

Run to the Sun 2004
By Sheri Levin McNerthney

It's still completely dark at 4:30AM on Maui a week after the Spring Equinox, shuffling around at the starting line for the 2004 Run to the Sun with about a hundred fellow masochists, oops, er, runners. I peer eastward and upward. There in the faint glow of the quarter-moon and a clear sky full of blazing stars I can just make out the finish line: the summit of Haleakela, 36 miles and 10,000 feet elevation away, mostly straight up.

I hear the voice of John Salmonson, chief kahuna of H.U.R.T. (Hawaii Ultra Running team, co-race sponsor with Valley Isle Road Runners), crackle through a loudspeaker. "Any virgins out there?" How do you answer *that* one at 4:30AM?? Shyly, I put up my hand. "For the benefit of you first-timers", John went on, "I'll tell you how this all started." John told us how one fine day in 1977 high school student Steve Sobaje, his teacher Bill Carroll, and his coach Dave Sakagawa were out for a training run. Their "training run" that day ended up taking them from the ocean's edge to the 10,000 foot summit of Haleakela volcano. And thus Maui's annual Run to the Sun was born. Steve Sobaje went on to set the course record of 4:45:31 in 1986. Now Steve is a 40-something firefighter; he still supports the race by running aid station #8 each year. You'll find Dave Sakagawa graciously handing out goodies at aid station #6.

Haleakela, "House of the Sun". It was here, according to ancient Hawaiian legend, that the demigod Maui lassoed the sun to slow its path across the sky so that his mother, the goddess Hina, could dry her tapa cloth. As a running destination, Haleakela is both forbidding and compelling. Ever since I moved to Maui three years ago I've wondered...what would it be like to run up to the top of that thing?

On March 28, 2004 I found out. The Run to the Sun course has three distinct sections. The first section starts with 7 or so mostly flat miles, a perfect warmup as you cruise past gently rustling sugar cane fields in the early morning darkness. I spotted a meteor streaking across the sky; a good omen, I thought. Dawn breaks as the grade slopes upward toward residential Kula. It's full daylight by the time you reach mile 13 and climb up the steepest section of the course, the infamous 1.5 mile Pulehuiki. After cresting the top of that runners' nightmare, you get to stretch out on a half-mile downhill which brings you to Crater Road.

The Crater Road intersection at mile 15 marks the beginning of the middle section of the course. From here the course climbs up a steady grade and breaks out of the residential area into the wild open slopes of Haleakela. Each switchback you round renews you with the gift of a breathtaking panorama of coast-to-coast Maui views and the islands of Lanai and Molokai framed against an infinite Pacific horizon.

At mile 26.3 you reach Haleakela National Park headquarters. Your first of two drop bags is available for you here. You're at 7500' elevation, and you're about to embark on the final section of the course. The grade kicks back a bit, but altitude becomes a factor to be reckoned with.

Up to this point there were aid stations every three miles; from here to the summit aid stations are available every mile, offering water, Coke, Powerade, gels, bananas, oranges, pretzels, and cookies as well as lots of enthusiastic encouragement and heartfelt aloha. Many of the wonderful Run to the Sun volunteers have served year after year, just to be part of this incredible and totally unique event.

By mile 30 at 8000' elevation, it's all about putting one foot in front of the other. Repeat. Somehow you at last find yourself on the final long traverse toward the summit. You're gradually but steadily reeling in the gleaming domes of the Haleakela National Observatory. You think you're almost there...but surprise, you're not! As you pass the Visitor Center at mile 35.4 the course suddenly steepens to climb up Red Hill, the final obstacle separating you from blessed horizontal-ness.

You can't see the finish line until you come around one last curve - and there it is just a few yards in front of you, a riot of color and activity waiting to greet you after your odyssey. John Salmonson presides over the finish line, hands you your coveted finisher's T-shirt, and you realize in a flash slicing through your foggy consciousness...it's over.

I found out what it's like to run to the top of Haleakela. It's hard. But it's awesome.