

# **A Step Beyond: A Definitive Guide to Ultrarunning**

**Edited by Don Allison**





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## Foreword

Ultrarunners are that small minority who are often thought to live in a different mindset, all their own. Most have experienced similar reactions when telling a “man on the street” about an upcoming 50 or a 100-mile race they are going to run. The usual reply is: “You’re going to do *what?* You’re crazy!” The mere thought of running that far is inconceivable to many; they just don’t get it. “I couldn’t run five miles,” they’ll say. In truth, chances are they couldn’t run two miles without stopping to walk. But chances are they have the *potential* within them to run any ultramarathon.

The gap between our actuality and our potential is enormous. It’s as great as the mismatch between our perceptions and reality. That’s why experience, actual and vicarious by the example of others, is necessary to close the gap in order for our aspirations to become more realistic.

The person on the street, without trying, has no real concept of how *hard* it is to prepare for and run an ultramarathon. That being said, neither do they have a concept of what is *possible*. They see only a mystery in their minds that paints ultrarunners as being a bit weird. Truth be told, for a long time, so did I. I also did not understand. I didn’t understand how it could be possible to run 100 miles and beyond. What could possess the human animal to do such a crazy thing without any apparent reward at the end? I didn’t even have a sensual feeling of how difficult it is. But gradually my mind was stretched, by effort.

As kids we run routinely, but only short distances at a time, in play. Gradually we discover that we can run longer, but generally anything beyond what we currently run seems out of reach. I find that to be true even today, at age 62. My “normal” everyday life of the 21st century does not require me to chase down my supper, as my ancestors did several millions of years ago when they stepped out into the hot and sunny African plains to become human, to become endurance predators. My mind and body forgets about running when supper is regularly served to me on a plate. Every time I take up the banner of wanting to run a long race I find it a challenge to consistently run even five miles per day. It is only after I eventually run ten miles per day that I begin to look back with amusement at my former self, and look forward to other challenges that then become possible. It happens, one distance at a time, one footstep at a time.

The question our ancient progenitors never asked, but that we ask all the time is this: *Why?* The person on the street asks it. Our spouses ask it. We ask it ourselves and search desperately for an answer, in each training run, and especially halfway into a race. We are left largely clueless, because the answer is not in our

proximate rationality. It is far beyond that, and deeper. The fact that we may get a T-shirt or a worthless trinket for finishing a race only confuses and demeans the effort—it's as if these nominal awards are designed to trick the rationality that the race is for something, regardless of how trivial and in a total mismatch between what we put in and what we received.

But we don't run for the baubles. We run long distances because in the deep dark recesses of our mind there still resides the instincts of our millions of years as running ape people. It's in our biological heritage to run distances.

That's how we came out of Africa, chasing the antelope and the mammoth. Its stamp is clearly visible in our biomechanical structure, our physiology, and our mentality. Our mind is our unique weapon—the ability in the hunt to perceive value far beyond the horizon, far beyond that which is visible.

Our primal ancestors were hunters. They made their living from running down prey that in the short run outran them with ease. The prey's strategy, which works with most predators, is to run so fast as to seem invincible. Only those hunters, whose mentality gave them pleasure in the chase as such, without immediate reward but with the vision of a possible payoff far ahead, would give chase, or "race" as it were. Only those with the mentality to endure would push the evolution of their physiology to match the required effort. That mentality allows us to endure, if not honor, voluntary privations.

There is no better proof of our running instinct, it seems to me, than our selective ability to forget. Any running animal will long remember the pain of stepping on a thorn; they will never repeat it if they can possibly avoid doing so. Yet, the pain and discomfort—if not agony that we may feel for hours on end during a run—is quickly forgotten or ignored, at least by us humans. Three days after the toughest race, we're eager to run again, as though the pain never happened.

We are born to run. And to run distance. To many that may seem like a moronic statement, given that so few of us currently *can* run long distance. But the paradox is that most of us now can't run distance precisely because we don't run, although in our evolutionary past we ran regularly. We had adapted to running, to the point of needing it. All of our physiological systems start to deteriorate as soon as we stop exercising, because we're not adapted to the physical rigors of being couch potatoes. We are not like bears that can lie down for more than half a year without suffering any muscle or bone degeneration, without incurring a pre-diabetic condition and hardening of the arteries. Psychology matches physiology. I can think of nothing lazier than a bear lying around in its lair all winter long. A bear has no urge whatsoever to get up and going in the wintertime. All bears that did so in the evolutionary past surely became dead

bears, because they exhausted their energy reserves and starved. We're the opposite. We're more like the migrant bird, at times restless and itchy for travel, regardless how arduous it may be. As with the birds, it's because for millions of years that tendency conferred survival.

Since the invention of weapons that kill from a distance, and then the advent of agriculture, we have transformed not only the planet, but also our lives. We no longer need to run down our dinner. When we did so, we developed a most powerful weapon that we still use. We developed mind power—the ability to project far ahead to the prey that is out of sight and sound, to the finish line of a marathon or an ultramarathon. We started a long run for the thrill of the chase itself, and we pursued it beyond all reasonable immediate rewards, by mind power and imagination. We were not always successful. Many hunts ended in failure. But there was the chance of a payoff, that we might “bring home the bacon.”

I often wonder how many ultrarunners there would be now if the plains and forests were teeming with game animals, if there were no “jobs” as we know them now, and if *all* of us were given the opportunity to chase down the Kudu, the wildebeest, or the deer. Imagine if you could put in a six-hour run through a beautiful pristine countryside among antelope and elk, and top that off with the strong likelihood that doing so would keep your kids from starving to death, make you a hero in the eyes of your fellows, and catch the eye of a sweetheart. How many of us would engage in ultrarunning then? How weird would it seem then?

We can't relive those times now. But the mindset is still there, and the body to back it up is built by the mind. To be an ultrarunner is not to be weird. It's to bear through the tough crust of customs, to the core of what makes us human. We're just following an ancient script to seek harmony with the conditions to which we're adapted. *A Step Beyond* can help us read and follow that script, a current-day manifestation of millions of years of our evolution. — *Bernd Heinrich*



## Introduction

### Ultrarunning: A Personal Journey of Discovery

The question so often asked about ultrarunning is this: why? Why run such long distances that will almost always result in long hours of pain and fatigue? Why participate in events that will yield little in the way of recognition from others? Like other complicated questions, the answers are many and varied. The most common reply is the lure of the challenge—each individual's search to find where the limits of their own endurance lies. The fact that ultramarathons are so difficult is exactly the draw. The possibility that an individual will not be able to complete the event—or will have to reach down the very depths of their physical, emotional and spiritual reserves to do so—is just the element of challenge and competition that many athletes are seeking as we begin a new millennium.

Ultra distance races are not a recent phenomenon; the history of the sport dates well back into the 19th century. Long before team sports such as baseball and football were around, “pedestrians” were competing for prize money in immensely popular challenge matches, running and walking events lasting for one or as many as six days. Thousands of spectators turned out at arenas around the U.S. and England to witness these amazing spectacles. Since that time, ultrarunning has maintained a decidedly lower profile; even today, many recreational runners are not even aware of that competitions beyond the standard 26.2-mile marathon distance exist.

Despite this relative anonymity, ultra distance racing has grown steadily during the past few decades. In the U.S. and around the world, the number of events and participants competing in races ranging from 31 miles to 3,100 miles has increased markedly. Perhaps the most significant development in ultrarunning has been the understanding and realization that almost anyone possesses the necessary physical ability to complete an ultra distance race. The myth that only super endurance athletes are able to run ultras has been largely erased.

Advancing technology has kept pace with this knowledge. This is an inevitable development, as the physical requirements placed upon individuals have demanded the most efficient and comfortable means of running for hours, days, even weeks at a time. Ultrarunning has pioneered several technological advances in running: in shoes and clothing, nutritional supplements, as well as heart rate monitors and altimeters.

In the current era, we have witnessed the evolution of ultras from a unique point of view. While much has changed in the sport, the one constant—the challenge of an individual versus pure distance—has remained. That challenge has been written about in almost every conceivable manner, from almost every angle. In *A Step Beyond*, we present a compilation of articles covering a wide range of topics.

The sport has been blessed with many colorful personalities throughout the years. The feats achieved by ultrarunners from all walks of life, from all around the world, borders on the unbelievable. Pushing the edge is an integral aspect of ultrarunning; many of those who have led the way throughout the years have become legendary. Of course, these amazing athletes have needed a forum in which to perform. Thus, races have developed and grown in tandem with the sport. There is hardly a city, state, province, or region that has not been the site of an ultramarathon. Like the runners who have competed in them, some events have become classics. Races, the people who run them, and the history created by them, are integral to the sport: we present the best articles on these subjects in those sections of *A Step Beyond*.

Of course any time there are races, there will be strategies on how to best prepare for and compete in these events. We have assembled a varied compilation of articles with advice on how to prepare for and run ultra distances. While there is no one “right way” to prepare for or complete an ultramarathon, many excellent training principles and racing strategies have been developed and refined, offering both the aspiring and veteran ultrarunner information that will help them on their personal quests.

Many articles through the years have dealt with the philosophical side of the sport. As mentioned at the outset, trying to answer the “why” of ultrarunning has provided many ultrarunners long hours of introspection and not surprisingly, some superbly written pieces. In reality, there are as many reasons for attempting an ultra as there are people who attempt them. In the philosophy section of this book, we explore some of these perspectives, all of which offer thought-provoking outlooks on the sport and the activity that is ultrarunning.

While there is no denying the importance of the mental side of the sport, the fact remains that ultrarunning is a supremely physical challenge. The effects upon the human body under the duress of running extremely long distances are many. Numerous studies have been conducted on the physiological ramifications of running ultras, both by medical experts and by the most insightful and acutely aware experts—ultrarunners themselves. We truly are all “an experiment of one.” In the section on physiology, we present articles ranging from normal physiological

functions in running to the far-reaching and sometimes serious medical consequences resulting from pushing the body to its limits.

Ultrarunning by nature is a serious endeavor, but we can't forget the lighter side of the sport, and we have not in this book. Quite often, humor is the perfect anecdote for an ultrarunner. Levity can lift the burden, allowing a lighter and more free-spirited approach—just what is needed to balance the sometimes seemingly impossible demands of ultrarunning. To paraphrase a popular euphemism, “Ultrarunning is too important to be taken seriously!”

As with all growing entities, ultrarunning is constantly changing and redefining itself. As society evolves, so do all aspects of life, ultrarunning included. Inevitably then, the sport will be constantly examined and analyzed. With the aforementioned rapid development of technological breakthroughs and advancements, one's approach must change in order to keep pace. In a new century, the possibilities for achievement in ultrarunning by athletes of all abilities have never been more exciting. In that sense, this book is simply a snapshot in time, one that will hopefully offer a perspective on where ultrarunning has been, where it is now, and where its future lies.

The sport of ultrarunning is an integral part of many people's lives. For others, it is only a brief journey. In either case, there is much knowledge and wisdom to be gained by our own efforts. Ultrarunning is a wonderful tool for learning about ourselves—not only our physical abilities, but our motivations and inner psyches as well. If *A Step Beyond* can help you get started or move further along the road of your personal journey of discovery, we will have achieved our goal. We wish you good luck on that journey. – *Don Allison*