I compared the race reports produced by our Garmin watches, we discovered that we'd both done about 72 miles – but I got credit for 65 and he only got credit for 55! In other words, I did seven miles of penalties and he did 17.

The reason for the huge discrepancy is that, other than a couple of bad laps in the middle of the race, I was only doing one penalty per lap, whereas Mark was failing *eight* obstacles every lap in the second half of the race because his hands swell up during long races, which kills his grip:



You can see all the extra mileage he had to do in the maps produced by our watches (mine is on the left):



Why I do extreme sports

As I hobble around, nursing my aching body, you might be wondering why I do extreme sports like this. There are several reasons, starting with this:

**PAIN IS
TEMPORARY,
GLORY IS
FOREVER.**

I actively seek out new experiences, especially those that push me outside of my comfort zone. They test and broaden my mind and, even amid quite a bit of pain and suffering, bring a hard-to-describe richness and joy into my life.

At the end of each year, my outside-the-box adventures – along with quality time with family and friends – are always among the things I look back on most fondly.

I suspect it's also healthy for my brain to mix things up a bit. On a normal day, other than a few minutes in the shower or doing a workout class, I'm reading, watching, or listening to something every waking moment. It's stimulating, but exhausting – like drinking from a fire hose. In contrast, for 24 consecutive hours this past weekend, I didn't once look at a screen and, for nearly the entire race, was alone, accompanied only by my thoughts. It was strangely peaceful and relaxing...

Accomplishing something difficult also builds my resilience, both mentally and physically.

Participating in events like this motivates me to stay in great shape – which is especially important as I get older (I turned 57 last week!). I want to lead a long, healthy life. A brutal race probably doesn't extend my life, but the months of training beforehand sure do.

Being super fit also makes me feel stronger and more confident – and I'm certainly not complaining about being on the podium at the awards brunch on Monday.

Lastly, my adventures are an incredible bonding experience. Ask anyone who has served in combat which people they're closest to, and most of them will say the ones with whom they shared a foxhole.

We increasingly live in a "clicks and likes" world, where our relationships are a mile wide and an inch deep... But research shows that happiness actually comes from the opposite: the number of deep relationships you have.

That leads to an obvious question: What is a deep relationship?

I've always thought that this was a good test: *Would they hide you?*

During the Holocaust, when the Nazis murdered more than 6 million Jews in Europe, some survived because their non-Jewish friends hid them – risking their own lives to do so. This is how Anne Frank and her family survived for more than two years in Amsterdam before they were betrayed.

How many people do you have in your life, outside of your immediate family, who would hide you?

Other pictures

Alan helping William put on his wetsuit:



Mark and Oey chowing:



Mark at the finish:



Tom crashed after the race:



So did Oey:



Oey getting his Holy Grail award on Monday:



Obstacles

I didn't get pictures of all of the obstacles, but here are some, in order that they appeared on the course:

#1: Well Clung

This is a picture from last year's WTM. This year, you have to jump and grab a wet, slick bar and swing out, but instead of transitioning to a second bar (like last year), you grabbed a cargo net and climbed down the bottom to the other side.



#2: Twinkle Toes – described above

#3: Devils' Sack

Pick up a sand bag and crawl under a net. If you did it with others, was reasonable, but by yourself was a bear...



#4: Snogging Dirt

A long crawl under barbed wire through dirt then mud/water:

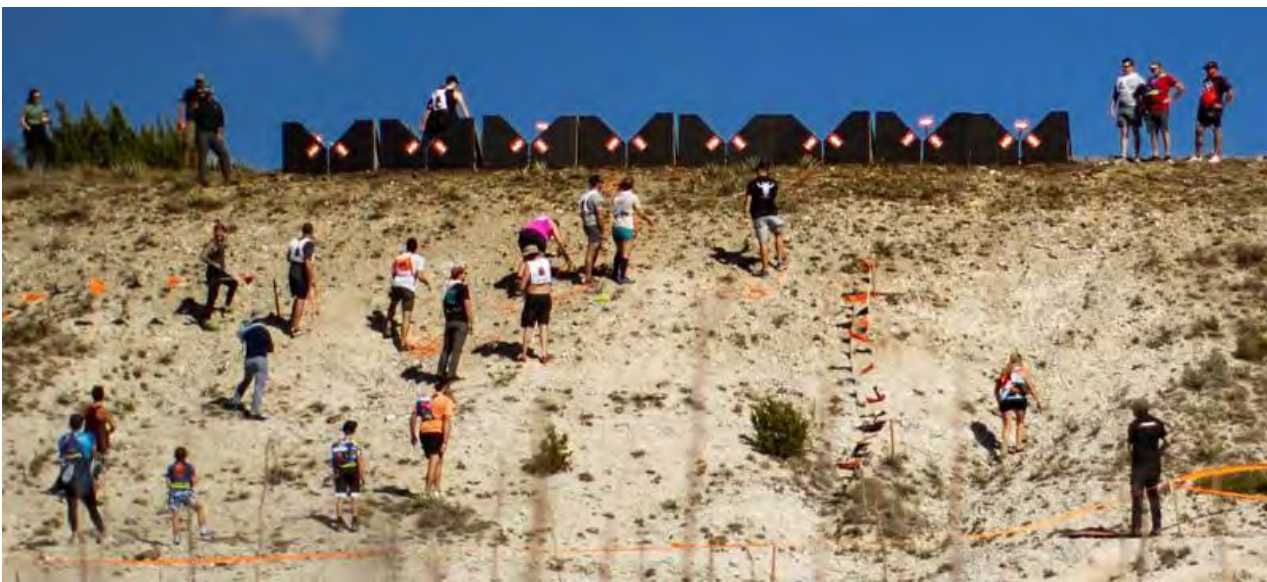


#5: Ladder to Hell



#6: The Grappler

I last saw this at the WTM in 2016 and didn't recall it being difficult, but this time it was. You got three attempts and if you failed, it was an endless nearly-one-mile penalty walk, which I did twice to my great regret...



#7: Operation

Another classic I hadn't seen since 2016. It's just like the children's game – you have to slide a long pole with a hook at the end to get a rubber bracelet hanging on a wall about six feet back. But if you touch the side of the hole, you get a huge shock! I only got shocked twice and didn't really care – it was a good wake-up! – but this one freaks some people out...



#8: Swingin Tips

Easy traverse over the wood, but hard traverse over the muddy plastic handles. I only failed once thankfully...



#9: Dublin Walls

I can do this without assistance, but was happy to save my strength a few times and get a leg up from the heroes who boosted folks for the entire race:



#10: Dingleberries

Traverse across a strap mesh. I only failed it once...



Here I am doing a nearly identical obstacle last year – one of my favorite pics!



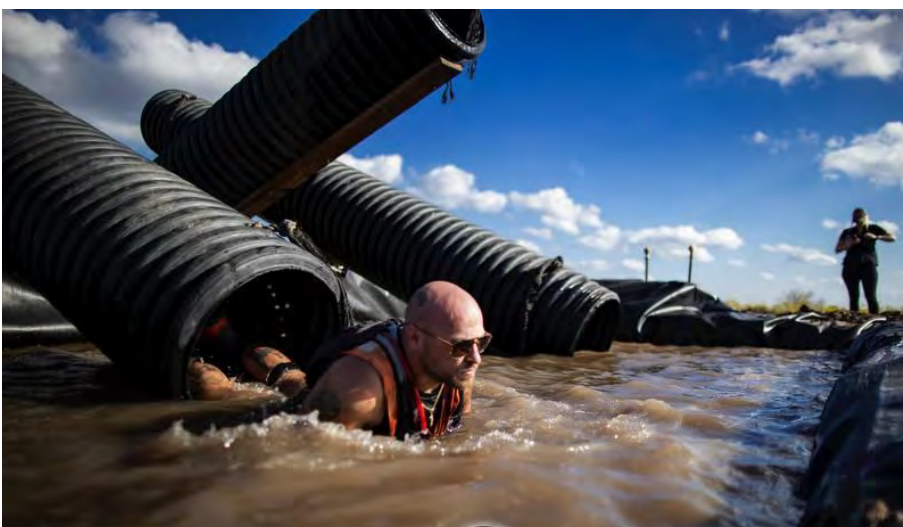
#11: Barrel Chested

The usual strap line, but with a wicked twist this year – you had to go around a barrel (and if any part of you touched the water at any point, you failed):



#12: Melting Point

The classic Arctic Enema with a twist: you had to get in the water, crawl in the tube, use the rope to pull yourself up to the midpoint, at which time it tilted down and deposited you in an ice bath:



#13: Trench Press

A knee-scraping trench crawl under barbed wire, with a tight squeeze into water at the end:



#14: Cage Crawl

A classic:





#15: Coach's Corner

Thanks to Coach for running an all-night disco! The obstacle was much harder than past years: another crawl and then up and down a muddy 10-foot cargo net.



#16: Spunky Monkey

A slight variation on the classic Funky Monkey: a rope climb up to a bar and then monkey bars down. It was much harder because the rope got your hands wet and muddy, so I couldn't do it after the first time. However,

halfway through the race, they reversed it and I was able to do it again because I quickly got up the monkey bars and then swung a leg over the rope to get down:



#17: Augustus Gloop

A wonderful twist on another classic: instead of climbing up a wall with water pouring down on you, you had to climb up inside a cylindrical cargo net:





#18: Hangin' Rough

Seemed simple: 2 rungs to a bar to another rung... but then the two banana holds at the end were impossible (though I came within an inch of hitting the bell on my last lap). I think fewer than 5% of racers even attempted this and only 1% got it (and the penalty walk was long)... Ugh!



#19: Mudderhorn

A fun, tall cargo net climb:



Kudos to the heroes of Mudderhorn, who boosted people up the slick wall to the net (this pic is from last year)!



#20: Everest

Everest also had heroic folks at the top for the entire race pulling people up:



Me doing Everest last year:



