

God, Life, and Everything "Tough Mudder"

Well, I survived.

Operative word here is "survived."

What I'm talking about, of course, is this past weekend when I insanely took part in a challenge course called a *Tough Mudder*. It is an international phenomenon in which normally sane people run, jog or trudge through a 10-12 mile course dotted with around 20-24 obstacles. Suffice it to say that this course is based on British Special Forces training.

Let me describe this weekend's experience a bit before coming to the most obvious question of "Why?"

A *Tough Mudder* is one of at least a half-dozen similar "challenge races" that are sweeping the world. Similar events include the *Warrior Dash*, the *Spartan Race*, the *GORUCK Challenge*, the *Ironman 70.3*, and the *Civilian-Military Combine*. With the exception of the *Warrior Dash*, the *Tough Mudder* may be the most manageable for an average Joe.

Last weekend's Tough Mudder took place in the beautiful setting of Mount Snow, Vermont. The course was laid out on the ski slopes with a vertical elevation change of more than 3,000 feet. Yes, that was elevation *change*. The entire course was made up of ascending and descending the mountain, sometimes in a zig-zag pattern, sometimes straight up or down.

Most of the course was covered in mud. By that I mean every hundred yards or so there was a patch of knee-deep mud we had to trudge through, sometimes fifty or more yards long. Down or uphill. That would have been more than enough for me, thank you very much.

But every half mile or so, there was an obstacle. The very first involved crawling uphill on your belly underneath barbed wire. Yes, people got cut. I managed it fine except for some cuts on my legs. With all the mud, I didn't really notice them until afterwards.

Some of the obstacles were easier than others. Scrambling over a pair of angled eight-foot-high walls turned out to be easier than I thought. So did the monkey bars set in an inverted V shape over a pool of water. The worst part of that one was watching all the people in front of me fall into the water. Assuming I would also fall, I grabbed hold of the rung and, with my son at my side, worked my way across. Best moment? When I safely reached the other side, and my son's look of delighted surprise. He said, "I'm proud of you, Dad."

So much for fun stuff.

Other obstacles included a dive through a dumpster filled with ice water. It is designed so that you must fully submerge. This one required shutting down all emotion and thought and simply doing it. After I emerged, the shock hit.

My least favorite of all involved jumping off a tower fifteen feet into a pool. I don't do high dives. Period. Ask me to jump out of an airplane with a parachute, and I'm your guy. Ask me to jump off a diving board, and I balk. So this one was tough. With my son at my side again, I just covered my glasses (which I had to keep on), and

went. I did not enjoy that experience, especially as I took a mouthful of water coming up. But I got out.

They traditionally end the course with an obstacle called, "Electo-shock Therapy," and the warning sign in front of it should give you an idea of what it was all about. The sign warned that anyone with a pacemaker, heart condition or metal in their body must skip this obstacle. To be clear, the organizers let you know you can skip any obstacle you want, and it's okay.

People run, walk, crawl these events for a variety of reasons. Some want to get in shape and use this as a good motivator. Some like to push themselves as hard as they can, though to what end I do not know. Many take part in these for the crowd energy which is admittedly exciting.

A lot of people participate to support a cause - The fight against Cancer and support for wounded veterans were prominent.

My reason was personal. My son wanted to do it, and I didn't want him to do it alone. He had actually already signed up with a team of much younger, fitter friends, but one-by-one, they backed out. I must have been sleep deprived or distracted or perhaps suffering from a recent blow to the head when I agreed to go with him.

One of the biggest reasons I suspect people like the Tough Mudder in particular is because of the sense of camaraderie. In the opening ceremony, we are told that it is not a race but a challenge, and that everyone is on the same team. We are admonished to help each other, and in fact that the course is designed so that nobody can do it alone.

I have to respect that. I have never been a fan of all the athletics that pits us against each other. I hear angry parents grouse about participation awards - they say, "Life isn't about participation, it's about winning. I don't get an award just for showing up at work." Actually, you do. You get a paycheck, a sense of achievement, and the ability to care for those you love. What could be better than that? A medal?

I like the concept of the Tough Mudder because nobody is out to get anyone else - it is help and be helped. And yes, it is a good feeling to help push someone up a wall who can't quite reach the top.

Is that feeling good enough to do it again? I'll let you know after I recover. But on our drive home, my son said, "Next time, Dad, we'll do a course that isn't so hilly."