

Ultramarathon 101 – Basic Overview

What is an ultra?

- Any running event over a distance greater than the marathon, i.e., more than 26 miles 385 yards.
- Ultras are run on trails, roads and tracks. Twenty-five years ago, most North American ultras were run on certified road courses. Today most North American ultras are trail races.
- Ultras are run over set distances (50K to 3100 miles). The 50K is the most popular race distance today.
- Some ultras are run for set time periods (6 hours to 6 days or more). The winner is the person who runs the greatest distance in the time period. These races are a unique mental challenge because running faster doesn't make the race end sooner.

Why run ultras?

- Achievable challenges... can't get much faster (won't ever run a 2:20 marathon) but it is possible to run longer/farther than you ever believed possible. Huge range of race distances and types... won't run out of challenges.
- Friendship and camaraderie... the ultra world is a small world; you will know your competition; you can run in same race with national champions and world-class runners.
- For many runners finishing is the main goal... this may explain the large number of races with extreme challenges (hills, mud, rocks, heat, cold, etc.). Every finisher is a winner.

Expectation setting – ultras are different.

- Aid stations have more food & drink but are farther apart. Most runners carry bottles and may carry food. Depending on the weather and the race, you may need to carry a rain jacket. Can have drop bags transported to the aid stations.
- Ultras often go where there are no rest rooms. Carry your own toilet paper and be prepared to go in the woods. Carry your favorite anti-chaffing treatment (e.g., a small tube of Vaseline).
- Roads are open to traffic with limited road marshals. Trails markings can be easy to miss and sometimes hikers remove them. Runners are expected to be aware of the race route and take some responsibility for not getting lost.
- Runners can have a handler who meets them along the race route and provides aid, change of clothes, shoes, etc.
- In long road & trail events, can have a pacer run with you for the last part of the race (safety measure).

Training – modify your favorite marathon plan and make it specific to your target race

- Start with your favorite marathon training plan.
- Go longer and slower on your long run. Do your long runs on terrain like target race (hills if hills, trail if trail, etc.) Test your race food, drink, pack, etc. on long runs. Test your walk routine on long runs.
- Keep speed work in your plan (e.g., one day a week: repeat miles or a tempo run)
- Make easy days even easier than in the marathon plan. No recovery; no gain.
- Take long, brisk walks on recovery / cross training days. The active recovery can be as good as doing nothing and the walking is actually race-specific training for most of us.

Running the race – Have a plan and follow it

- Have reasonable expectations – start at a sustainable pace. Ultras are not won in the first 20 miles.
- Include scheduled walks from the start on flat courses. Short, frequent walks work better for most, e.g., walk 40-60 seconds at end of each mile in a 50-mile race.

- Walk all hills from the start on hilly courses. If hill seems too easy to walk all of it, alternate running and walking (e.g., run 100 meters, walk 50 meters, repeat to the top). If the gradient changes, time your run segment for the easier bits and walk the harder bits.
- Eat and drink while walking (carry a bottle and food). Carry two bottles on hot days or if the distance between aid stations is more than an hour.
- Spend as little time as possible in the aid stations. Treat them like a NASCAR pit stop. Pull in, give your bottle to a volunteer to be refilled, grab something to eat and walk out of the aid station as soon as you have your bottle back.
- When things go wrong, fix them quickly. Eat if you are starting to bonk. Take an electrolyte capsule if you are starting to cramp. Fix your feet if you are starting to blister and so on.
- When things go wrong, keep going. Things almost always get better.
- The hardest part of an ultra is often the middle miles or even getting to halfway. It is easy to get freaked out by the distance or time remaining. Don't think about how many miles or hours remain. Take the distance one chunk at a time. Just think about getting to the next aid station, getting to the top of the next hill, getting to the next power pole.
- Maintain relentless forward progress till you finish.

Food & drink

- Short ultras can be done on gels, drink and electrolyte capsules, especially if you are both fit and fast.
- Some runners get good results with bananas, defizzed Coke and Gatorade despite the high fructose content.
- Real food is often eaten in longer ultras.
- Some runners use liquid foods like Ensure or specialty products like Hammer Sustained Energy.
- Experiment and find what works for you. Bring your own favorite foods and drinks to the race. Put supplies in drop bags or set up your own mini-aid station at the Start/Finish on loop courses.
- Sometimes your stomach will rebel at foods that worked before. When what worked before stops working, try something else. At times like that, the appropriate food is anything you can tolerate.

Recovery from the Big Race

- If your legs are sore (i.e., it hurts to run), then don't resume running until you are pretty much free of pain. Typically this takes 3-4 days if you have, for instance, trashed your quads.
- While your legs hurt, do something else for active recovery. Walk if you can do that with tolerable pain or ride a bike. Avoid impact exercise until the legs stop hurting.
- When you can resume running, go easy and give your body a chance to repair any lingering damage.
- As you resume training, you should find your short runs will feel good within a week or two at most. You may even be able to run a decent 5K after two weeks recovery.
- If you try a long run only a couple weeks after a hard ultra, you will probably feel very tired and sluggish after 10-15 miles. I have found my endurance comes back slower after an ultra than my short race speed (what little speed I have, anyway). It usually takes about 3-4 weeks before a long run feels comfortable to do.
- Allow 3-6 months between ultras to 1) adequately recover and 2) adequately train for the next race. The longer the race and the harder the effort, the longer the gap between races should be.

Additional Resources

- National calendar & magazine (complete coverage, for and by runners)
www.ultrarunning.com

- Trail Runner magazine (trail only, slick, color, glossy)
www.adventuresports.com/pub/trailrunnermag/
- Western New York Ultra Series (six events in 2008, trail & road). See below for more info and here's the URL: www.wny-ultra.org
- Ontario Ultra Series – If you can't find a Western New York ultra that fits your schedule and interests, the Ontario Ultra Series is a 12 race series involving a wide variety of running courses throughout Ontario. <http://www.ouser.org/>
- Local Rochester running group – Oven Door Runners includes many ultra runners, mostly trail <http://www.odrunners.org>
- Expert “old school” advice on all things ultra – Check out Kevin Sayers' Ultra Runner Resource site. Kevin hasn't added to the site since 2004 but what's there is the best, period. <http://www.ultrunr.com/>
- Ultrarunning is a global sport. Planet Ultramarathon has some excellent world-wide content if you can find it. <http://planetultramarathon.wordpress.com/>

Ultra Overviews: Races of the Western New York Ultra Series

Following are my observations of each event, based on multiple finishes (except the CanLake50 which I direct) and data from the past four years of the Western New York Ultra Series.

BPAC 6 Hour Distance Classic: Flat, Fast, Easy and Social

Date: April 27th; Location: Amherst Bike Path at Amherst Pepsi Center. Run & walk as far as you can on flat & fast, 3.25-mile paved loop. Do more than 26 miles in six hours and you will be an ultrarunner. In most ultras you see very few runners after the start. At the BPAC, you are always around other runners. Speedy runners may lap you several times. You may lap some slower runners. Each lap you get to greet other runners on the 1K out & back section. And since everyone finishes at the same time, everyone is there for the post-race party and awards ceremony.

Highland Forest 1 2 3: Elevation, Big Climbs and There could be Snow

Date: May 18th; Location: Highland Forest Park near Tulley. Run & hike three 10-mile laps on rugged upland trails. This series race comes the closest to being a mountain race. The total elevation gain and loss over 30 miles is 4500 feet. Twice each lap you climb to 1900-foot summits. If the Syracuse forecast calls for rain, it will be cold and might even snow at Highland Forest. Most of the trail is good running. There are several long, steep climbs that should be walked and one long eroded downhill that calls for careful running. There are some short sections of roots, mostly in dense pine stands. If it has rained recently, there will be short stretches of unavoidable mud.

Finger Lakes Fifties: There could be Mud; There will be Cows

Date: July 5th; Location: Potomac Group Campground in Finger Lakes National Forest near Hector. 50K option is two 25K laps on a mix of forest trails, dirt roads and pastures (remember to close the gates behind you so the cows don't get out). The 50-mile option is three 25K laps plus a 3.5-mile finishing loop. The 50K has only 2400 feet of gain and loss, making it one of the easiest of the series trail races. If the spring has been dry and race day is cool, fast times can be run on the trails. Remember to keep picking your feet up when you get tired or the roots will get you. If it has rained recently, you can count on muddy trails and standing water in the pastures. Novice ultrarunners should try the 50K. The 50-mile turns into a really tough race to finish on a hot day.

Green Lakes Endurance Runs: Pristine Lakes, Forest and Meadows

Date: August 24th; Location: Green Lakes State Park, Fayetteville. 50K is four 12.5K laps; 100K is eight laps. The loop includes 5K of flat, fast shaded shoreline trail and 7.5K of trail through

upland forest and rolling meadows with panoramic views. Except for several short steeper bits, almost the entire loop is good running. The course has the potential to be the fastest 50K in the Western New York Ultra Series. Novice ultrarunners should complete the 50K before thinking of attempting the 100K. The lack of shade on the upper sections of the course will make for a challenging race on a warm August day.

CanLake 50: Bopple Hill and 50 Miles Around the Lake

Date: October 11th; Location: Finger Lakes Community College at Canandaigua. Run one big lap around beautiful Canandaigua Lake on scenic roads with spectacular panoramic views. Total gain and loss for 50 miles is approximately 3500 feet... most of the gain and loss is in four climbs and descents. The smart runner walks the climbs (including all of locally famous Bopple Hill) and makes up any time lost on the flat and rolling roads that make up the rest of the course. Many first time ultrarunners have successfully completed the full 50 miles around the lake... a road 50, even a hilly one, is easier to finish than a trail 50. If that still seems like too much for a first ultra, there is a point to point 50K option... run 3/5ths of the way around the lake and finish 50K in the hamlet of Middlesex. This 50K option is new this year... with only 2100 feet of gain and loss, fast times are expected.

Mendon Trail Runs: The All-Weather "Bacon Strip"

Date: November 8th; Location: Mendon Ponds Park near Pittsford. Just like a strip of fried bacon, the course is just one little hill after another. The race directors claim each 10K lap has 1100 feet of climbing which would total 5500 feet for 50K. I've measured it several times with a barometric altimeter and get just under 800 feet of gain per lap or close to 4000 feet for 50K... almost as much as the Highland Forest 30 miler but a very different experience... at Mendon you are always changing gears as the course continually undulates while Highland Forest has long climbs, long drops and long runnable grades. The Mendon course is near perfect for a race in November... the sandy soil soaks up water and drains well so mud is not an issue. Most of the loop is wind sheltered by woods and hills.

Other Events, Not in the Series

Iroquois Trails Ultras: New course; new race

Date: September 20-21; Location: Greek Peak Mountain Resort near Virgil. 50 mile and 100 mile runs. Finger Lakes Trail sections spanning the Tuller Hill and Kennedy State Forests, paired with the mountainous terrain of Greek Peak Mountain Resort. Given that this is a new race with first-time ultra race director, strongly recommend training runs over as much of the course as possible before race day. <http://www.iroquoistrails100.com/>

Niagara Ultra 50K: Fast, competitive 50K road race

Date: June 21st; Location: Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Take your passport and money. Book a night in a bed & breakfast. Run a beautiful 50K. There's also a marathon and half-marathon for your traveling companions. With the 7am start, you will finish in time to clean up, eat and take in a play at the Shaw Festival in the afternoon before heading home. <http://www.ouser.org/races/niag.htm>