

# Triple Threat

## *Helen Klein's Tahoe Triple Marathon Sets a New Standard for Mature Athletes.*

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BY JANE BYNG

On October 7, 8, and 9, 2004, Helen Klein completed the Tahoe Triple Marathon. She ran a marathon a day to complete the 78-mile loop that circumnavigates the lake. I crewed for her during this event. She completed this challenging high-altitude, three-day event 50 days before her 82nd birthday, and she did it, as usual, with style and courage. She continues to prove that the mind is stronger than the body and that it is never too late to start an athletic career.

To run the Triple Marathon, you need to bring your own crew for at least the first two days, as runners are completely unaided and on their own. The course has some markings and monitoring, but you need your own handlers because support is minimal. The third day is run with the official Lake Tahoe Marathon, however, with shuttle buses, mile markings, aid stations, and some traffic control.

The idea of running around a spectacularly beautiful alpine lake (6,200 feet at lakeside and reaching a height of 7,044 feet at Spooner Summit) is not new to ultrarunners. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the race around Lake Tahoe was called the Pepsi 72. It was run as a one-day, 72-mile ultrarace. Rae Clark set the course record in 1982 at 9:06:14.

Four years ago, Lake Tahoe Marathon race director Les Wright revived the tradition of a round-the-lake race but instituted several major changes. By adding an extra six miles, the run around the lake could now be done as three full marathons in three successive days. The extra distance was added by running through Inspiration Point twice and ending on day three at Pope Beach. Race registration was held the afternoon before the event at the Horizon Casino Resort with good food and inspirational speakers. An international field of runners attended, with runners coming from many states and as far away as Canada and Sweden.

### INSPIRATION IN THE PREDAWN

Day one began with a spectacular 7:00 A.M. sunrise at Inspiration Point, overlooking Emerald Bay. The air was permeated with the smell of pine trees; the weather was a cool, crisp 42 degrees. The majority of the course is run on a highly trafficked paved road around the lake. Because the race is run on the highway,



▲ Runners at the start of the Tahoe Triple. Helen (#553) is smiling and looking great for 81 years and 10 months.

it is easy to drive the course, stopping every few miles to aid and monitor your runner. Extreme caution has to be taken by the runners and crew because of the narrowness of the shoulders and the amount of traffic on the road.

Helen's crew included our crew captain and coach, Norm Klein, a prominent race director (14 Western States 100s, Rio Del Lago 100, and Helen Klein 50 Miles), former oral surgeon, and Helen's husband for the last 37 years. It also included me, a friend and fan of many years, and her daughter, Debbie Schooley, from Salisbury, Maryland.

Crewing in some multiday endurance events can be quite a challenge, but it is always rewarding to be part of the struggle and to share in the adventure. Crewing for Helen is always easy. She never eats after 4:00 P.M. the night before a race. Morning starts with some of Helen's homemade bread, almond butter, and bananas. She prefers to eat healthy, but on race days she eats everything in sight: pretzels, grapes, and coffee candies were favorites on this run. She ingests copious amounts of fluids, alternating among electrolyte drinks, water, and colas. She runs quietly, focused on keeping her form: shoulders back and down, relaxed, loose, and landing lightly.

We wait for her every couple of miles, like waitresses with trays of snacks and drinks. As the day warms, we grab her clothes as she peels off layers. On long runs, we often help her change her shoes, but on this run she had a comfortable new pair of Sauconys that she wore for the entire event. Helen says the most

enjoyable part of the race is being able to do this at her age and being able to cross the finish line every day for three days. Her rapid recovery after the races is aided by a hot tub, massage, plenty of food, and keeping busy around the house cooking and cleaning.

The course has many spectacular views; however, we were unable to see many of them on the first day because of road construction and the need to keep our eyes on oncoming traffic. I was frightened that one of us was going to get hit by a speeding big rig. The shoulders of the road are often very narrow, and caravans of large trucks can be an annoyance. The trucks create an enormous draft, which combines with narrow, uneven shoulders; broken asphalt; pine needles; and slipperiness, gravelly sand to create quite a challenge for the participants.

## CRASH AND RECOVERY

At mile 19 of day one, Helen took a horrific fall, nearly sliding under a guardrail. When several runners near her crowded together to avoid being hit by a speeding big rig, she lost sight of her footing, fell on her face, and slid. Gushing blood, she quickly arose. She had a cut eyebrow from her smashed glasses, a bruised eye, a large contusion on her right cheek, and gouges out of both hands.

Although she did not complain, we could see that the knees of her tights were ripped, and she was bleeding there as well. She was quite a sight, being drenched in blood. We helped her to change her shirt and rinsed her off. Norm put some



Photo by Jane Byng

▲ Afternoon, day 1, Helen on broken gravelly shoulder before the accident.

dressings on her, and one of the other crews gave her an ice pack. She hurriedly took off and for the next three miles held ice to her bruised and road-burned face. She ran the last seven miles injured but still finished the first day's marathon in 6:06:44. Although she was badly bruised, she was in good spirits, smiling, and actually looked pretty good.

The second day of the event runs over the north shore of the lake and past the affluent area of Incline Village, which boasts massive houses and gorgeous landscaping. In addition to the many varieties of stately pines, Indian summer was visible in all the colors of aspens, maples, and birches. The spectacular views of these mountain chalets are almost as good as views of the pristine lake.

No one had any guesses what the day would bring in the wake of Helen's injuries from the previous day. I wanted to forget the whole affair and go on a picnic. Amazingly, however, Helen was bouncing around looking great the next morning. She was bruised and bandaged, but she did not even limp. It is truly amazing how she can recuperate so quickly. Her recovery certainly has to be due to an unbelievable amount of determination and discipline.

The second day was better, as the traffic was not quite as bad as when we went over the north shore and Incline Village is quite beautiful. Helen ran remarkably well and finished a little swollen in the time of 5:50:10. The course description



Photo by Jane Byrge

▲ Day 2, running through Incline Village, bruised but running strong.

posted on the Internet reported that the last five miles were all downhill to the finish. We clocked the mileage, stopped at a high point, and Norm told her it was all downhill. Well, it was not—it was more rolling hills with a lot of uphill. Nevertheless, Helen finished strong and undeterred.

## ANYTHING BUT QUIET AND LONELY

The third and final day's marathon was really festive and well produced. Aid stations, music, mile markers, and funny signs were abundant. The Hill From Hell is at 6,300 feet, Purgatory 100 at 6,500 feet, and You Made It at 6,800 feet. Bagpipers were playing at the top of the hill at mile 17, where there is an aid station stocked with water and oranges. This was followed by an unforgettable view at the 20-mile mark with Emerald Bay on one side and Fallen Leaf Lake on the other. South Lake Tahoe lies straight ahead.

The 101 triple marathoners and the one-day marathoners got off to a lovely, yet drizzly, sunrise start at Commons Beach in Tahoe City. Everyone was ecstatic that the predicted rain had stopped and the sun was coming out for a perfect day. The runners got off to a great start. However, the Saturday marathon was totally unlike the peaceful, lonely marathons from the previous two days, as this one was joined by 588 additional runners who were participating in single-day events.

The half-marathoners and 10K racers joined us at their respective distances from the finish line. This can be a bit of a distraction to the people who are participating in the three-day event. However, by maintaining their focus, they are able to continue and do quite well. As a crew member, I found it a little annoying at first, because after waiting for two days for our lonely runner to come along, suddenly we could hardly spot her mixed in with the multitude of runners. I thought it must be a bit demoralizing to be passed by hundreds of fresh, new runners, but Helen, always positive, said she was actually “happy when the half-marathoners and 10K runners joined us,” because running hard up the hills “they were huffing and puffing too.” It was, in fact, actually fun to see all the new faces and enjoy their camaraderie. It was, however, our Triple runners, participating in all three days, who had the pride of being able to wear the blue Tahoe Triple singlets. These runners are considered to be the elite runners of the event. These are the runners who like challenges. They are not running just a marathon; they are running 78.6 miles around the lake.

## A RUNNING COMPANION

Helen's good friend Glen Millar joined her on the third day, and the two of them ran the entire race together. Glen had just run the Portland Marathon the week before. The two of them had the same goal of running the best they could and just enjoying the event. They had a great deal of fun just talking and enjoying the

scenery. Helen looked great and was truly inspirational to all who saw her. It was a magnificent comeback as she ran the last 59 miles battered but in great spirits.

Helen finished the third marathon in 6:08:57. She never complained, seemed a little embarrassed more than anything, and was committed to finishing the run in great spirits. She does not whine or complain but just runs and inspires us that a positive attitude makes the world a better place.

A festive finish line at the Pope Beach shoreline in South Lake Tahoe awaited the 101 finishers of the Tahoe Triple Marathon. Sean Meissner, 31, from Sisters, Oregon, won the race for the fourth straight time with a total time of 9:28:01, setting a new three-day course record. Amazingly, he ran a fourth marathon, the Bizz Johnson Trail Marathon, the next day in Susanville, California.

Deborah Hamberlin, 36, from Tempe, Arizona, was the first woman with a total time of 11:07:00. Helen Klein's finishing time was 18:05:51. Huge crowds lined the chute to the finish, with separate clocks for the 10K, half-marathon, and full marathon. With music playing, runners soaked their legs in the cold Lake Tahoe water. Various food vendors and merchandise were available. Postrace activities were abundant and shuttle buses were available to take runners back to the casinos at Stateline. The entire race weekend is a big party at a truly beautiful place.

Most ultramarathon runners seem to agree that it is easier to run the entire distance around the lake in one day as opposed to doing it in three separate stages.



Photo by Jane Bying

▲ Day 3, the finish line. Glen Millar (left) and Helen finish the third day marathon in 6:08:57.

Awakening each morning with the usual stiffness and sometimes not having the desire to go out and run are obstacles the participants in this three-day event have to overcome. Everyone who finished this epic event is to be commended for the effort it took to finish. Once again, Helen proved it is possible to live a healthy lifestyle and have fun, too. This is why she serves as a role model and inspiration to runners old and young alike. She is amazing and continues to be our hero.

## An Interview With Norm Klein

**M&B:** *Norm, as crew captain on this Tahoe Triple adventure and as a race director of numerous multiday races and 14 Western State 100s, what did you think of the course?*

**Norm Klein:** I think it is a difficult event, and I think it is an event that requires a lot of concentration and focus on the part of the people who are participating, not only the runners but the crews as well.

**M&B:** *What did you think of the scenery?*

**Norm:** The scenery is spectacular running around Lake Tahoe. The vistas overlooking Emerald Bay are incomparable.

**M&B:** *How would you rate the level of difficulty of this course?*

**Norm:** It is difficult in that you are running at elevation, number one; number two, you are running on a road with heavy traffic; and number three, sometimes the shoulder is quite narrow. It is not an easy course, but it is an event that if you are fortunate enough to finish, it is something you will be very proud of.

**M&B:** *What did you think of the race management?*

**Norm:** I think race management did a very good job. The prerace ceremony with the speakers was well done. The prerace buffet was excellent, and the overall logistics of putting on an event on heavily trafficked roads is a pretty difficult job, and it is a job that was well handled.

**M&B:** *How proud are you of Helen's Triple?*

**Norm:** Well, naturally, I am proud of anything Helen has done, but the fact that during the first day she had that bad fall and skinned herself up from head to toe with blood everywhere, and the fact that she ran three or four miles holding an ice pack on her face while running on a busy highway speak volumes of what this woman is capable of doing.

**M&B:** *What did you think about Helen's injuries at mile 19 (of a 78-mile race), and what did you think about her spectacular comeback?*

**Norm:** It worries me more than it worries her, because I root for her to finish at all these things that she does. I have seen her struggle. I mean, here is a woman who has been doing these things for 25 years, and I've seen the epic struggles that she has gone through to finish. So this was not any surprise to me that she was able to finish despite having that fall. I've grown pretty much accustomed to seeing her overcome these difficulties.

**M&B:** *Would you recommend doing the Tahoe Triple to other ultrarunners?*

Norm: Yes, I would. I think it is a good event. It tests your tenacity. It tests your willingness to get up each morning after having completed a tough 26 miles the day before. It is something to be proud of finishing.

**M&B:** *You know Helen better than anyone. What is the motivation?*

**Norm:** Well, the three *D*'s that she professes all the time—dedication, discipline, and determination—and the pride that she takes in finishing. Plus, I have followed sports all my life, and I rate the top three athletes, not necessarily in this order, based on what they have to do to overcome the struggle. I mean, it is very easy to go out and play a basketball game for two hours and come back two or three days later and play another basketball game and make \$20 million a year. But to go out and do this day after day and not make anything on it is amazing. The big three in my opinion are Helen, Ann Trason, and Lance Armstrong.

**M&B:** *This is a time-consuming and expensive sport if you travel to the events, and there is virtually no monetary reward. This is a somewhat controversial issue in the ultrarunning community, and I know that you are adamantly opposed to prize money being given in ultra events. Why do you feel that way?*

**Norm:** I am opposed to providing prize money in events of this nature for several reasons:

1. All participants have to pay an entry fee. I feel that if there is extra money, it should be used for extra perks for all of the runners rather than just an elite few.
2. As is seen in other sports, prize money can lend itself to cheating. All one has to do is refer to the Olympic scandals where gold medals can lead to huge contracts and monetary rewards when in many instances various methods of cheating have been responsible for obtaining these medals.

[Helen comes into the room to tell us that a fan from Alaska just called to talk to her.]

**Norm to Helen:** If you quit running, the feeling that the ultrarunning community has—the women in particular, not just ultrarunners, but women in

general—will feel a loss the same way that the fans who follow basketball felt when Michael Jordan quit playing basketball.

**Helen:** Oh, I don't think so.

**M&B:** *So, Norm, what makes her obviously so much better than other people her age?*

**Norm:** The three D's. Dedication, discipline, and desire and the ability to finish what she sets out to do.

**M&B:** *How much of a role does genetics play in this?*

**Norm:** I think it plays a fairly significant role. Most people will tell you it's 30 or 40 percent genetics and 50 to 60 percent desire.

[From the other room, Helen softly says, "Discipline."]

**M&B:** *How did she get so tough mentally? She never gives in, never complains? She seems almost too saintly. What makes her so stubbornly strong?*

**Norm:** Those two words, pride and stubbornness.

**Helen:** No, now don't you put that in there.

**M&B:** *I have seen her during hard times in races, and she never seems particularly stressed. Lesser persons would be anxious and agitated; she is patient and kind. How does that happen?*

**Norm:** She does not want to present herself as really struggling because she feels that this will detract from her desire to have people want to do the same thing she does.

**Helen:** That's too much . . .

**Norm:** Oh, go talk to the guy in Alaska.

[Everyone laughs.]

**M&B:** *So, Norm, how do you feel about the fact that you started this running odyssey and to put it bluntly, Helen is a star and you are injured a lot? How frustrating is that?*

**Norm:** Well it's frustrating to me that I'm injured, but it's extremely gratifying for me that she does so well. I always had a saying when I was directing Western States when she was running. People would ask me would I like to ever win Western States, and my standard answer was "I'd sooner Helen finish Western States than me winning it."

**M&B:** *The two of you really are a great team. How long have you two been married?*

**Norm:** It was 38 years in May. We are very supportive of each other. We take pride in what each other does and what we do ourselves. It's a matter of pride and not wanting to give in.

**M&B:** *You, like the rest of us, get injured all the time. How do you explain that she never has problems? Her feet look great, not gnarly like most runners, and the only injuries she gets are from accidents. And when those accidents happen, she keeps going and heals on the run, so to speak. No blisters, sprained muscles, torn tendons? How does that happen?*

**Norm:** There are a number of factors, and number one, she runs within herself. She doesn't try to compete against other people unless special circumstances merit it. So that's the first, and she does have good genetics . . .

**Helen:** And she eats a healthy diet.

**Norm:** And she eats a healthy diet.

**M&B:** *Several years ago she sustained serious injury in an early stage of the Utah Eco-Challenge, and yet she finished without faltering. We all saw her bruised and bleeding in Tahoe. She was covered in lacerations and contusions, and she got up and acted like it was a minor incident. She acted like it was no big deal while we were all, frankly, freaking out. Do you know how she overcomes the pain?*

**Norm:** As a former oral surgeon, I dealt with people in pain all the time; some people have low tolerances for pain, and others have high tolerances for pain. She has a very, very high tolerance for pain, perhaps as high as I've ever seen. But again, a lot of this has to do with the mental aspects of this, of not wanting to give in and make a spectacle of herself.

**M&B:** *What have you learned from her about aging gracefully? I have been watching her run for 15 years, and all I notice is that her times have slowed a little. That's it; she still looks and runs great.*

**Norm:** I'm sure you are aware that Helen is not your typical 82-year-old woman and again, back to the same old thing, taking care of yourself and competing within yourself.

**M&B:** *You and Helen retired early and moved out to California to become part of the ultrarunning community. You became a premier race director, and she became an ultrarunning legend. Has the adventure been all you thought it would be?*

**Norm:** First of all, we never anticipated doing this. We never figured we'd be doing as many ultras, and I certainly had no intention of going from an oral surgeon to a race director; but it's been extremely rewarding, and we have made a lot of great friends. But more important is the incredible support we get from the volunteer community. Without their support, there is no way we could direct races and no way we could have support when we run. Especially



Photo by Jane Byng

▲ Norm and Helen Klein in December 2004 after Helen became the oldest woman to finish the California International Marathon.

like you, Jane, willing to come up there and spend three or four days at your own expense. That's been the great thing. Accomplishments are one thing, but friendships and dedication are even more important.

**M&B:** *We read interviews with runners all the time, but we hear little about the race directors who work so hard to put on these events. Can you give me some insight into directing races?*

**Norm:** The key to success of any race director is his or her ability to recruit and keep volunteers. Volunteers can actually make or break a race for you. If I have had any success as a race director, it is because I call my volunteers many times before the races, have them to our home for prerace parties, and write each of them a handwritten thank-you note after each race. I also plan ahead so that, if necessary, and I was called upon to do so, I could actually stage the race at least one month before the actual race date. I am not blessed with many skills, but I do feel that I am a well-organized person.

**M&B:** *What would your life be like without running in it? What would you be doing?*

**Norm:** I have no idea. I'd have a little more time to play with my cacti.

