

# READER

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## Sporting Life: more than a marathon

To most people, the marathon is the ultimate endurance test. Yet Sunday, an intimidating fraternity of runners will challenge much greater distances in Chicago's eighth ultramarathons sponsored by the American Medical Athletic Association/American Medical Joggers Association.

"Ultramarathon" refers to a distance that exceeds the marathon's standard 26 miles, 385 yards. On Sunday, "ultrarunners" have their choice of a 31.6-mile (50-kilometer), 50-mile, or 62.1-mile (100-kilometer) race.

Several U.S. and world records have been set in this race. In 1982, Marcy Schwam set the women's 50-mile record by finishing in 5 hours, 59 minutes, and 25 seconds. This year, Terry Gerber, one of the top U.S. female ultrarunners, will be trying to beat that time.

The race starts at 7 AM at the chess pavilion at North Avenue beach, continues five miles north along the jogging path to Foster Avenue, then five miles back. Most runners will repeat this out-and-back ten-mile loop five times.

The record time for a 50-mile ultramarathon on a loop course was set here in 1984 by Bruce Fordyce, who finished in 4 hours, 50 minutes, and 50 seconds. This year, there's a serious chance a new world record will be set. A new ultrarunner, 27-year-old Chuck Jones from Nevada City, California, could chase Fordyce out of first place. Fifty miles is not much of a distance for Jones; he's already tuned up by competing in (and winning) three 100-mile mountain trail runs this year.

Many runners do their first ultra in Chicago because it's a "decent" course. Some ultrarunners take a more jaundiced view of the race. They call it the "Sissy 50" because it's flat, and there are no mountains or rocks.

The race chairman, Dr. Noel Nequin, director of cardiac rehabilitation and health enhancement at Swedish Covenant Hospital, expects to see many runners walking as early as the first hour.

"What's your hurry if you're going to cover 50 miles? You **have** to conserve your energy. Look - 10-K and marathon runners - when these people walk, they feel broken, not only physically, but emotionally. Ultramarathoners accept walking. It's part of their strategy."

There's no end to this. Of the 150 ultramarathons in this country each year, there are 24-hour races, 6-day races, even "commuter races" between Philadelphia and Atlantic City.

Then there's the monster of them all, the Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run, perhaps the world's toughest one-day endurance event. The race begins at five in the morning in Squaw Valley, at an elevation of 5,000 feet. The finish line is 100 miles away, in Auburn, California. Because of the high altitude and difficulty of the trail, runners say it's the equivalent of six marathons back to back.

Last June, Chuck Jones sprinted to the finish of this impossibly rugged course, and finished first, in 16 hours, 37 minutes. An automobile can cover the distance in an hour and 50 minutes.

There are two chances to finish, slim and none.

What, beyond fitness, is all this for?

"What I learn about myself," says 38-year-old Sam Gutterman, a Western States veteran who'll run in the 50-mile race this weekend. "It tells me I have mental toughness, that I'm willing to gut it out, and that I'm emotionally driven."

"Before Western States, I told so many people I was going to run 100 miles. I wanted to avoid personal failure - having to say I didn't make

it." The fear of not finishing, of being pulled from the race because he couldn't make the 30-hour cutoff time, drove him. When he entered the stadium near the finish line, running past a sign that read "Welcome Home, 99.7 Miles," he'd made a hero out of himself. For the next four days, he walked around his apartment touching his plaque.

Imagine. You can no longer prove stamina by finishing a mere 26 miles. These days, "true grit" means battling much, much more. Muscle spasms, glycogen depletion, rock slides, nighttime running with a flashlight, forcing down a cheese sandwich when it wants to come up, and carrying enough fluids to avoid dehydration and heat stroke.

Marathon runners worry about sweating and goose bumps. Ultrarunners fear complete collapse.

"Ultrarunning doesn't reward its runners with a way to be in the spotlight," says Ed Ayres, editor and publisher of **Running Times** magazine. "It's not a very commercial branch of the sport. It attracts people who are more philosophical, more thoughtful, and more private. And maybe one of the reasons ultrarunners are more private is because ultras are, so far, unspoiled by the commercial flash and glitz."

There's another reason no one hears about ultraruns. It's an amateur, voluntary activity, and is kept within its own tight little community. With the exception of the ABC special on Western States aired each spring, ultrarunning gets no TV attention.

Until there's the chance to catch a 50-miler crossing the finish line on TV, you'll have to take a ringside seat. Count on seeing a spectacular, maybe wrenching, finish at the chess pavilion sometime Sunday, between 11 and noon.

- Peggy Wolff