**ULTRA MAMMA’S CORNER**

RUNNING YOUR FIRST ULTRA

by Nancy Shura-Dervin

Ultra running is a relatively new sport, which has recently begun to experience rapid growth. Much of what is known about the sport comes from hard-earned lessons given on the trail and passed on to other runners, person-to-person. What works for one runner may not work each time for that runner, and certainly may not work at all for other runners. Every person is AN EXPERIMENT OF ONE according to Kevin Setnes. Kevin is master’s champion ultra runner, writer for UltraRunning Magazine, and coach for TEAM ULTRA FIT. The challenge of this endurance sport is made more so by the fact there are few tried and true rules which work for everyone given that the distance, weather, temperature, even the runner's body, are always changing. It is a well-known fact that despite the best preparation, finishing a 100-mile ultra is still a crapshoot.

What follows is a basic primer for the new ultra runner. It is not intended to teach everything you need to know, but will give the basics necessary for the newbie to handle 50K through 100K distances most comfortably, toward a finish. The bulk of what you will eventually need to know to become a competent ultra runner will come from your experiences running these races. You will become your own best teacher. You will learn from going slow and you will learn from racing. From your DNFs will come the lessons you need to learn in order to handle the difficulties that eventually arise with longer distance events. Some of your most valuable lessons will come from bonking, yet still finishing a race, as this will teach you mental toughness, beyond what you could have imagined. You will finally come to know what you are really made of! All this will come in time, if you continue in this sport. But every sport has a beginning and at the start of each new distance, a little bit of knowledge will help you go a long, long, long, long way!

The Countdown: Race Days -4, -3, and -2

MENTAL PREPARATION:

Reducing Anxiety: It's completely normal to feel extremely anxious in the last few days before your ultra. Beginners and seasoned runners alike share these feelings. Usually the longer the distance, the greater the anxiety. This may interfere with the quality or quantity of your sleep, especially on ultra-eve. Ultra-eve sleep may also likely be of lesser quality because of last minute preparations, travel, hotel beds, etc. It's a good idea to try to get your best sleep four, three, and two nights before the ultra. This is especially true for races beyond the 100K. It's helpful to keep a little note pad with you during these days. Keep the pad on the bedside table at night. You are likely to remember necessary details at the most inconvenient times! Jotting these down will help you remember to buy, prepare or pack important things. Begin now to assemble your running gear (clothes, shoes, packs, drop bags), especially if you will be traveling any distance for the race. Don't wait until the day you pack to do this. This will greatly reduce your last minute anxiety.

Review the Course. Get a feeling for the distance between aid stations, especially the first and the last. Decide where you will use drop bags, if any. It's helpful to commit to memory the topography of the last 5-6 miles of the course. This will really help you stay focused during the last few miles.

Replace anxiety with confidence. Negative thoughts should be replaced with positive statements. Repeat them out loud to yourself. Write them on your pad and read them aloud. Statements like NANCY, YOU'VE DONE YOUR TRAINING; YOU ARE READY TO ACCOMPLISH YOUR GOAL, will soon become the positive thoughts that will override your fears. This is a very important part of mental preparation for ultra runners.

Imagery: Create visual images of you running the race... and finishing. Take 15 minutes each day to sit quietly and visualize putting to practice everything you've learned; power walking the hills, running the down hills. See yourself as efficient, competent and strong. Be sure you finish the visualization seeing yourself crossing the finish line!

PHYSICAL PREPARATION:

Eat well in the days before the race. Do not strictly carbo load. Have some form of protein with each meal. Protein is necessary for the repair of muscle and tissue breakdown that will inevitably occur with longer distance races. Increased dietary protein in the days before and after an ultra will help ensure more successful racing and recovery.

Hydrate adequately and avoid alcoholic beverages the week before the race.

Trim your toenails and have a massage!

RACE DAY -1:

Prepare Your Gear. Prepare drop bags, if any are needed. The use of drop bags is common to 100-mile races at points where remote trails prevent crew access. 50-mile and shorter races are generally restricted from having crews. Usually drop bags are delivered to the RD when you pick up your race number. 50-mile runners do very well with one or two drop bags available to them during the race. The bags are prepared ahead by the runner and taken by the R.D. to designated aid stations on the course. The bag contains items the runner might need that aren't provided by the race, such as your special race drink (be sure you know what the race drink is), dry socks, change of shoes, jacket, etc. It's a good idea to keep it to one or two bags only per race and keep them small and simple. The more time you spend digging through drop bags, the less time you have to run. Label your drop bags with your name and race number. Arrange to have dry clothing at the finish line.

Prepare your race clothes. Set them all out like your mom did for you on your first day of kindergarten! Pin your race number onto the bottom of your shorts, or your hat. Do not pin it on your shirt. You might need to change shirts or possibly put on a jacket. You bib must be visible to the race officials. Put out your socks, shoes, insoles, bandana, sun block, sunglasses, etc. As most ultras start quite early, it will likely be dark when you awake in the morning.

Prepare your bottles or hydration pack. Assure that you are packed up with essentials... candy, salt, a baggie for food, etc. If rain is likely or you are running at altitude, you might pack a large plastic trash bag. Plan your breakfast for the morning.

Tend to your feet... tape if necessary. Set out shoes/gators. Check your shoelaces and gator straps.

Do you need a flashlight or mini-mag for the beginning or end of the ultra? Will you be starting or finishing in the dark? Plan accordingly.

Have a warm bath before bed and remember to set your alarm!

RACE MORNING:

Have breakfast early. Eat and drink what you normally do. Coffee is OK, if it's your usual. After breakfast, get dressed. Before leaving, go to the bathroom.

The start line: Plan to arrive about 30 minutes before the start, earlier if parking is an issue. Check-in with the race officials. Stay relaxed and calm. Repeat your positive statements. You are a newbie at this distance and you have only one goal... to finish! Do not think about the entire race distance. Break the race up into smaller sections. Concentrate on getting to the first aid station. When people ask me how I ran 100-miles, I usually answer “one step at a time”. As the race begins, take a deep breath and smile... this is the beginning of your new adventure!

TACTICS:

Don’t think about the entire race distance. Move from aid station to aid station. These are your little goals. Think of each section as a 6-mile run... a 4-mile run... Do not calculate how far you've gone. Don't think about the distance remaining. Just focus on the distance to the next aid station.

Conserve Energy. Stay calm. Breathe deep. Walk all the hills, especially in the first half of the race. Walk/jog the flats. Run the down hills comfortably. Try not to get carried away. This is your first ultra and it is important to get yourself to the finish in good condition. You will have plenty of time to race after you cross this finish line. During the second half of the race, begin to walk/jog the hills, if you can. Otherwise, walk. During the last 5 or 6 miles, continue to run as much of the course as you are able, including the hills. The end is near!

Run Your Own Race. Pay attention to your body early. Let friends go ahead of you. Listen to your breathing and focus. By following your game plan, you will often pass many runners in the later miles. It's nice to run with others, but during races, one person invariably runs off pace and will suffer as a result, often later in the race. People don't always hit their highs and lows at the same time. It's a good idea to focus on yourself during the early hours of the race, and then maybe hang with others through different parts of the course. Feel free to leave people or let them leave you, always paying attention to your own pace.

As you approach an aid station, pull out your bottles, and remove the lids. Report your number to the recorder. Go directly to the food table and fill your bottles. If helpers fill for you, be sure you get what you asked for by tasting the fluid before leaving the aid station. If you hate Gatorade, you don't want to discover an hour later that your second water bottle is full of Gatorade. Grab some munchies and stuff them into your belt pack and head out of the aid station. Do your eating on the uphill sections of the course... not in the aid stations. The less time spent in aid stations, the slower you can move on the course. In a 50K, strive to keep your aid station stops down to under 30 seconds. In a 50-Mile, keep them to less than one minute. In all races... beware the chair! Be sure to report your race number as you leave.

Food, Drink, Salt, Etc.: The balance of these things should be determined by you, in your training. Newbies would do well to know that generally speaking, most runners consume solid food more often in the morning, with cooler weather, and rely more on fluid calories later in the day, or in the heat. It is a popular thought that more calories consumed early in the race will carry you through the later miles. Other runners prefer to eat solid food at the regular meal times and supplement with carb drinks in-between. Weaker drinks or plain water are sometimes better tolerated late in the race, when stomachs are more likely to be queasy. Carry food or gels in your pack and eat them on the up hills, while walking. By eating and drinking during the up hill sections, you will be nourished and hydrated for running the down hills. Salt is helpful to encourage stomach emptying. Regular salt intake will help prevent fluid sloshing. Be sure to work with this in your training runs.

During hot weather, wear clothing to protect from sunburn. Lightweight cotton shirts are excellent because they can be doused with water to cool you. Slow your pace accordingly. Take adequate salt to help process extra fluids you will need to drink. Wear a hat. At aid stations, roll ice in your bandana and tie around your neck. Place ice under your hat. Always put ice in your bottles. Although it's tempting to pour water over you, it's more important to get the water into you. Your stomach is your radiator. Extra water in you will circulate through you and cool you, through perspiration.

This Too Will Pass: With long distance running, you are likely to experience highs and lows. This is especially true of distances of 50-miles and beyond. If you manage yourself well, you will not 'bonk', but you may certainly experience periods of fatigue, pain, nausea and discouragement. It is essential to remember that these experiences are temporary. Tell yourself that this will pass. Take whatever measures are necessary to correct the situation; have some salt, drink more fluid, eat some calories, slow down and recover... let it pass. Repeat your positive statements... as mantras. Remind yourself that it is worth continuing... a medal waits for you! Feeling great is also a temporary condition... tell yourself that this too, will pass!

Getting Lost: Sometimes runners go off course during an ultra. While hikers sometimes tamper with ribbons/arrows, more often, runner fatigue and distraction results in getting lost. Pay attention to markings and don't just follow other runners. If you find yourself off course, do not continue on without marks, hoping to find the course. The protocol says to backtrack to the last mark and continue on. At the finish, you can brag about the extra mileage you ran!

Pooping, Peeing and Barfing: Most races have porta-potties at some of the aid stations. These are the best places to poop. Without porta-potties, it becomes necessary to go off trail. Be sure to pack out your tissue. Peeing by the side of the trail is acceptable for both genders during ultras. Dark yellow, scanty urine is a sign that you are not well hydrated. Take heed and drink more. Clear, free-flowing urine is your goal. Nausea can be reduced by wearing 'Sea Bands' on your wrists. Purchased in the medical section of your drug store, the bands provide acupressure to send anti-nausea messages to the brain. Ginger is also an effective anti-emetic. Candied ginger or natural ginger root can be sucked on during ultras. If these measures fail, barfing is best done off to the side, so runners don't have to tromp through it! ;-)

New Territory: At some point, every newbie becomes aware that they have entered new territory. Mile 27... mile 32... mile 51... the boundary has been broken. This is the farthest you have ever run in your life. Stay calm. Have fun. Every step you take is an adventure... a new record! Maintain your focus... getting to the next aid station. Use your positive statements.

Bonking: Bonking needs no description. It will happen to everyone, sooner or later. If you pay attention to the problem and take measures to correct it, you will usually recover sufficiently to finish your race in the allotted time. Everything that contributes to bonking seems to be related to running too fast. Slow your pace, drink more fluid, consume more calories, take salt, etc. Before dropping, take a good rest at the aid station, if time permits. Fluids are often processed more effectively when you just stop for a while. Short rests can sometimes revive the runner who may go on to keep a better pace.

Cut-Off Times: Some races impose cut-off times. Cut-off times are more common to 50-mile or 100-mile races, are intended to protect the runners, and to prevent the aid station workers of having to stay on the course indefinitely. Runners approaching the limit must leave the aid station before the cut-off time or they will be removed from the race and driven to the finish. Occasionally, runners may be permitted to pass though, especially if it is the last aid station before the finish. It is always the race management's option to detain a runner at an aid station, due to missing the cut-off, or some medical reason. It is never acceptable to argue with race officials/volunteers and it is even more unacceptable to continue in the race on your own, after missing the cut-off. It may be disappointing but... s--t happens!

Leaving the Last Aid Station: Stay focused for the last few miles. It's never too late to bonk! Practice your game plan. Smile and greet runner you pass, or those who pass you. The experience of ultra running is special because of the camaraderie of the runners who often share help and encouragement. The front runners have fleet of foot while the last runners have strength of character. Everyone deserves credit in this game.

The Finish Line: In ultra running, the sprint to the finish line isn't always a sprint, but the range of feelings that accompany finishing a race of this distance is usually quite dramatic. The longer the distance, the more dramatic, even for spectators and crew, who may have waited 10, 20 or 30 hours to see their runner finish. The combination of exhaustion, relief and amazement experienced by the runner is soon replaced by pride at completing the adventure. It is then that the newbie realizes that... PAIN IS TEMPORARY; PRIDE IS FOREVER!