

There have been several Distance running legends in America over the past few decades. Jim Ryan, Gerry Lindgren, Steve Prefontaine, Mary Decker Slaney, Alberto Salazar, Joan Benoit Samuelson and Billy Mills are listed among them. All of them accomplished much. People still talk about their amazing feats. Their performances were tracked and recorded. They mapped out their goals and worked hard to attain them. But **none** of them did so out of necessity. All of them merely competed in the safe, cozy environment of a track and field arena or properly laid out and maintained marathon or cross country course. Each one of the previously mentioned runners is worth talking about, but based on the true definition, **I** am the **first** great American Cross Country Legend!

Let me introduce myself. My name is John Colter. And for the next 10 minutes, I want you to imagine that you are me so you can vicariously experience what I accomplished. I **would** say that you can see what it feels like to be in my shoes, but in my race I was not **allowed** to wear any, and can honestly say that my great athletic **feats** were done in my **bare feet**!

Unlike the legends previously listed, I was **not** born in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. I was born in Virginia in 1774. Most historians will identify me as one of the best scouts that traveled with Lewis and Clark on their famous expedition to the Pacific Northwest. And yes, I am credited as being the first white man to set eyes on Yellowstone National Park. But as far as my athletic accomplishments, there are **now** internet site 200 years later dedicated to what I did one day in 1808. This undertaking happened to be in distance running, so now just sit back and listen to the legendary race I had to run.

I was out on a hunting and trapping expedition in Montana with my friend John Potts. This is a good time to step into my shoes, because I still had boots on. You need to realize that this was **not** just an afternoon tromp through the woods. This trek lasted for **several weeks** and we were actually **200** miles from our home base fort when this competition began. Some of the details of this legendary race are **still** in debate, but for the most part, this is how events transpired.

Unfortunately, we ran into a band of 200 Blackfoot Indians. This tribe was not known for being very hospitable, so we immediately became the **hunted** rather than the **hunters**. I knew just enough of their language to get by. At first, this band of hostile natives was teasing us with threats. My partner lacked the discretion to play it cool. He started mouthing off to them, and he paid a severe price. They shot him and hacked him into pieces. On the other hand, understanding the danger of being **outnumbered 200 to 1**, I said as little as possible and started looking for some way out of this trap.

Things went from **bad** to **worse** when they stripped me of all my clothes, including my boots. As I stood naked before dozens of spears pointed at me from all directions, the tribe chief interrupted their actions. I could tell that he was a man of **true** sport as he asked me if I could run very fast. I told him I was not that fast, even though I was a rather **accomplished** runner. He decided that it would be much more entertaining if he made a sport out of their intent to skin me alive, so he gave me a running head start of about 100 yards before he unleashed all 200 warriors in his tribe to chase me down with weapons in hand. In my mind, I knew that there was a river just over 6 miles away. I figured that if I

could just get to the river, maybe I could somehow lose them there. So that was my race plan, run **back to back** 5K's without letting 200 Blackfoot warriors, angry and armed, catch me. The race was **on!**

Keep in mind; they had previously taken away **all** my clothes, **including** my favorite pair of **running shoes**. You might think this would give me an advantage of being lighter, especially on my feet. But on this cross country course, there was sharp stones, sage brush, scrub oak and **thousands** of patches of small cactus that were unavoidable. As I raced away at near full sprint to keep them from catching me the first ½ mile, my feet, or should I say **your** feet, became pin cushions, with gravelly dirt and broken off cactus needles getting painfully wedged in my bloody feet. Each step caused me to want to scream in **agonizing** pain, but I knew I had to **focus** my energy into my running instead. "I've **got** to get to the river" I thought to myself. "I've **got** to get to the river. It is my **only** chance!"

The first two miles, I did not **dare** look back. I could hear them coming and screaming their warrior cries. Then the sounds started to diminish. I took a quick peek back, but **only** one running warrior was close, and he had cut the distance of the head start by **more than half**. The rest were a minute or so behind me. I knew I **had** to run **harder!** So I **pushed** and **pushed!** I pushed so **hard** that I contracted a **serious** nose bleed. Blood not only covered my **cactus-pricked feet**, but now I could feel **blood gushing down** over the lower half of my face. I looked down at my **bare** chest, and it was not **bare any** more as blood covered it almost in its entirety. "I've got to push **harder.**" Can you feel my **pain?** It was **great**, but **you've got** to push **harder!**

One more mile passed and I could hear my biggest competitor catching me inch by inch. Soon, I could hear him breathing – **painfully gasping for air**, but getting **closer**. I knew he would catch me in the next 100 yards, so I employed a surprise tactical maneuver. I suddenly **stopped** and turn to face him with my hands stretched out wide. It caught him **so** off guard (maybe it was from my bloody chest I exposed to him) that he **stumbled back** and **dropped** his spear. So I quickly **responded** by **picking** up his weapon and turned it against him, **pinning** him to the earth, snatching his blanket and continuing my flight.

I had reached the **half-way point** of my **goal**. I was just 3 miles away from my river of victory. Thanks to my little pit stop to vanquish my relentless opponent, now the other 199 were closing in on me fast. With my bare feet still screaming in pain, I was forced to get back into my best stride possible. I just **had** to run harder, despite the pain. I just **had** to! The pain was nothing compared to the thoughts of taking my victory lap down the river and preserving my own life. "I've got to get to the river!" My feet were screaming louder. The gashes on the front of my bare body from running through the brush were tempting me to stop and double over in pain. "I've **got** to get to the river! I've got to push even **harder!**" Can you envision the river, my finish line of victory? It was my greatest hope, so you've got to push yourself harder!

The second 5K in this race to save my life was nearly as fast as my first. And it was fast enough to distance myself from the other 199 predators that remained alive such that I was able to jump in the river and hide under some logs in the frigid waters until nightfall. When I escaped in the darkness of the night, I was modestly covered by the blanket I captured and made my way back home. Keep in mind; it still took me eleven days to travel back the 200 miles to Fort Raymond with my bare feet masticated like

ground hamburger, and surviving nutritionally on tree bark and roots along the way home. This journey home was even more treacherous than the race to the river such that I was only a **few** steps away from death as I **stumbled** into camp where my comrades could **barely** recognize me.

Now that you have lived a week in **my** world of **1808**, transport yourself back to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, **placing** yourself on the starting line of the race of your life. After **living** in **my shoes** and **enduring** what **I did**, this challenge before you now is a **piece of cake**. Looking down, you now see a **shiny** new uniform adorned on your chest. On your feet are specially designed spikes to protect you from any cactus along the way and to grip in the ground with every victorious stride. You know that pain is inevitable, but every time the pain comes, **all** you do is **look down** and see that your uniform is still clean. There is no blood. And then you can say, "I don't see **any** red blood on my chest! I have run **harder** than this. I can run **harder again!** My feet do not have any cactus needles in them. I can go **faster**. I **must** get to the river. This is my finish line of victory! And my **desire** to get there is **stronger** than the pain I must run through to get there."

You are now part of my legend, the legend of John Colter; **pioneer** of the west, discoverer of Yellowstone, and the **very first** great American Cross Country **Legend**. Now go and run like you **have** before, like you **did** when you were **me!**