

YOUR FIRST ULTRA

AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE

ANDY MOUNCEY



EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT YOUR FIRST ULTRA MARATHON, FROM TRAINING AND KIT TO RACE PACING AND CROSSING THE LINE. JUMP RIGHT IN...

JUMP RIGHT IN...

BEFORE WE START, let me introduce myself. I'm Andy Mouncey, a professional coach, trainer, motivational speaker, and author of 'So you want to run an Ultra'. I run long for fun and have been placed 2nd twice at the UK's premier 100 mile trail race, the Lakeland 100.

If you're considering an Ultra this year, you've come to the right place. You may have ticked your marathon box and be looking for **The Next Challenge**. Rational thought might suggest a first 50km, but here's the first of the differences about ultras: you don't need to come through the usual 10k > half marathon > marathon progression route. You can jump right into the trail ultra-running scene.

Welcome to ultra running, where the normal rules don't apply and it's okay to jump right in...



LESS IS MORE

THE SCIENCE BIT

Findings from the Western States Research Group back this up. 25% of a study group, (Hoffman MD, Krishnan E, 2013) had run an ultra within three years of starting regular running – and even more significant for race organisers in particular – the study also found that this three year window was reducing.

In other words, a significant proportion of ‘newbies’ were jumping into ultras earlier and earlier, and part of the reason for that was the number 26: The median age they started regular running.

“ THOSE WHO START LATER ARE HIGHLY MOTIVATED
- AND KEEN TO GET ON WITH IT! ”

On the face of it that sounds like a route to disaster, and there is of course a flip side: These people will have less endurance running experience to draw on in a sport where almost all the learning is made by doing the thing. However, these folks are still alive and functioning so clearly there’s something else at work.

Here’s what I think that something is:

- It’s not just about the distance
- It might be something BIG that inspires you to start
- It’s not really about the running

IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT THE RUNNING

AS THE RACE DISTANCE INCREASES, THE LESS OF A RUNNER YOU NEED TO BE

Unless you're at the top end of the field you won't be ultramarathon running – you'll be ultramarathon covering the ground as best you can.

This is where many runners come unstuck - they think it is all about the running and commit two mistakes: Run as far as they can till they are reduced to a shuffle, and neglect to practice walking in their training.

Over the shorter distances, (up to marathon) it's nearly all about the ability to run. You will need to be mentally alert – control your pace, remember to eat and drink – and there will be some mood management required, but by and large you can grit your teeth and get there if you want to. So most of the training is running.

The challenge, in order of importance, will look like this:

PHYSICAL — MENTAL — EMOTIONAL



THE DISTANCE MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

The picture changes for ultras, especially the big ones: It's much more about tactics, strategy, being on-task, managing mood and covering the ground using a combination of walking and running styles.

The challenge, in order of importance, will now look like this:

MENTAL — EMOTIONAL — PHYSICAL

What this means is that if you can walk efficiently for long distances at around 3-4mph on the flatter stuff, you've a perfect right to be on that start line. You may also be moving more comfortably and for less effort than someone running at 5mph. Your fellow racers will also walk most of the climbs... so all you need to do is work on your climbing strength and descending skill.

Take comfort from the start line – a quick look around show you all shapes and sizes, with a whole range of running histories.

While Time On Feet over the years does appear important for the top half of the field, the good news is that the other non-running skills are just as important.



There appears to be no direct link between number of years running, current weekly mileage, marathon personal bests and likelihood of finishing a big ultra.

LADIES DO IT BETTER!

Interestingly, through my own coaching and racing, I have noticed that ladies who ultra run are:

- More likely to get their pacing right
- More likely to sort out niggles before they become problems
- More likely to enter an ultra only after careful preparation
- Less likely to be on the start line carrying an injury
- More likely to start conservatively and hold an even pace

A higher proportion of ladies starting a race will finish compared to men, and for those of you who like to see the evidence – consider this post-race study: Dr Sam Robson took 66 of the 162 starters for the 2012 UK South Downs Way 100 miler (55% finish rate) as his sample, and found most men went too fast in the early stages and faded, whilst ladies tended to keep an even pace better.

LADIES, THIS IS THE SPORT YOU WERE MADE FOR!



HOW WILL I KNOW WHEN I'M READY?

If you are wondering what sort of race you should start with, then go for something that inspires you. Think about it this way: You'll be out there for a very long time.

If you're in a new place that you're curious about, with cool scenery, then the odds are it'll make the miles pass easier, and the finish line closer.

So enter something that grabs you. If you have that then you'll also be motivated to train. All that remains is to prepare with the goal in mind and to make that preparation an experience that adds to the quality of your life – as opposed to becoming another source of stress. Or if you want to simplify it even more, do stuff that you enjoy and stuff that builds confidence. (Matt Fitzgerald, 2007).

Bottom line? It's OK to jump right in – as the distance goes up the less of a distance runner you need to be.

*IF YOU'RE MOTIVATED ENOUGH TO FILL OUT AN ENTRY FORM
— YOU'RE READY!*



TRAINING – WHAT TO DO?

1

HIKING

You will need to train to walk for an ultra. Even the top boys and girls walk at some point in the long races. For us mere mortals this falls into two categories: Flats & climbs.

Walking efficiently in a race is a world away from your usual amble to the shops, and is therefore a skill to be practiced. Walking gives you a physical and mental moving break, and in ultras a break really can be as good as a rest. During a recent coaching camp we came up with 10 different walk-run styles to use on a climb. TEN! Most people just run up till the hill beats them.

Key Workouts:

- Hiking for climbing strength and efficiency and speed on the flat
- Max effort short uphill hike repeats with a heavy loaded pack at best pace holding good (upright) form with or without poles.
- Sustained effort long hill(s) with slightly lighter pack weight as above
- Moderate effort undulating loop or out and back with lighter pack weight as above
- Speed – Fast walk all the flats as part of a normal run
- Steady-sustained running for the first half of a session with the second half as a fast hike
- Hilly loop and you only run the down hills everything else is a brisk hike



remember that you are
in charge of the hill.
The hill is not in charge
of you.

TRAINING – WHAT TO DO?

2

DESCENDING

It's the downhills which are the quad-killer. Descending effectively and efficiently is a different skill set from the full on styles seen in shorter fell races in the north of England. In ultras the emphasis is on conservation and preservation of the muscles and the energy systems. This means the technique is different, and you should tailor your training accordingly.

If you don't have hills outside your front door, there is a lot that you can effectively do in a gym to condition those quads.

Key Workouts:

- Downhill bombproofing and descending skills
- Hiking downhill with loaded pack wearing boots with or without poles
- Faster-than-normal running on all descents as part of a normal hilly run
- Over-stride downhill running as repeats or as part of a hilly run

Skills

- Focus on feeling easy and smooth downhill as part of a hilly run – keep knees and hips bent
- Focus on keeping your footfalls as quiet as possible downhill
- Practice running S-bends (as per slalom skiers) where you use the full width of the trail to take the sting out of the slope



you really need to train for the descents, unless it's a 12 hour track race you've got in mind.

TRAINING – WHAT TO DO?

3

BE IN THE PRESENT

It's more helpful to focus on the journey rather than the destination, especially when the destination may be a very long way away.

Focus on the things you can control, get your head up and enjoy the moment – which is, after all, unique. Helpfully, most ultras take you through beautiful landscapes and that means there's much to enjoy and take in.

Key Workout:

- Pace Control & mental strategies e.g. Progress in bite-size chunks
- Develop a script of helpful self-talk and cues to stay positive
- Pace Control
- Easy-Steady-Hard: Build your effort through the run e.g. 20-15-10 minutes as E-S-H
- Out & Back: Choose a linear route and aim to come back a little faster than you went out e.g. Start at 15-20 mins and build over the weeks to an 80-90 minute total workout
- Test Races: Choose a shorter race to practice the skill of starting slower than you think you should. Get right to the back of the field and walk-jog the first bit while almost everyone else streams away from you.



Enjoy the surroundings
along your journey

TRAINING – WHAT TO DO?

4

TRAIN ALONE

You have a greater chance of running alone during part of an ultra. Yes, the field size is growing as more and more people go longer and go off road, but the probability remains: You will need to be cool with your own company and confident in your ability to motivate and look after yourself.

Key Workout:

- Solo outings mixing hiking and running on familiar ground in good weather progressing to unfamiliar ground in bad weather. These are done Back To Back – two sessions close together i.e. evening-morning / morning-afternoon / afternoon-evening – so you don't need to find a huge block of time and you are practicing heading out for the second time on tired legs e.g.
- Sustained Run 1 hour (am) Hike with loaded pack 1.5 hours (pm)
- Power hike hills 40-60mins (pm) Speed hike without load 1-1.5 hrs (am)
- Hike with light pack including a run on the flat 1.5-2 hours (am) and an E-S-H run 40-60mins (pm)



practice the art of
self-reliance

GETTING TO THE FINISH

Here are my top tips for getting to the finish line:

START SLOW

Try to pace as evenly as you can – and that means starting slower than you think you should. Remember that Even Pace is *not* Even Effort: Even Pace should feel like a walk in the park for the first third, the middle third of the race you will still be in control but having to concentrate, while the last third will feel like a threshold level effort. Remember that most people will not do this and will go off too fast. Let them: You'll see them later!

HIKE THE HILLS

Everyone slows down on the climbs – but the smart ones will aim to get up and over with as little additional effort as possible. The key is conservation of energy. If you still have energy beans to burn in the final quarter and you have your eyes on a prize THEN you can put heel to the steel on the ups. But if you've nailed your power hiking you should be able to get up and over far more comfortably than someone trying to hold onto a run – and not much slower either.

CONTROL THE DESCENTS

Preservation of your main working muscles - the quads - for as long as possible is key to a happy experience. That does not mean throwing yourself headlong down the first hill. Throttle back, stay smooth and stay in control. You've practiced this in training right? (see above, training tip 2). You need to flow easily down the hillside as opposed to doing an impression of a raging torrent.

GETTING TO THE FINISH

DON'T FAFF

Your personal organisation is key. Your kit should be fit for (your) purpose and organised around your person so you can reach it easily. That means practicing with it so you can do the simple tasks with one hand, without looking, even in bad weather. And even if you're using poles. Eliminate the rubbing-flapping-squeaking things well before race day and you'll be well on the way.

TRANSITIONS, NOT CHECKPOINTS

Checkpoints are a black hole: They may cause you to linger and waste time. There are huge physical-mental-emotional benefits to be had from a considered pause / recharge, but there are dangers too:

- You can be distracted/influenced by others enough to put you off your game plan
- You can sit down and stay sat down
- You can be disoriented by the onset of choices and people after hours solo on the trail doing your best to keep it simple

So think of checkpoints as a *Transition* – which means they are something to *move through*. Stay standing unless you really do need to take the weight off your feet for a bit – in which case set a time on your watch to get up again – and rehearse a routine to take care of the essentials, for example:

- Final approach to checkpoint: Drink water and congratulate yourself for getting this far
- Arrive: Give number, dispose litter, top up bottle/bladder, eat, top up supplies
- Depart: Walk, eat and drink, think good thoughts and re-set.

GETTING TO THE FINISH

FOOD AND DRINK

In my running world, food divides into two groups: Food for task and food for treats.

The former is quite simply fuel that provides a constant supply of energy over an extended period of time that we can harness for the task of relentless forward motion.

The other one is the pick-up or shot in the arm that we use as a reward or a boost during a low point. (I used to love a Jelly Baby every time I turned a new page on the race route instructions).

Here are my favourite helpful habits:

- Keep the calories coming in – a steady stream of savoury and sweet stuff
- Mix it up: Low bulk calorie-dense solid food, plus gels
- Drink to thirst
- Bladder v bottle? Experiment to see which works best for you
- Some salt may help
- Expect to eat/drink differently at different levels of intensity and in different environmental conditions
- Faff-free fueling is essential (and critical in bad weather when your focus narrows) so practice until you can do it without breaking stride or unshipping your pack
- Eat on the climbs when you are walking
- Carry your own collapsible cup/flask
- Expect to lose weight and be OK
- Retain your litter and dispose at checkpoints

IN SUMMARY

There are three main trends in running at the moment:

- More people are running off-road
- More people are running long off-road
- More ladies are running (long, off-road)

And while road cycling is the new golf, running remains something that requires very little other than a hefty dose of motivation and something for your feet and your modesty (although you'd be forgiven for thinking otherwise after picking up any running-based magazine packed with ads for expensive 'essential kit').

While road and track ultras are nothing new – look up the jaw-dropping feats of the Victorian and inter-war eras for starters – mass participation trail ultras are a relatively recent phenomenon, but totally accessible in ways that the shorter distances are not:

- The normal rules and measures don't seem to apply
- It's not really about the running *per se*
- And if it inspires you then it's absolutely OK to jump right in

We'll see you on a start line then.



READY TO JUMP IN?

The team at XNRG would love to help you achieve your first Ultra Marathon.

XNRG's mission is to help people challenge themselves and break through their mental and physical barriers, whilst providing peace of mind with expertly run events, going the extra mile for every competitor.

Our heartland is multi-day endurance events; we originally started to help people training for the world's toughest desert footrace, the Marathon Des Sables. Today, we welcome hundreds of competitors across our events, from single day ultra marathons to multi-day events. We can't wait to welcome you!

View and sign up to our full list of upcoming events at www.xnrg.co.uk/events

