

When Is It an Ultra?

When does a marathoner automatically become an ultrarunner without having to make the leap or the commitment that is usually required?

It could be argued that the transition can occur when a marathoner runs two marathons in two days or three marathons in three days, as happens each year to nearly a hundred marathoners at the Lake Tahoe Marathon, where a “Tahoe Triple” option is offered for runners who would like to circle the alpine lake over three days by running a marathon on three consecutive mornings, the third morning corresponding with the running of the annual Lake Tahoe Marathon.

Race director Les Wright over the years has attempted to turn the week leading up to the Lake Tahoe Marathon into a virtual cornucopia of sporting events, with everything from speed golf (you carry one club and play nine holes, running between holes, fastest time wins, with some rules applying to lost balls and so forth) to kayak and swimming races. Unfortunately, there are so many events offered between Wednesday and Sunday that it is easy to lose track unless you have a laminated scorecard and schedule.

Some of the events that Les dreams up don’t make it into a second year. In



spite of his worst efforts, saner heads prevail, and some sports that fail stay failed and are scratched from the next year’s program . . . only to be replaced by something equally off the wall. But occasionally things go very much off track, and some of Les’s ideas actually do seem to work.

For example, years before the Los Angeles Marathon claimed that it was introducing the concept of sending the women off first under a handicap system with a special money prize being awarded to whichever runner crossed the finish line first, male or female, Les had already been doing that very thing for several years, thank you very much. He just did not have a team of public relations flaks to get the word out to the rest of the running world.

His concept of running three marathons on three consecutive days, with the runners ultimately circling the lake, started a decade ago with 25 runners and now boasts nearly a full hundred hardy souls/soles out there huffing and puffing in the thin Tahoe air. (Of course, he could not leave well enough alone and now also offers something called a Tahoe Super Triple or Super Tahoe Triple or whatever, where the runner does one marathon on Friday, does another on Saturday, and then runs the

entire 72 miles around the lake starting late Saturday night and—hopefully—integrating with the annual Lake Tahoe Marathon on Sunday. He also offers a straight-up 72-mile ultra around the lake and also the opportunity—if you are hardy and foolish enough, and in 2011 two runners were—to run the 72 miles around the lake and then turn around and run the 72 miles back around the lake in the opposite direction for a total of 144 miles. I ain't makin' this up. Try following it without a scorecard.)

Obviously, the 72-mile, round-the-lake races are ultras, and the folks who enter and run them approach the challenge in an ultra state of mind.

But in speaking with a handful of the folks who were doing the triple, and in the wake of doing a presentation on Thursday night concerning the “10 Commandments of Ultramarathoning,” it became obvious that a good percentage of the marathoners approaching the triple did not see themselves as ultramarathoners. They were very much in the marathon frame of mind and were darned content to stay there.

Some of them, of course, were members of the Marathon Maniacs, those quantity-over-quality crazies who will go anywhere, anytime, to run their next marathon, and if they can get more than one in during a weekend, so much the better.

There is some crossover between the Marathon Maniacs and the 50 States Marathon Club folks, who were also in attendance, lured by the prospect of three marathons in three days and the ability to knock off two states (California and Nevada) in one weekend without having to hop on a plane.

The 50 States folks go so far as to carry a half page in their club newsletter titled “Seeing Double,” which helps members locate weekends when there are Saturday and Sunday marathons available, such as May 14, 2011, the Lake Wobegon Trail Marathon in St. Joseph, Minnesota, and May 15, 2011, the Green Bay Marathon in Wisconsin. As of the April edition of their newsletter, the club boasted 2,412 members (1,518 males, 894 females) who taken together had run 143,585 marathons.

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They don't necessarily look at themselves as ultramarathoners, either, because all they did today was run a marathon, and what they'll do tomorrow is run another marathon—and on into the distant future. “Marathon” is the key word here.

But wait. Doesn't running three marathons in three days put these folks into the format and head space of the classic ultra stage racers? The trans-America Bunion Derbies of 1928 and 1929 were run from point A to point B one day and then from point B to point C the next, day after day after day. Some of the distances for the day were beyond the marathon, some were near the marathon, some were less than a marathon, and some were rest days, but the concept of knocking off a very long race one day and then refueling in order to run a long race again the next day, and on and on, was very much a part of the concept of multiday stage races and was certainly considered ultramarathoning.

So why shouldn't that apply to the Tahoe Triplers?

Of course, the whole concept of stage racing could be taken to extremes at Tahoe. I pose this next possibility with the great trepidation that it might actually happen. In order to allow the runners (marathoners or ultramarathoners, however they prefer to be known) at Tahoe to get into double digits while

they are visiting the beautiful Lake Tahoe area, why not start a marathon on Thursday morning and let those who so choose do a Tahoe Quad: four marathons in four days that bring with them a total of 104.8 miles?

That makes the transition from marathoner to ultramarathoner easier psychologically and mathematically, because the runner can claim to have surpassed the magic 100-mile mark, an arrangement of digits that all runners covet whether it's in a 100-mile race or a 100-mile training week.

Of course, knowing Les Wright and the way his twisted mind works, throwing out such a stupid idea is likely to give it a chance to gain traction. The guy really needs to get more sleep instead of sitting up in the middle of the night cooking up more daffy ideas.

But back to the central theme of this essay. Although many of the Tahoe runners do not see themselves as ultramarathoners, any runners who complete three marathons in three days, especially when those marathons are at altitude, are beset by more-than-impressive hills, and offer minimal support along the way, have earned the option of calling themselves ultramarathoners. And if, for some arcane reason, they choose not to, I'll do it for them.

Now, about those “10 Commandments of Ultramarathoning” . . .

—*Rich Benyo*