One look at its excessively aggravating features makes it obvious the Badwater Ultramarathon won’t be overrun with entrants. There’s the preposterous route, the stultifying heat, the monstrous hills, the soul-draining length, and the excellent chance of rattlesnakes.

“In the middle of the night,” Jeff Gleason ’79 said after running his second 135-mile Badwater this summer, “this pickup truck drives past us and stops. Two guys jump out. One has a stick. The other gets a cooler out of the back. They’re dancing around a rattlesnake in the road. One guy pins it down with the stick. The other guy opens the cooler and another snake tries to slither out. I said, ‘What are you going to do with them,’ and they said, ‘We’re gonna take ‘em home and play wid ‘em.’” That might be the most chilling aspect of the whole ordeal.
It’s not that you’re running from a Death Valley start at 280 feet below sea level to the portal of Mt. Whitney, the highest point in the contiguous 48. It’s not that daylight temperatures reach 125 degrees. It’s not even the snakes. But running in close proximity to people who will herd rattlesnakes for home entertainment, see, now you’re getting crazy.

When Gleason, who received his A&M degree in marine biology, ran his first Badwater in July of 2009, he had five goals related to pace, body condition, encouraging runners, raising money, etc. This time Goal 1 was, uh, survive.

“The first time, I totally underestimated the hills,” he said. “I ran about 1,900 miles getting ready. This time I ran about 2,300.”

These kinds of challenges have always driven Gleason, an executive at ThermoFisher Scientific in Pittsburgh, but the real impetus remains his A&M core value of selfless service. This year, his efforts, and that of his six-person crew (including wife Kelly Gleason’80, also a marine biology graduate), raised more than $80,000 for Pressley Ridge, a Pennsylvania center for troubled children.

“I’d just been thinking about the kids Pressley Ridge helps out,” Gleason said. “Kids just shouldn’t have to go through that. I mean, we’re so fortunate. What would it be like if we had to face those kinds of challenges? I’m just so glad we could do this for them.”

Goal 1 having been achieved, there are plenty of challenges and plenty of selfless service ahead for this ultra-Aggie.

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