

# GO TRAIL™

**MAGAZINE**

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ON HIS **AMAZING 2011** SEASON AND WHAT HE'S GOT LINED UP FOR 2012

# The winning strategy of second place

**WORDS BY STEPHANIE CASE**  
IMAGES BY ZANDY MANGOLD/RACINGTHEPLANET



“**We have all been taught the phrase, “second place is the first loser”. I suppose in a way that is true, but what I learned during my recent race in Nepal, sometimes being behind is just what you need to lead you to a win.**”

This past November, I participated in my fourth Racing The Planet event: a six-stage, self-supported footrace covering 250 km and almost 30,000 feet of elevation throughout the Annapurna region. Having already conquered the muddy race paddies of Vietnam, the shifting sand dunes of the Namibian desert, and the untamed brush of the Australian outback, I hate to say I went into the race feeling rather confident. I had picked up a few tricks during my previous stage races that I thought might help set me apart from the crowd. In Namibia, I learned that if your gaiters break on day one, it is possible to make backups using just a needle and thread and some spare head buffs. Vietnam taught me that ‘trench foot’ is not as bad as it sounds, and definitely possible to run through. In Australia, I discovered that time benefits of urinating on yourself instead of stopping for a proper bathroom break is not worth the dire physical consequences. Surely, with this wealth of information, I would catapult to the front of the pack.

More importantly, for the four months leading up to the race, I had been religiously following a training plan concocted by Canadian ultrarunning legend Ray Zahab. Speed work and intervals were the name of the game during the week, with long runs scheduled for Saturdays and Sundays. Unfortunately, with a full-time job in a city like New York, that often meant that weekdays, and the odd Saturday, were spent in the gym on the treadmill.



I actually did not mind it too much until I had to start training with my backpack on. One weekend, I finished a marathon on the treadmill wearing a 15 lb pound backpack, surrounded by bags of salty chips, sticky rice krispie squares, and enough Gatorade to turn your sweat fluorescent pink for a week. Anytime one of the other gym-goers shot me a funny look (and you can imagine there were many), I responded with a nod and a little grunt, secretly smiling as I imagined myself running through the Himalayas. Thankfully, I got out of the city most weekends to hit the trails in nearby New Jersey, and I worked in a few races to keep me on my toes (literally), including the inaugural Ultra Race of Champions in Virginia.

Everything was on track for a strong performance in Nepal. This, of course, made me feel more pressure than ever to do well. I had no excuses for failing and nothing to hold me back. I had won RacingThePlanet’s Vietnam race in 2008, but I had not been able to secure that top spot since. That little voice in the back of my head was getting louder: maybe you’re just a hack. I realize I might have been a bit hard on myself, but a big part of me worried that at the ripe old age of 29, I had already hit my peak. I had tried to put in as much training as I could, and however well I did in the race was going to be my best.

Of course, I didn’t tell anyone about my burning desire to win, for fear of fuelling my delusions of grandeur. When I arrived at RacingThePlanet’s host hotel in Pokhura, about a six hour drive from Kathmandu, I got completely caught up in the excitement of seeing old friends, meeting runners from all over the world, and, of course, getting through the official equipment check. As the race is self-supported, getting your gear “right and light” is half of the battle. Each runner is required to carry certain mandatory items and a minimum of 14,000 calories of food, but there are still a million decisions to make. How many nuun tablets should I take? Do I have enough batteries for my headtorch? Will I get sick of chicken teriyaki by day three?

And the ultimate question, how many squares of toilet paper will I need mountains? Any miscalculation could not only affect your race performance, but also your mental sanity, so these decisions were not taken lightly. Even after removing all of my food from their packaging, snapping my toothbrush in half, and forgoing the luxury of a sleeping mat, my bag still weighed in at 8.5 kg, about 2 kg over what would soon be the leading woman's pack.

After passing through all the necessary formalities, we made it to our first campsite and were greeted by local men and women who marked our foreheads with red powder. I was absolutely itching to start the race, bursting with energy from my taper. I felt like a toddler on Christmas Eve, hopped up on sugary treats and unable to wait until morning. I had not checked out the women's field before arriving, but I knew that there were some heavy hitters in the crowd. I tried not to let my nerves get the better of me, but it was somewhat inevitable. The first day sets the tone for the rest of the race and I knew it would give me a sense of what lay ahead.

At 7 am the next morning, with a few yelps and whoops from the crowd of 220 runners, we were finally off into the hills. Stage one was relatively short at just 27 kilometers, but the climbs were not to be underestimated. The first 4 km followed a jeep road that was "Nepalese flat",

but then the course veered straight uphill. Much of the race route consisted of stone steps, placed by hand at what often seemed to be random intervals. Within minutes of starting the climb my heart rate rocketed skyward and the sweat dropped off my forehead at an alarming rate, leaving a trail of dark splotches on the stones behind me. Suddenly my treadmill marathon training seemed ridiculously inadequate and I cursed myself for not having made more of an effort to, say, give up my life in NYC and move to the Swiss Alps to train. I was told that there were brilliant views of the snowy peaks of Annapurna South and Fishtail Mountain along the ways, but frankly I was too focused on staying upright and propelling myself to the finish. After 4h18m, I finished stage one first amongst the females, but it was far from an easy win. The formidable Samantha Gash, one of the expected frontrunners, had gotten lost on the course and finished just a few minutes behind me. I knew from then that it was going to be a tough race...

...What I didn't expect, however, was that just a few hours after winning stage one, I would be contemplating dropping out entirely.

I had barely eaten anything while I was out on the course, and I had to force myself to eat my ramen noodles when I made it to camp two. I didn't think anything of it until a few hours later when one of my

tentmates became ill.... And then a second tentmate went down. I had this sinking feeling that it would hit me too, but I convinced myself that I was

## **"Of course, I didn't tell anyone about my burning desire to win."**

just being paranoid. I knew I needed to get some calories in, so I dipped into my emergency snack bag (saved for those really low moments when I needed a boost) and pulled out a plastic-wrapped ball of peanut butter and some chocolate squares. They tasted horrible. Shivering from the cold, I bundled up in my long pants and jacket and crawled into my down sleeping bag for a nap. Just before I closed my eyes, I noticed that the other competitors outside my tent were comfortably lounging about in their shorts and t-shirts. Something was definitely wrong. At 7 pm, just twelve hours after the start of the race, I began vomiting.

This can't be happening. I made it to the latrines just in time to throw up the half-eaten ramen and the unpleasant peanut butter and chocolate combination. I did a quick calculation in my head – that was over 800 calories gone. With an average of only 2000 calories available per day, that was no small loss. And the vomiting continued. All night.



I'll spare you the gory details, but needless to say I felt like roadkill the next morning. I tried to eat a few bites of oatmeal, but my stomach told me loud and clear to leave it alone. All I wanted to do was curl up in a comfortable bed, watch movies and drink chicken noodle soup out of a mug. I most certainly did not feel like running 32 km over mini-mountains with nothing in the tank. What made matters worse was that as I was the leader after stage one, I was forced to wear a special bright yellow jersey Tour-de-France style stating LEADER in large block letters. I just wanted to hand it over to one of the other women right then and there. I did not care about winning. I did not care about the months of training. I did not care about the time, energy, and money I had put into getting ready for this race. I just wanted it to be over.

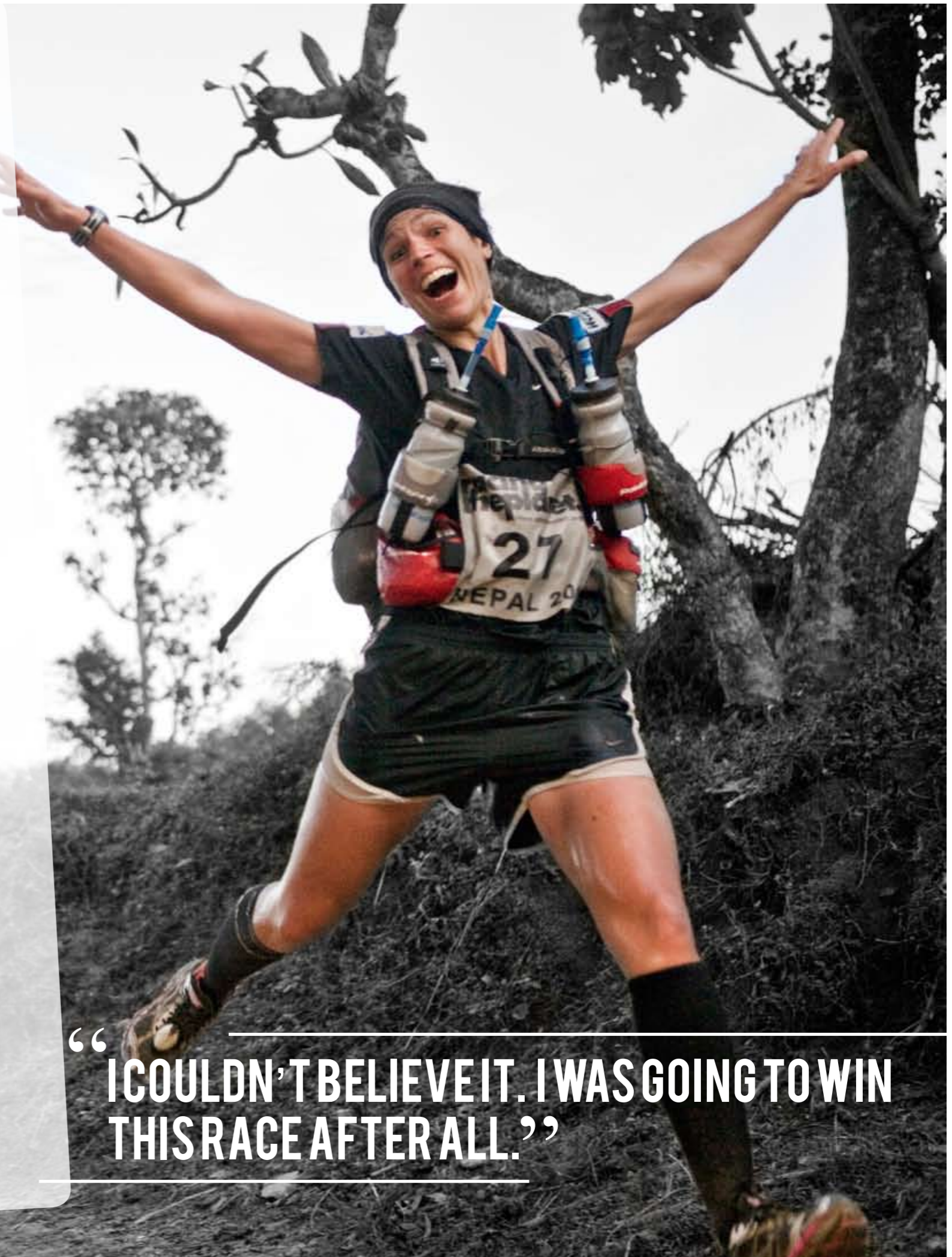
I can't remember actually making the conscious decision to start stage two - I think I just let routine take over. I put on my backpack, filled up my water bottles, and when everyone else started running, I followed. I could barely look up without getting nauseous and I was unsteady on my feet from the lack of calories. I could not even get water down. I was running hunched over and at one point I tripped over a small rubber pipe on the road, sprawling out on all fours on the ground in front of an entire Nepalese family. I showed up at the next checkpoint with blood running down my knee and mud all over my face.

I felt completely out of place. Runners kept flying by me, offering encouraging words and advice, but I could barely hear them. Nepalese children greeted me with a high-pitched 'namaste!' at every village I passed, but the most I could muster in return was a meager 'namememe...' A couple kids were so excited to see me hobble by that they followed me for twenty minutes in their school uniforms. It was hard for me to keep up and they were less than half my size.

By some small miracle, I finished stage two in third place, but I was ecstatic to finish at all. I was only behind the lead by about 15 minutes overall, but I knew I would be feeling the effects for at least the next day or two, and with the amount of calories I had lost, it would be tough to bounce back. And you know what? From then on, I really did not want to win anymore. Once I started to feel better, I did not want to waste another minute of the race worrying about the competition. I just wanted to RUN.

That evening, I kept down about 200 calories of dinner and another 200 calories in the morning. Not a lot of fuel for the distance I had to cover in stage three, but I was definitely on the mend and for the first time in a day and a half, I was able to look up and take in my surroundings. The 38 km course took us over cable bridges and followed a fast-flowing river through more remote villages. The adults joined the kids in their trailside cheering, offering a namaste or two with hands pressed together in prayer-like mode. A few kids tried practicing their English by yelling out my race number or shouting 'Canada!' when they saw the flags sewn onto my shirt sleeves. It was better than the crowds at any marathon. As expected, I slipped further behind the lead, but winning was no longer my goal. I went to bed that night without stress, worries or expectation - just a desire to get up and run again.

By day four, I was almost back to normal. The stage was dubbed "The 1000 year Old Gurung Steps" and it consisted of a 27.2 km course, starting with a 1200 m steep climb to Gorepani. To give you a sense of the difficulty - and the remoteness - of the course, the race organizers had a helicopter on standby, just in case one of us overzealous runners got into trouble and needed to be evacuated.



“ I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. I WAS GOING TO WIN THIS RACE AFTER ALL. ”



**“I WOULD HAVE LET THE PRESSURE GET TO ME, TAKEN A WRONG TURN, GONE TOO FAST DOWN A HILL AND TWISTED MY ANKLE, OR SIMPLY NOT BEEN ABLE TO RUN AS FAST.”**

I took the steps steadily, leaned into the hillside, and pushed off my quads with my hands on each step. When I reached the top at 3200 metres, I barely had time to stretch my legs before the course headed sharply downhill over endless stone steps. I zigzagged down the steps as if I were skiing down a snowy slope, switching up my leading leg to try to give the other leg a short rest. I made it to camp five 3500 steps and only one nasty fall later, completely jubilant.

Camp five was situated in the village of Birethanti at the foot of the Modi Khola Valley, and instead of our usual tents and dehydrated meals, we were treated to beds in teahouses and a large dinner of dal bhat and coca cola. Not used to such luxury during these races, I could not help but wonder if the race organizers were trying to apologize to us ahead of time for what was about to come. The next day was the “long day”, which is normally double the length of any of the other

stages. Perhaps it was the caffeinated soda, but that night we were all buzzing with equal amounts of trepidation and eager anticipation for the challenge ahead.

When I woke up the next morning, I knew it was going to be a good day. As I lined up at the start line with the 175 others who remained in the race, my legs told me that they were ready. I set my polar watch and looked at the numbers, knowing that the 0 km distance reading would say 72 km by the end of the day. Right from the start, I broke off with the front pack of men and soon enough we were heading straight uphill again. None of us had poles, so it was down to the strength of our quads. I was drenched in sweat almost immediately and I had to keep reminding myself to take sips of water in between gasps of breath.



Every once in a while I allowed myself to take a second to breathe in my surroundings. Snow-capped mountains, trees covered in pink blossoms, stone villages, multi-coloured prayer flags – I was running through a photo-shopped postcard. I was having so much fun I barely remembered I was in a race. I managed to stick with second and third placed males on the uphill, but they would lose me on the downhills. For a while, I was even ahead of the Italian Stallion or, my favourite nickname, the ‘manimal’, whose incredible quads and chiseled physique earned him the admiration of even the most manly of men.

The numbers climbed higher on my watch. I started to slow down on the flats in the afternoon, but I kept eating, drinking, and moving forward. The runner’s highs had me giddily singing along to my ipod, serenading the local villagers and sometimes the passing donkeys along the way. When I reached the last checkpoint, one of the

race volunteers told me I would finish before dark. Before dark! I was expecting to be running well into the night, so the thought that I would not even need my headtorch gave me a major boost of energy. I flew into camp at 5:15 pm after 10 hours of running, giggling and smiling so hard I thought my face might crack in half.

Not only had I come in as first female and fifth overall, but I had finished a full hour ahead of the lead woman. I couldn't believe it. I was going to win this race after all. And 36 hours later when I ran through the final finish line in Pokhara, I actually did.

I had come into the race seeking a challenge, wanting an adventure, and, yes, secretly wanting to win. I can't say for sure, but I have a feeling that had I not gotten sick at the start of the race, I probably wouldn't have won. I would have

let the pressure get to me, taken a wrong turn, gone too fast down a hill and twisted my ankle, or simply not been able to run as fast. Being in second place up until that final stage was a blessing in disguise because I was able to run purely for the sake of running, and I know that is when I run my best. I am not saying that I am going to aim for second in my next race instead of gunning it for first. What I am saying is the next time I catch myself thinking more about my performance than the feeling of the ground quickly passing under my feet, I might look for a root to trip on to bring my head back to earth. In the end, I got my challenge, my adventure, and my win – just not in the way I had expected, and that is always a good thing.

So who wants to join me next year? Come on, I will let you lead.



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JIKELEZA JOG 2012

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