

# Data Literature ReDraft

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*Why* would someone run 100 miles? *How* would someone run 100 miles? The reasons to run ultramarathon can be multifold and obscure, so a beginning can be easier on the how-to. To run an ultra marathon a runner can follow specific guidelines of training: and later the outcome of competing in a race, under certain probabilities, is likely predictable, with a successful finish. These indications are agreed by different runners who give advice for new runners embarking in such a mission. The recipe is simple. Build up an amount of running mileage that is accountable through weeks and months. Training to log distances is common training among athletes to pursue shorter distances, such as the marathon. To go ultra, the best and regularly recommended practice is to divide the week between regular week training days, and always including (at any mileage of training) a long run, likely on weekends. Doing this through several months, in average no less than 6 months with long runs between 3 to 10 hours, should work to be prepared for an ultra race. Once at race: be prepared and expect the unexpected. This last point is where the key and the challenges lay for the race as well as for training for every runner: managing the subtleties and not subtle changes in the body and mind is what makes running ultra an epic challenge for a life time.

How does a runner learn to manage the obstacles that ultra running presents? Simple, by experience. Christopher McDougall, a runner himself, asks in his book *Born to Run* [McDougall, 2009]: *Why does my foot hurt?* This limitation leads the author to question the basis of several other social systems in which he finds himself immersed in. The economy creates unwanted needs, such as using bulky shoes that need to be changed every few months, and affecting the way we feel and move our body. Why do humans need so much technological annexes to function? Or may they/we not need them?

The production, marketing and image of shoe brands have mutated along the past decades. In his journey McDougall enters into detail on the evolution of how and why modern human use shoes. Later on the book the author also gives plenty of reasons why humans move at all. A number of persons deliver more arguments in favor of the idea that humans can run very far and for a long time, and can even do so (nearly) barefoot. Anthropologists and evolutionary biologists argue about the physical capabilities of human beings: the unique capability of barefoot bipeds to sweat and endure running for hours, with the example of ancient cultures still remaining today that take over persistence hunting as mode of feeding and hence survival. In the book there is also a number of runners: American, and Mexican aboriginal Rarámuri runners that live a different kind of life. Some atypical runners such as Michael Randall Hickman -aka Micah True, aka Caballo Blanco, an American settled down in the Mexican canyons- do not have standard jobs, meaning that finances do not guide his life; others such as Barefoot Ted and Jenn Shelton who are freethinkers and thriving for the excitement of living among nature as explorers and dwellers of mother nature. Not to forget the elite athletes that are well known to be amongst the best in the world, from both sides of the American-Mexican border: Scott Jurek and Arnulfo Quimare.

The characters of the book, in general, are appreciative of and near to nature -in physical presence and/or desire- and close to an outdoors lifestyle. The rural environment is the overall setting of trail running, and ultra marathons. However, the conditions under which such both training and the events themselves take place is that of the urban civilized life: the majority of ultra races are set through paths that have been made through the passage of humans, animals, and in sum through trails that are made possible struggling through and against nature. The most renown ultra runs of the world may have the best scenarios, backgrounds, and closeness to nature. But at the same time, most of them are set through highways where pavement prevails. This can even be said of the oldest ultra races around the globe, such as the case of the 90K Comrades which began in 1921 and runs all the way through the KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa between the cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg, shifting each year in a different direction: even years, the race goes upward [Burfoot, 2007]; odd years, downwards. Some elite ultra runners train in an isolated cabin in the woods near mountains, but this is not a general rule.

Training for ultra is more of an urban feat, since most runners live in cities, and go back outdoors for long runs during the weekend: this is a bit of a stretched statement, but is more true than the opposite. The environment -and the city-, as concepts to deal with, shape the lines and styles through which runners move opening their way. The Comrades, to go back to the same example, begins at dark before dawn: the view of the thousands of runners resembles spectral visions in the photographs of the event, this achieved by the slow (intentional) delay with which light is captured by cameras in the night. Effect possible thanks to the urban lighting of street posts. This same lighting would not be possible in a country side, and when so, additional gear is needed. Ultra running and ultra races have characteristics that make it in some senses closer to urban settlements, and in other senses closer to outdoors. This mixture and moving in and out and in between is what makes it a novel place to look at the differences and challenges throughout such settings.

The rural/urban opposition to label spaces nowadays can feel a bit outdated, even more since places are shaping into new forms and contact with humans and other species of flora and fauna. James Ballard -the writer- has stated that the XXth century has been shaped by the use and proliferation of the private automobile. Shall this continue in the XXIst century?

*I think the key image of the 20th century is the man in the motor car. It sums up everything: the elements of speed, drama, aggression, the junction of advertising and consumer goods with the technological landscape. The sense of violence and desire, power and energy; the shared experience of moving together through an elaborately signalled landscape.*

*We spend a substantial part of our lives in the motor car, and the experience of driving condenses many of the experiences of being a human being in the 1970s, the marriage of the physical aspects of ourselves with the imaginative and technological aspects of our lives. I think the 20th century reaches its highest expression on the highway. Everything is there: the speed and violence of our age; the strange love affair with the machine, with its own death. [J.G. Ballard]*

The future of our landscapes may well be shaped by some habits from the past, as well as escaping from those that constrain our humanity. The author offers his view of the present lively options, and sets possible outcomes for the future:

*More and more, the landscape of the XXth century is created in function of the motorcar, a phenomenon against which people all around the world is starting to rebel against. They look with horror to Los Angeles -nicknamed Autopia, Smogville and Motorpy-, a city ruthlessly ruled by the car, with the air clouded by the exhaust fumes and an artificial horizon of elevated terraces of the gigantic highway systems. [Ballard, 1996]*

And yet again, the excess of a way of city life can also lead to seek for variations and options for new life styles. Howard Becker has observed, on the book *The Invisible Cities*, by the writer Italo Calvino, that imagining such variations is a manner of thinking that can allow scientists to frame analysis around new variables. Against the apocalyptic vision of the grey lifeless city grows its opposite: every city has, along with its apparently distinctive feature, its reverse [Becker, 2007].

If the past century has defined the world as a global city, today there is no longer such a strong disparity between the rural populations and the urban ones. All of it is much closer together and mixed up. The city of today includes and values green spaces. And the value of retracting further away to exotic isolated landscapes, and tourism has increased. For some people mother nature has become more important and give no meaning to cities, even living inside of them and when we all depend on the roads and technologies that allow us to move in and out of them. The city can become a place where nothing happens from this perspective, but at the same time where the resources come from, as invisible as they can be to a peasant. Italo Calvino shows a different picture of the current megalopolis as a general figure, as he speaks of the city of Cecilia in the voice of a shepherd:

*“I am a wandering herdsman. Sometimes my goats and I have to pass through cities; but we are unable to distinguish them. Ask me the names of the grazing lands: I know them all, the Meadow between the Cliffs, the Green Slope, the Shadowed Grass. Cities have no name for me: they are places without leaves, separating one pasture from another, and where the goats are frightened at street corners and scatter. The dog and I run to keep the flock together.”* [Calvino, 2008]

Seeking for expansion to the grasslands, the world of ultra welcomes an increasing population of newcomers. It brings along defiant hindrances: both of the body against terrains, as of the inner struggles within. Back to McDougall’s book. It is a contribution of ideas not only of value runners, but also to the imagery of running as to the overarching mythology and motivation that underlies a number of interests: covering not only human mobility but also nutrition, unplugged sociality, outdoor lifestyle, and love of time in nature as a standard –not as a mere time-fixed vacation from a consuming job that does not relate to spiritual interests.

McDougall undergoes a path through which he learns a great deal to go ultra, which hints into how this is achieved. Which guides to a further question: *How does a runner go ultra?* McDougall embarks in this task to participate in a challenge among the best runners of both cultures mentioned: North Americans and Mexicans. This question, as a researcher, I make my own: *Can I do this (running ultra)? How? And with which costs (palpable and interiorly) and consequences?* *Born to Run* gives explanations and inspiration. What other elements delve through runners circumstances and spirit?

*“Chris’ gift to the running community was a beautiful story,” says Maria Walton, “a story of endurance and of strength. He connected all these people through those who ran in the Copper Canyon in 2006, and offered a message of hope, community and celebration. That’s the real gift of Born to Run.”* [Winn, 2014]

As much as a cheerful spirit is easily welcomed, and is frequent in the ultra community, this is not all there is to running through extreme events and conditions. Shared difficulties and embarrassing moments are also common feats for runners, and even reason to feel more empathy. A winning sense of struggle and coming through is not all there is to running, and to demanding the mind and spirit to reach further. More obscure elements escape to the outer view. This is the case for example depicted in the German fictionalized video biography of Austrian runner Johann Kastenberger: *Der Räuber* (2010v Martin Prinz [2010]). This character not only pursued running as a professional athlete but also had an atypical side practice: robbing banks. In this sense the movie does not pose

the runner as a role model to be followed, but rather shows the daily tasks that an athlete goes in a normal life, and at the same time (not) showing any (dark) reasons why an athlete gets into the life of a professional burglar. The movie, according to the film critic and ultrarunner Santiago García, does not try to be of the inspirational type, it is not a celebration of the strength of the runner:

*[the director] takes many poetic licenses that as much as they bend a little on the occurred events, they emphasize the film's contemplation about the nature of the runner. The search for challenge, emotion, the strength of heart which are well known by those of us who have ran marathons and ultramarathons. Among the several characteristics that the movie highlights as peculiar to marathoners, it is intensity that stands out, as well as the freedom instinct that inhabits adventure races, as well as races in general.* [García, 2014]

Ultra-runners do in general enjoy the fresh air of the natural outdoors. They explore and celebrate the winds of a world of freedom as a common mentioned motivation. This push that moves runners into the wild is -however liberating- also tainted by other not always self-evident purposes. Running is not only a means to gain a sense of freedom and openness to the world. Running ultra also comes as part of an exploration for more energy, productivity, and a sense of being in place, more grounded to the lived reality, not an imaginary free space. And on a similar tone, there is a push that is to not waste time in useless activities, but seeking for adrenaline, (selfish?) well-being and doing an extreme activity that in one way or another is still compliant with socially accepted rules of life, that is: running is a well seen hobby, as of the kind that produces no harm to others. But is there not also a type of moral obligation for runners to accomplish something whatever it may be, even such goals? This is more evident perhaps in the Japanese culture, which has a strong group idea of running by teams: the *ekiden*. The sense of responsibility shows in the dramatic performance that they put over when they cannot comply to the teams expectations, here a description and comment on the Hakone National Japanese race by British journalist and ultra-runner Adharanand Finn:

*At every changeover, the effort and passion for this race is etched across the contorted faces of the runners. They seem to run with their eyes closed, their mouths gnashing. Even their hair seems to be getting in on the act, straining from the tops of their heads. [...]*

*It reminds me of the dramatics of footballers looking for free kicks. Except, rather than trying to show the referee how hurt they are, here the runners are trying to show their team-mates, and the spectators, how much effort, or *dory-oku*, they're putting in [...]*

*The further back they are in the field, the worse the dramatics become, with the last few runners collapsing as though they've run their legs into a useless pulp, refusing to be dragged back to their feet, pleading to be left to die at the side of the road. But even knowing it is partly an act, it is moving to witness it, particularly at the end when I manage to get a spot right by the finish. Normally Japanese people balk at even shaking hands with each other, preferring the restrained dignity of a little bow. Expressions of emotion are rarely on public display. But here, the waiting team-mates are clearly concerned, and do their best to comfort and help their companions, with loving arms around their shoulders, and kind words whispered in their ears. [...]*

*At the end, I see many of the fans, who are mostly young women, crying. When I ask one woman why she likes Hakone so much, she can barely speak. 'It is so moving,' is all she can say, biting her lip. Another man, waiting by the finish with a small portable radio, answers the same question with one word: 'Bushido.' [loyalty, courage and honour] [Finn, 2016, p. 134-135]*

In this way we can get to a picture where on the one hand ultra can become a highly socialized activity, and at the same time, on another hand, it can be a very personal, intimate endeavour. Also from Japan is Haruki Murakami, who tries to understand and explain to himself the reasons why he

runs, even going ultra. His profile is of someone who seeks to gain energy to become a physically resistant writer, which in his view is a harsh mechanical duty, aside from being demanding of the creative energies of the person behind ideas and a keyboard. Murakami's running history has allowed him to enjoy the sport through out a quarter century and race through scattered places around the world: experiencing for instance that in Japan an ultra race can be held without modifying the car traffic, because in certain regions it is very calm. (Not the same to say about the London-Brighton race in UK which was suspended from 2005 onwards because of vehicle danger and lack of enough traffic people to help during the race).

To delve more into the literature of Murakami is to give a closer look to the meaning of running ultra, at the same time understanding the repertoire of objects and activity that it entails, and in the same approach, grasping the lively experience. The author's book is *What I talk about when I talk about running* | a memoir and in his chapter 6 he reports on his 100 K race in Lake Saroma [Hokkaido]. It is himself who describes this goal as an aim that normal people do not yearn for, and he tried once, with a bitter sweet taste afterwards, that is commonly known as *the runner's blues*, which is the down feeling of depletion and no desire to return back to the activity, feeling which in most cases simply goes away.

With the experience of having run a marathon before, the writer calls to attention that once passed the Olympic distance for the marathon of 42.195 K, there are control posts every ten Kilometers. Those who do not arrive to them in a given time are eliminated, this is a common trait to many ultras, a way for the organizers to keep track of who is doing what and how they are doing in all health related issues. This is an important topic because many narratives surrounding the experience of ultra highlight the exploration and experimentation of pushing the body beyond known limits. This discourse has a tacit assumption, that is you need to demand your body even more than ever, but always given that you have a certain amount of prior training, physical and mental. And this is a point where organizers are not bland. Signing a disclosure of responsibility is a bureaucratic procedure but is withheld always and everywhere. Even in places where some infrastructure is lacking and the respect to runners is not widespread, these sheets always get taken cared of, and hence, signed. To run in the Antarctic Pole among other ten contestants only, Argentinean runner Christian Gorbea is not surprised to send an athletic resume and fill in "500 sheets and insurances" [Gorbea, 2017b].

What does an ultra runner experience in his body and mind when running? In Murakami's account it is as simple as nothing, combined with mundane sport calculations: at the beginning phase of his ultra he was just limited to running in silence, keeping pace and calculating that at a rhythm of 6 minutes per kilometer he could finish the 100 K in ten hours. Later on the race, at km 55, he would get to a station where he could make a stop and refuel:

*I changed into fresh clothes and ate the snack my wife had prepared. Now that the sun was getting higher the temperature had risen, so I took off my half tights and changed into a clean shirt and shorts. I changed my New Balance ultramarathon shoes (there really are such things in the world) from a size eight to an eight and a half. My feet had started to swell up, so I needed to wear shoes a half size larger. It was cloudy the whole time, with no sun getting through, so I decided to take off my hat, which I had on to keep the sun off me. I'd worn the hat to keep my head warm, too, in case it rained, but at this point it didn't look like it was going to. It was neither too hot nor too cold, ideal conditions for long-distance running. I washed down two nutrition-gel packs, took in some water, and ate some bread and butter and a cookie. I carefully did some stretching on the grass and sprayed my calves with an anti-inflammatory. I washed my face, got rid of the sweat and dirt, and used the restroom. // I must have rested about ten minutes or so, but never sat down once. If I sat down, I felt, I'd never be able to get up and start*

*running again.*

*“Are you okay?” I was asked.*

*“I’m okay,” I answered simply. That’s all I could say. After drinking water and stretching, I set out on the road again. [Murakami, 2009, p. 79-80]*

Here Murakami shows the technical elements of the race, such as food with the help of someone else that gives elements to help through the race and in this way also gives moral support. Also shows the option of changing clothes, and chance of being able to stop and assess the current situation to have weights upon which to decide on the possible continuity, or not, on the run. Along with the personal assessments come the environmental evaluations, which are so obvious to runners, that may seem not to be needed to mention, but however illuminate the number of considerations while on the go. Drinking and eating is such a basic task that it cannot be overlooked, in fact these practices are such a low standard to keep up to that sometimes becomes the only goal for runners to reach the finish line: that is, when in movement, sometimes the awareness of hunger and thirst may disappear, but all runners should have some reserve of energy at all times.

And finally the spiritual-internal moment is the struggle of own decisions, as when he states the need to remain standing, which respects the ultra runner addagio: “Beware of the chair!”, since once you go down, it can become very difficult to rise up again. Soon after his departure from the station he has to deal with physical limitations, and handles this impediment with technique, an option that appears only after long hours of training and realizing the possibility of the body to move in different ways than pushing with the legs: sometimes you have to shift weight and attention elsewhere in the body to make the load easier on certain muscles:

*I realized something was wrong. My leg muscles had tightened up like a piece of old, hard rubber. I still had lots of stamina, and my breathing was regular, but my legs had a mind of their own. I had plenty of desire to run, but my legs had their own opinion about this. I gave up on my disobedient legs and started focusing on my upper body. I swung my arms wide as I ran, making my upper body swing, transmitting the momentum to my lower body. Using that momentum, I was able to push my legs forward (after the race, though, my wrists were swollen). Naturally, you can only go at a snail’s pace running like this, in a form not much different from a fast walk. But ever so slowly, as if it dawned on them again what their job was, or perhaps as if they’d resigned themselves to fate, my leg muscles began to perform normally and I was able to run pretty much the way I usually run.*

*Thankfully. [Murakami, 2009, p. 80-81]*

Later on comes the trespassing of *the wall*, which is (in)famous in Marathons and which you should surpass to reach the goal. It is said that in ultra you even may have to pass such moments several times. Here is the inner dialogue in the book, and how it transforms opposite bodily sensations:

*Ultimately, using every trick in the book, I managed to grit my teeth and make it through thirteen miles of sheer torment.*

*I’m not a human. I’m a piece of machinery. I don’t need to feel a thing. Just forge on ahead.*

*That’s what I told myself. That’s about all I thought about, and that’s what got me through. If I were a living person of blood and flesh I would have collapsed from the pain. There definitely was a being called me right there. And accompanying that is a consciousness that is the self. But at that point, I had to force myself to think that those were convenient forms and nothing more. It’s a strange way of thinking and definitely a very strange feeling—consciousness trying to deny consciousness. You have to force yourself into an inorganic place. Instinctively I realized that this was the only way to survive. [...]*

*While I was enduring all this, around the forty-seventh mile I felt like I'd passed through something. That's what it felt like. Passed through is the only way I can express it. Like my body had passed clean through a stone wall. At what exact point I felt like I'd made it through, I can't recall, but suddenly I noticed I was already on the other side. I was convinced I'd made it through. I don't know about the logic or the process or the method involved—I was simply convinced of the reality that I'd passed through.*

*After that, I didn't have to think anymore. Or, more precisely, there wasn't the need to try to consciously think about not thinking. All I had to do was go with the flow and I'd get there automatically. If I gave myself up to it, some sort of power would naturally push me forward.*

*Run this long, and of course it's going to be exhausting. But at this point being tired wasn't a big issue. By this time exhaustion was the status quo. My muscles were no longer a seething Revolutionary Tribunal and seemed to have given up on complaining. Nobody pounded the table anymore, nobody threw their cups. My muscles silently accepted this exhaustion now as a historical inevitability, an ineluctable outcome of the revolution. I had been transformed into a being on autopilot, whose sole purpose was to rhythmically swing his arms back and forth, move his legs forward one step at a time. I didn't think about anything. I didn't feel anything. I realized all of a sudden that even physical pain had all but vanished. Or maybe it was shoved into some unseen corner, like some ugly furniture you can't get rid of. In this state, after I'd passed through this unseen barrier, I started passing a lot of other runners. [Murakami, 2009, p. 81-83]*

Strong emotions, as well as moments of dullness and/or pain, harsh spiritual struggle are part of the elements of ultra. A real parliament can take place inside an individual. As long as this type of debate and pushing is an inner conversation, one could bare in mind that our own thoughts are also formations that come from without as much as from within. As for the corporeal element of the struggle, it was -according to [Shilling, 2011, p. 164]- only the classic sociologists (Mark, Durkheim, Weber) that saw the body as 'worked upon', and it was Mauss's merit to distinguish how the bodily techniques are not universal and how they unfold in series of activities, postures, tensions, appearances. Even more (p. 165) despite his Durkheimian roots, Mauss's concern was on how *individual* body subjects developed habits as modes of connection with other people.

Once in presence of this inner conversation as this author shows a glimpse appears of clarification on the how to pass through these hard times, but remains the question of how it all begins. According to Elias Canetti, (social) impositions and specifically orders are so strong that their presence is simple assumed, unquestioned. Who may have the ability to distinguish between the inner forces from within and those from without? Gordon Ainsleigh was the first to change the ground rules of Western States: long time a race held by horse, a certain year -1974- he was horseless and decided to run the 100 mile course by foot. Did he do this out of his own volition? Mainly yes, but not without a certain inspiration by another pioneer woman: Drucilla Barner, first woman to win the Tevis Cup and Secretary of the Western States Trail Foundation. So maybe pioneers are just carrying the torch of something that is moving around the situation. And perhaps even when ultra is becoming at least a little more than the past a massified activity, still the inner struggle and inner voice is present. In Japan many may run, but the endeavour continues to be personal, even intimate.

In Canetti's explanation of how orders are obeyed he states that -different from other social constraints- the order is perceived as something alien, imposed. And further more, he dissects the order to view at as composed by a *momentum* and a *sting*. And it is this exterior component that remains unnoticed once entered the body, and keeps exerting is action on and on:

*The momentum forces the recipient to act, and to act in accordance with the content of the command ; the sting remains behind in him. When a command functions normally*

*and as one expects, there is nothing to be seen of the sting; it is hidden and unsuspected and may only reveal its existence by some faint, scarcely perceptible recalcitrance before the command is obeyed. But the sting sinks deep into the person who has carried out the command and remains in him unchanged. In the whole psychological structure of man there is nothing less subject to change. The content of the command -its force, range and definition- was fixed for ever in that moment in which it was first promulgated, and this, or rather its exact image in miniature, is stored up in the recipient for ever and may remain submerged for years and decades before it comes to light* [Canetti, 1978, p. 305]

Inside or outside. Something is pushing. One could not reduce ultra to a mere athletic feat of moving the legs. *It's not all fun and games.* The ultra legend Greek-Australian Yiannis Kouros bewares writers to be careful of what they have to say about a sport that in some cases they/we may not be fully aware of. Two phrases by Kouros [Kouros, 2012] sum up his ideas about what this sport means:

- *Without patience, you will never conquer endurance.*
- *The verb “endure” is not a physical verb, it’s a spiritual one. Endure means to withstand.*

Who is Yiannis Kouros? For a world record setting man, he is fairly unknown outside of the ultra community. He has set a high standard, a quadruple record in fact, on the Greek Spartathlon [1983 1984 1986 1990] completing the 246 kilometers race in between of 20:25 and 21:57 hours and minutes, a mark still withstanding after over a quarter century. This is a complex and complete character, since he remains an underground dog for the general public but at the same time has gone longer and faster than virtually anybody else. For those who know running history, he is a major figure.

In 2013 the editing team at *Runner’s World* decided to give tribute to the best runners of all time. They discussed if this was even possible: how to measure and compare athletes with such different merits over the stretch of history? In fact, they first decided that it couldn’t be done, and then did it in a simple and happy manner anyway. The list would be titled GROAT, not the strictly indisputable *best*, but rather the *Greatest Runners Of All Time*, on those who inspired and influenced complete eras. The list begins with 32 candidates from different distances and mostly taking into consideration groups of 8 for the past recent decades: 1960s and before, 1970s, 1980-2000, 2000s. In this list only two ultra runners appear: Yiannis Kouros in the end of century period, and Scott Jurek in the following decade. Kouros “owns every men’s road world record from 100 to 1000 miles and every road and track record from 12 hours to 6 days” [Remy, 2013]. In this context it is understandable that he does not like false publicity for other accomplishments that are opaqued by his own. And he even has his own definition, for him hypermarathon in greek, which is the same than ultra is going beyond marathon distance. But for him, this is only in theory: he does not consider that going 45, 50 or even 100 K is ultra, this is because the body and its movements are still in control of the person: at the stage the person knows that they can endure because of a distinct personality, being a unique human being [chris1kerk, 2009].

*What counts is actual performances, not collections... [...] Everything that is not valid: Collection of events is not a sport, collection of km/miles also not a sport, running every day a marathon or 50k/mile also not a sport, patterns of sleeping or not sleeping and eating also not a sport, travelling solo with dad, brother/sister or/husband/wife also not a sport and taking part in events with extreme terrain or temperatures (just to so off that they are tough) while they can’t distinguish in official road or track events, are not valid.. All those manias indicate inabilities, no values and acceptance of inferiority. Moreover, to disguise or promote such miasms it turns to be criminal. Any fun-runner who considers himself/herself fun-runner is appreciated, as they have self-knowledge. But, any fun-runner who considers himself/herself ultra-runner is not just a faker but*



*indicates and uses charlatanism as well in order to show off or to sell their emptiness.*  
[Kouros, 2013]

As much as Kouros' athletic feats are impressive, he has a wide and profound vision on what racing ultra means. On the one hand he is strict about the activity being a sport, not a hobby of any adventurous type; but at the same time he emphasizes the importance of training the whole being, not alone the physical aspect.

*I would say that ultimately it's not simply an error, but also hubris to the metaphysical spirit of the real term of "Ultra" to degrade it down to their feet, and made from their earthy approach, according to their weaknesses. But the greatest error and the biggest hubris towards the principles of fair-play and athletic spirit happens when some articles or books are referring to fakers and their unreal/not valid activities.* [Kouros, 2013]

What is useful about what Kouros says is first to set a standard, and then see how much other runners can agree or depart from this definition of races, going ultra, and how the community works and understands itself. Other runners may be less harsh to newcomers, and themselves, such as the interviewees at *No Meat Athelete Ultra Podcast* who express that it is more fun to train for an ultra than for a marathon [Hay and Frazier, 2018]. This being because, among many other details, it is more pleasant to do long runs through amazing places than taking track of time splits to beat your own PR [Personal Record] at a given distance. A very common idea in ultra is that you haven't gone ultra until you reach the 100 miles limit. This is not only an elite opinion, but part of the mythology around races. There is also newcomers, and slow comers that increase distance little by little. There even is room for the "Short Distance Ultra Running" such as Abby Levene has been labeled.

Why does it matter how ultra runners qualify what ultra is? No one person should have the ultimate say, but they are useful guides to identify different ways of approaching and understanding the sport, or even being able to grasp the reality of ultra beyond race, beyond sport, beyond athletics, and also taking all these elements into consideration. Scott Jurek, the other grand character in the Groat list mentioned above, set several records: 24 hours, three Spartathlon, 7 consecutive Western States 100 miles (and has also won Hardrock once, and Badwater twice), and a perhaps non-strictly-athletic but equally respected setting which is the Appalachian Trail [Jurek, 2018]. (Note for further consideration: The direction of meddling with nature is important, since one direction implies getting colder and the other way gets hotter, also altitude, and season of the year, these criteria aplicable to other areas by other runners). Is this not ultra? According to Kouros, perhaps not. According to most ultra runners? Probably yes. Same could be said of Argentinian Rodolfo Rossi [Rossi, 2017], who crossed the country from North to South running, and was nick-named the Argentinean *Forrest Gump*.

The use of these materials is that an ultra runner that intends to learn by reading these documents has much to see in them. In this sense, the spectrum opened allows to choose what will be read, and what will be done as for running ultra as auto-ethnography. A 50K may suffice to begin with. How much further shall hunger and desire push towards is yet to know.

Getting into focus, calming down while able to react timely, concentrating, all of these tunings and conditionings may be in sync with other sports, which also aim for the proper mind frame for efficiency. It is frequent that ultra runners are people that enjoy sport in general, also martial arts, and meditative practices, and have passed under a good number of them. Just to mention a few: soccer, rugby, tennis, golf, car-racing, sailing, surfing, (northern-)skiing, chess, yoga, pilates, tai-chi, aikido, and so on. All practices help to gain control over the interactivity between body and environment (even if conceptually in sitting sports).

An aim that is shared by athletes from divergent streams of activity is that the benefits of meditation are spreading widely and should not be ignored. This has been documented in more recent times and is most evident with the data on well-being, and mindfulness. There is of course some dangers in this. To take one example of an extreme athlete that has gained Guinness Records for time under ice, and as much as it is valuable to become “Happy, Strong and Healthy”, as the IceMan Wim Hof claims for his method, with alleged scientific backup, attention must be kept on the possible difference between the health people people may *feel* as distinct (sometimes similar) to the health the actually *have*. This does not mean that aspects of his method cannot be useful, but the methods (breathing, meditation, and exposure to cold -water-) should be studied separately first, and then together, and see for the significance of such advances once discussed under the scientific loop and community.

*There is, however, a string attached to the Wim Hof Method, that is the risk that people may think the method is scientifically valid. Wim is a wholehearted speaker, but his scientific vocabulary is galimatias. With conviction, he mixes in a non-sensical way scientific terms as irrefutable evidence. Many less scientifically literate people believe what he says and several seriously diseased people have used his method as the final straw. Stories of believers circulate on the Internet, in popular magazines and are broadcasted as well. The scientific investigations are often presented with a biased view.* [van Marken Lichtenbelt, 2017]

Conceptually the body is at the center that needs care, and yet, as *The Matrix* motto states: “The body cannot live without the mind”, and again, by the same coin: the *body* cannot be absent to *feel* the world. The learning of the body in fact needs to rely on what the mind can grasp and handle. In Latour’s account a dead body is incapable of being sensitive to stimuli, so being and becoming a body is learning to develop that sensitivity [Latour, 2004], in the same way than an enologist learns to taste wine by refining the senses and their uses. The ultra runner becomes aware and reacts to the city flows, trail terrain, outdoor smogs, car traffic, and so forth when enters in a interchange of actions, reactions, and has the ability to move-with.

*To characterize any given assemblage, one should identify which have been, in the given case, the specific way in which the elements have articulated and arranged.* [Tonkonoff, 2011]

To be awake, the body needs not to stay null to influence, on the contrary. To be alive, is to be open to be *affected*, and the materials to which it is subjected shall produce some sort of *effect*. In this sense the network formation produced at this intersection is not only of a body disposition to which is juxtaposed a set of instruments working as mediators: rather it is a working network of *affects*, no affect exists if not in relation to a counterpart activity, even when non-human. To put this image into a running situation, it may have a very concrete image, but it can also be part of a dream like experience:

*[peculiar power of locomotions of the physical being] indistinguishable from the spiritual or intellectual. In running, ‘spirit’ seems to pervade the body; as musicians experience the uncanny phenomenon of tissue memory in their fingertips –Joyce Carol Oates [in Tan, 2018, p.4].*

I have based this first approach on available material, which is also popular and referential to a good amount of runner-readers. This is not only out of convenience: it is a matter of method, gaining insight into the weight of discourses that circulate to a certain extent more than other discourses. In a sense this approach looks for measuring an impact, taking into account the quantitative weight of the materials, as the following Tarde(an) / Latour(ean) reading suggests:

their is a mistake in our tendency to not consider the *diverse* grades of belief and desire, limiting measurements of belief in terms of belief *or* non belief and desire in terms of desire *or* absence of desire. [Vargas, 2004]

In a certain sense, the limited amount of material to comment up to here is not only a voluntary choice but also reflective of the scarce amount available if compared to running shorter distances, and compared to other sports. Ultra, however, is on the rise and for some time already [UltrarunningMagazine, 2016].

In the 1977 classic book on running, James Fixx calls to attention on the existence and capabilities of Tarahumaras, the *Rarámuri* later mentioned in *Born to Run*. Other than that there is not extensive documentation on longer races further from the marathon, but does give at least some pages and explanation. First he mentions several pioneers, and stating that going further does not come out of a desire to get fit because those who go ultra are already fit, and states going further in distance as a logical step for those who accomplished a marathon. And he quotes a simple explanation by one of the first ultra runners in American History, Ted Corbitt: “Many marathoners finish a race and have too much left, so they speculate about how much farther they could have run” [Fixx, 1977, p. 267]. Important to mention, and follow up with the focus, and meditative aspect of running is that Corbitt had a pre-race mantra that remains valid today [Corbitt]:

- *I will be relaxed and free of all restrictions, free of all coordination tensions in running.*
- *I will feel buoyant and strong while running.*
- *I will run in a perfect pacing coordination form.*
- *I will be at ease during the morning of a/the race and my pulse will not accelerate before or during the pre-race physical examination.*
- *I will run hard and enjoy the effort.*
- *My gastro-intestinal system will remain normal in function on the day of a race and especially during a race.*
- *On the day of a race all body organs will function perfectly, especially the heart and digestive systems.*

The ultra person then is at once an activation of awareness, and a body subject to a number of trials, and technical learnings. Some learn by example, most learn by trial and error.

- Extreme cold + high altitude + lack of air + poor acclimatization = ataxia [Gorbea, 2017a, p. 80].
- Extreme heat + Excess humidity + hot asphalt roads that melt shoes + dehydration + badwater > puking + diarrhea + passing out [Karnazes, 2005].
- Jet lag + cheap plane tickets (to save costs) > poor chances to win a race in Himalayas, but ending anyhow [Armenault, 2015].
- Running 5596 continous kms across a country from north to south + 113 days in a row + 5000 mts of vertical distance + upto -14° degrees Celcius + 120 kms/h winds + storms/snow/gravel/asphalt/mountains/steppe + 9 pairs of shoes > 2 injured knees + 2 fractured fingers - 6 feet finger nails lost + an epic memory and story [Rossi, 2017].

It is runners themselves that become the most acquainted experimenters, scientists, philosophers and soul searchers. It is them who quote William James:

*It wasn't just the racing they loved; it was the thrill of exploring the brave new world of their own bodies. Ultra god Scott Jurek summed up the Young Guns' unofficial creed with a quote from William James he stuck on the end of every e-mail he sent: "Beyond the very extreme of fatigue and distress, we may find amounts of ease and power we never dreamed ourselves to own; sources of strength never taxed at all because we never push through the obstruction.".* [McDougall, 2009]

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