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## THE DISTRICT LINE

### Ultra

#### ONLY WIMPS RUN MARATHONS

TEN YEARS AGO THE 26-MILE MARATHON was the ultimate endurance event. Runners would prattle on about pushing their limits, "hitting the wall," and getting runner's high. But now that 400 marathons are run each year in America and almost everyone knows a marathoner or two, the event has become passe. For serious runners the new challenge is the *ultra-marathon*—any race greater than the standard 26

miles, 385 yards course.

"Marathons are strictly for training," says ultrarunner Lynn Nutter, a Chicago psychologist who has run in eight ultras since January. On Saturday Nutter and ultrarunners from across the country will face the double marathon course of the John F. Kennedy 50-Mile Run/Hike. The race, which starts at 7 am at the Boonsboro High School Athletic Field in Boonsboro, Maryland, will continue for 16 rugged miles along the Appalachian Trail, stretch for 26 miles along the C & O Canal towpath, and finally finish on Maryland Route 63 in Williamsport at the Springfield Middle School. Runners will be crossing the finish line between 1 pm and 9 pm. To be eligible for awards, runners must complete the 50.2 mile course in under 14 hours. The course record of 5:53:05 was set in 1982 by Mike Spinnler. In 1984, Teri Gerber set the women's record of 6:50:56.

To an ultrarunner like Lynn, a marathon is a sprint. "I've used America's Marathon for the last couple years to train for other events," she says. Lynn runs an eight-and-a-half minute mile during a marathon to set her pace, running a slower 10-minute-mile on the ultraruns.

Runners who live near the Appalachian Trail have the advantage of training right on the JFK course, getting to know its ups and downs, and the 1,700-foot elevation climb in the first six-and-a-half miles. As a fly-in from the flatlands of the Midwest, Lynn must make do with stair work on a StairMaster machine at her health club and the stairwells of high-rise apartment buildings. "I try to get in six miles at a time. I take breaks, sometimes 15 minutes or a half-

hour, for water or hot popcorn."

The JFK 50-Mile Hike/Run, organized each year by the Cumberland Valley Athletic Club, is one of the oldest ultramarathons in the country. Although the first JFK was run in 1962, its origin goes back to President Theodore Roosevelt's 1908 executive order that "line officers of the Marine Corps in the grade of captain or lieutenant are required to walk 50 miles, this distance to be divided into three days, actual marching time, including rests, 20 hours." When John Kennedy came across this order in 1962, he asked in a televised press conference whether the current Marine officers were fit enough to do 50 miles in 20 hours.

William "Buzz" Sawyer was watching TV that day. He promptly launched his own 50-miler that year, assigning it JFK's name.

"Fifty-mile hikes were being organized everywhere," Sawyer remembers. "So I picked the course. I never liked paved roads, so I picked the Appalachian Trail and the C & O Canal towpath." In the early days of the race the emphasis was on hiking—the objective was to finish. "People were looking for *anything* to run," Sawyer says. "They weren't in shape like they are today, so we only had about 20 percent who finished." Sawyer expects about 75 runners from the D.C. area to participate in the JFK run this year and estimates that of the 200 to 300 entrants, over 80 percent will finish.

As Sawyer explains it, the Appalachian Trail segment of the race forces runners to pace themselves. Rocks hidden under fallen leaves, switchbacks, and signposts (one rectangle for straight ahead, two rectangles for a sharp right or left

turn) keep runners from turning on the steam. If runners burn out their quads on the downhill, they have nothing left for the towpath part of the course, where they can really make time.

A sweeper, or support man, brings up the rear on the Appalachian Trail, looking for stranded and injured runners. Sometimes Sawyer works as the sweeper. "We make sure the sweeper is in good shape and is familiar with the trail," he says.

Along the towpath a National Park Service ranger in a truck also sweeps for runners. Runners can't really get lost along the towpath, unless they fall into the Potomac or the Canal, but they can suffer muscle spasms, sprained ankles, glycogen depletion, heat stroke, collapse, or delirium. So most runners have "handlers" who dispense hot food, dry sweat bands, clean T-shirts, and moleskin for blisters at the six crew access points, spaced out every six to nine miles. Handlers also give massages and pep talks.

What's the purpose of a 50-mile run? Why, to train for 24-hour races. Lynn Nutter ran two of them this year—one in Louisiana, the other in Missouri. Or to train for the Glen Ellyn, Illinois, Back-to-Back 50 (50 miles on Saturday, 50 miles on Sunday). Or for the 100-mile Western States Endurance Run, a one-day event run through the Sierra Nevada mountains. Runners start in Squaw Valley at 5 am and finish the next day in Auburn, California. Or six-day races. Or "commuter races," such as the one last week run between Philadelphia and Atlantic City.

Ultraruns attract no corporate sponsors, give no prizes, and bestow no media glory. Blisters, shin splints, and finishing seem to be reward enough. "Running pretty well takes over my life," says Mary Hanudel, 26, who recently ran the 155-mile "Sparathlon" in Greece. "It's easier to run than to have a social life."

► PEGGY WOLFF