

Ultrarunning History // Angeles Crest 100 // Lighting Review

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NOVEMBER 2022



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A BLIND RUNNER

BY JENNIFER RIZZO

THE FIRST TIME I SAW A BLIND RUNNER WITH A SIGHTED GUIDE, I immediately thought, *how could I be the eyes for another runner?* I had developed a passion for ultrarunning, and helping disabled athletes seemed like a way to give back to the community. Then I heard that Achilles International, a nonprofit that helps runners with disabilities participate in races, was looking for guides to help visually impaired runners at the Vermont 100.

After a phone call with a blind runner from North Carolina named Eric Strong, I was so excited about the opportunity that I agreed to be his crew chief on the spot. When I tell people about my experience as Eric Strong's crew chief, their response is usually the same: praise for doing something so generous. But the truth is, guiding a runner nourished my own well-being more than you might expect.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, in addition to wanting to help Strong, my goal as his crew chief was to renew my

passion and confidence as a runner. Over the summer of 2022, my faith in my athletic ability was at an all-time low. The year prior, I had trained hard and set high goals. But in the end, I had some devastating failures and sadly, I could feel my love of ultrarunning waning.

ERIC STRONG WAS BORN WITH CONGENITAL GLAUCOMA, a condition that can lead to nerve damage and eventual blindness. As a young man with deteriorating eyesight, Strong tried to hide his growing disability and be like everyone else. But six years ago, at the age of 33, he was diagnosed as legally blind.

After losing his sight, Strong decided not to let his disability limit him. Instead, he uses difficulties to push him toward new goals and encourage others. Strong was a runner in high school and returned to running at age 33 to maintain fitness. With energy to spare after his first marathon, Strong soon progressed to ultras. In 2018, he finished the Vermont 100K in 15:06, and returned in 2019 to complete the 100-mile race in 29:06. In 2022,

Strong hoped to beat his 2019 time and become the only blind runner with two Vermont buckles.

TO ACCOMPLISH STRONG'S GOALS, we recruited five guides and two pacers. The guide, tethered to the blind runner, leads the athlete by verbally directing them over obstacles such as rocks and roots. After mile 70, runners at the Vermont 100, including visually impaired runners, are allowed to pick up a pacer. Having both a pacer and a guide allows the guide to focus on the workload involved with that job and not have to worry about pacer duties.

Adam Cook, a 23-year-old who runs regularly with the Boston chapter of Achilles, guided Strong for miles 30 to 49, and paced miles 88 to 100. Cook said that communication is the most important aspect of guiding a disabled runner.

Verbal cues are a guide's main tool to help the athlete navigate the course. Benjamin Simanski, a 41-year-old visually impaired runner from Massachusetts who completed the 2022 Vermont 100 in



ABOVE: Eric Strong (right) walks with crew Dan O'Brien and Jeff Cook after his finish. © AUTHOR

OPPOSITE: The crew (left to right) Jeff Cook, Jennifer Rizzo, Jocelyn Mongillo, Rachel Doxey, Eric Strong, Adam Cook and Dan O'Brien. © COURTESY AUTHOR


BELOW RIGHT: Eric Strong gets assistance from his crew Adam Cook and Rachel Doxey at the mile 60 aid station. © AUTHOR


23:38, said that the number one thing he looks for in a guide is, "someone who is a good author and really good at describing details."

A positive attitude and sense of humor are also valuable traits. Before the race, Cook said, "Have fun. If you're not having a good time, then they're not either." Another member of Strong's crew was Adam's father, Jeff Cook. In addition to providing the crew with comedic relief, the Cook's ran a combined 50 miles over the weekend. Jeff experienced how a little humor can save the day when, at mile 25, he and Strong came upon a flooded, muddy section of trail. Jeff said, "It was a great example of how something that doesn't really look like a big deal can turn into one when you're guiding a blind runner." He couldn't guide Strong through the mire without risking sodden feet or worse, an injury. So, he said he "pushed (Strong) up into the bushes and brush, and I kind of half-assed myself through the mud." But more than anything, there was a lot of laughter





ABOVE: The campground sits under a mist of fog at dawn during the Vermont 100.  AUTHOR

BELOW: Author Jennifer Rizzo sits with Adam Cook at the mile 60 aid station as they "hurry up and wait" for their runner.  AUTHOR

between the two as they struggled around the obstacle, making it more manageable.

AS I WAITED LATE IN THE DAY FOR STRONG TO ARRIVE at an aid station, a combination of exhaustion and anxiety caused me to ruminate over my recent athletic failures. I longed to be out on the course running with Strong, but I worried I just wasn't good enough. As a middle-aged woman with short legs, I often feel

"less than." But, as my turn to run was coming up, I tried to bury my worries in enthusiasm and remain positive, as I had seen Strong exemplify throughout the day.

When I did finally come on as a pacer at mile 70, night was falling on the course. Rachel Doxey, 23, would be Strong's guide. She guides Strong regularly and I enjoyed learning from her. As the three of us hit the trail, Strong said, "Ok Jennifer, you're the navigator." We fell into a "V" formation, with me in the front and Strong and Doxey running behind. Strong told me that he used his ears to tell what pace I was moving in front of him. When I hit a hill and power-hiked to conserve energy, he sensed it and changed his own pace.

I occasionally switched pacing and guiding duties, and replicated how Doxey counted steps until a turn or obstacle, and listened as she moved Strong behind her on single-track trails. I also learned he liked us to describe the scenery. We described the surrounding landscapes of old red barns nestled among bales of hay and an orange moon in the sky. At 2 a.m. in the morning, when the dense trees thinned and a grass clearing spread around us, I described the stars twinkling above us.

In the dark of night, I took a bad fall after tripping over a root. Although my hand and knee were badly bruised and I got a mouthful of dirt, the biggest casualty was my ego. I lamented, as I was



supposed to be Eric's eyes, but Rachel reminded me, "You fell, not Eric. So, in that way, you're doing a pretty good job."

I knew what Eric was capable of, and I told him that when it was runnable, I would push him to keep up the pace. Our "V" formation began to fly past runners. Eric laughed and said we were the meanest guides he's ever had. I said, "I am looking at this like I'm your mom. I love you, but I will push you to be your best." It was the experience of a lifetime: cruising down a path in the middle of the night with an incredible athlete behind me, matching our footfalls with our ears.

When we arrived at mile 88, Eric was ahead of schedule. *Perhaps*, I thought to myself, *I'm not that bad of a pacer after all.*



ABOVE: Finisher Eric Strong (center) poses with his crew (left to right): Jennifer Rizzo, Dan O'Brien, Jeff Cook and Rachel Doxey.

📷 AUTHOR

LEFT: Strong runs with Adam Cook through the aid station at mile 49.

📷 AUTHOR



ERIC STRONG CROSSED THE FINISH LINE IN 26:29, achieving a new PR. Watching any runner finish a 100-mile race is a moving experience. But cheering for Eric with my crewmates felt like a gift. We were supposed to be there to help him, but really it felt like he had supported us, and I have him to thank for my renewed love of the sport.

After he finished the race, I followed behind as Jeff Cook led Eric toward our tents. Watching them, I thought about the things I perceived as my limitations – my gender, body type and age. But I had witnessed Eric turn what others may see as a weakness into strength. We all have things we think hold us back, but in reality, we make the choice whether to feed our limitations or to use them to push us forward. ▲