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INSIDE:

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By Christopher McDougall

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The New Rules of Running

Can a fairly sane runner keep pace with the crazies who run 100-mile races? Should he try?

IN THE LAND OF THE ULTRA

freaks, the man with toenails is a mutant. That's what I discover when I arrive at Grand Targhee Resort, at the foot of Wyoming's Tetons, for the Badwater Ultramarathon Training Camp. For the next 5 days, I'll be working out with a dozen or so adventure racers and extreme endurance athletes as they prepare for the most fearsome footrace on Earth: a 135-mile run across Death Valley and up the side of Mt. Whitney in the blistering heat of summer.

But, unlike some of the serious badasses here—guys like the Toenail Ripper, the Army Ranger, and Jungle Boy—I'm not interested in running 60 straight hours across a desert in July. Nor do I plan to be hunted by trained killers in a Georgia swamp, or race through the Amazon on foot while dodging jaguars and those needle-thin river fish that swim up your penis, or have my toenails removed to improve my ultramarathon times.

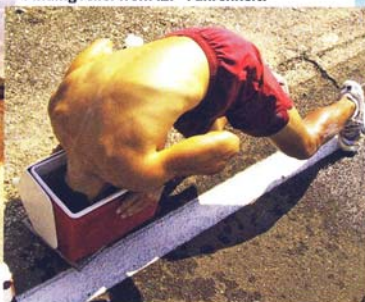
So, what can I learn from these guys? How about the secret of lifelong fitness, for starters. »

Cardio



Badwater Ultra: Climbing out of Death Valley.

Finding relief from 127° Fahrenheit.



No help: Some tote their H₂O.

Ultra runners, after all, are among the most durable, carefully trained athletes on the planet. They're masters of increasing horsepower without blowing the engine. Real endurance, they know, isn't about gutting it out on race day; it's about keeping consistent for years before race day.

Beneath the lunatic appearance of men who are running on roads so hot that their shoes are melting lies a marvel of strategy, nutrition, and innovation. They've had to learn how hard they can punish their bodies without breaking down, and how to get the maximum workout in minimum time. They'd never make it to the start unless they knew how to train for months without injury, and they'd never make it to the finish if they weren't experts in muscle care and motivation.

These are lessons that can be applied to any sport, and that's why I'm here: to see if I can break my lifelong cycle of on-again/off-again conditioning and become as body-savvy as a man facing 3 days under a brutal desert sun.

EMULATE GIRL POWER

Day 1 begins with Cameron Diaz, hill repeats, and a puzzle. First, the puzzle: Nearly all the women finish the Leadville Trail 100 Ultramarathon every year, but less than half of the men do. Why?

"Relentless forward motion" says Cameron, who, despite her Hollywood smile and freckly blonde beauty, turns out to be Lisa Smith-Batchen, 45, the legendary ultra runner who's one of our instructors (www.lisasmithbatchen.com). "Take this hill, for example," she says, as we cruise up a mile-long slope. "I'll bet your instinct is to hammer it, right?"

Well, yeah. And I'm glad she brought that up, because, frankly, I've been a little disappointed. As soon as we start to breathe heavily, we're supposed to walk. Even for a plodder like me, that seems pretty wimpy. But I have to figure Smith-Batchen knows what she's talking about: She's not only a two-time female Badwater champ and a highly respected endurance coach,

but also the only American, male or female, ever to win the hideously grueling Marathon des Sables, a 6-day stage race across the Sahara.

By our second ascent, the mastery in Smith-Batchen's hill-climbing method becomes clear. When she walks, she's gliding upward with a rhythm that's as smooth and deceptively technical as a speed skater's: Her pelvis is forward; her shoulders are squared over her belly button; her breathing is a series of metronomic belly puffs; her thumbs are pistoning straight back and forth to her hips.

When I throttle back and mimic her technique, I'm surprised to find I move about as fast as I would if I were running, but with a fraction of the effort. At the top, I can shift right back to a run without having to drop my hands to my knees to suck wind.

"The mistake lots of guys make is hammering themselves, or each other, and then crashing," Smith-Batchen explains. They think it makes them look tough, but it can actually be a sign of self-doubt: If you're confident that you've prepared well, you don't need to prove it on every hill. Men who do may be unconsciously prepping themselves with an excuse for not finishing. Fly-and-die guys eventually end up missing workouts thanks to tendinitis and hamstring pulls, or find ways to back off before things get tough.

That's one reason ultra women have such a great finishing percentage, Smith-Batchen says. Their true challenger is in the mirror, they realize, so they tend to run on brains. As she is making this point, I recall with a cringe how many times I've flamed out of hoops games, trail runs, and weight circuits, usually because I started writing checks with my cojones that my muscles couldn't cash.

THINK WITH YOUR D---

"Before I start a race, I think, *Okay, where's my penis?*"

Ray Zahab is not nearly the horndog this question makes him out to be. At 33, he's

already won an individual title in the Arctic Yukon Ultra; a team title in the 120-mile Jungle Marathon; and third place in the Trans 333, a nonstop, 200-mile footrace across the Ténéré Desert, in Niger.

Today, he's leading an afternoon session on core conditioning, demonstrating how a few posture tweaks can have an amazing effect on short-burst speed and long-range resilience. By keeping your body weight properly balanced, Zahab says, you can increase gravitational pull to accelerate, and decrease it to diminish the strain on your joints and tendons.

The key is your core—the lower-back and transverse abdominal muscles that girdle your midsection. Most people have developed the bad habit of striding out long when they want to go fast, and putting their heads down to grind it out when they're tired. It may feel natural, but they're actually working against themselves by slopping their body mass all over the place. When you hunch over, you're directing your weight downward instead of forward. When you lunge out with a long stride and land on your heels, you're really throwing your weight back behind you.

Instead, imagine you're pedaling a unicycle: Keep your shoulders plumb-lined over your hips and kick back with your feet instead of reaching out. To speed up, lean forward from the ankles instead of bending forward from the waist; you'll create a light, controlled fall instead of a muscle-intensive series of pushoffs.

"You should use this anytime, in any activity," Zahab says: hiking, biking, sprinting down the basketball court. Besides going faster with less effort, you'll preserve your legs by stacking your weight over your strong, protectively arched midfeet, instead of crashing down on the sensitive nerves in your heels or the fragile tendons in your toes.

Zahab has two methods to make sure he's properly positioned. First is the toe tilt, which he does just before starting to run: If he can lift

his toes without rocking back, he's balanced. The second is the penis test—a handy, in-motion diagnostic that determines whether his hips are jutting far enough forward. Whenever he feels that his biomechanics are getting sloppy, Zahab glances down at his appendage to make sure his pelvis isn't lagging. "If it's up front," he says, "you're fine." As I follow his advice, I notice a strange sensation in my calves and ankles: no sensation. For the first time in weeks, my Achilles aren't aching. Not too brightly, I ran a lot of miles and biked a lot of hills to prepare for camp, which meant I arrived here with overworked, twinging calves. The relief I feel when I fully straighten my spinal column is so dramatic, I soon use Zahab's penis test to coin a mental reminder: "Limp, owww! Erect, ahhh."

Meanwhile, I'm surprised to see two other guys practicing just as intently. One of them is Jim Simone, the former Army Ranger turned ultra runner. As part of his combat training, Simone spent 3 days crossing a swamp while evading a squad of Special Forces soldiers. Since then, he's run marathons all over the world and survived desert ultras on two continents. Next to him is Marshall Ulrich, also known as the Toenail Ripper (to me, at least). In the documentary about Badwater, *Running on the Sun*, Ulrich is the guy who appears on camera explaining why he decided his toenails were dead weight

and had them surgically removed.

Watching these two badasses taking Zahab's advice so obediently is all the convincing I need; if their techniques need correction, mine has a long way to go.

CREATE YOUR OWN HELL

On day 3, we studied the case of Frank McKinney. McKinney was a 41-year-old real-estate magnate who'd never run a marathon and who lived in the eternal springtime of Delray Beach, Florida, a good 100 miles from a decent hill. And in 6 months, he would have to run five back-to-back marathons across Death Valley, culminating in a nearly 9,000-foot climb up Mt. Whitney.

So how could he learn to run mountains without any mountains? Easy. If he couldn't put the resistance in front of him, he'd put it behind him. He tied a rope around an SUV tire, clipped the rope to a weight belt, and dragged it back and forth across an inter-coastal bridge. He also created his own Death Valley simulator: He stuck a treadmill in a spare bedroom, then surrounded it with heat lamps, a space heater, a dehumidifier, and massive fans to reproduce baking winds (though the fans sort of got ruined when his wife tried to create a desert storm by sprinkling them with sand).

The plan worked. In 6 months, McKinney transformed himself from a weekend tennis

player into a member of the elite club of Badwater finishers. "It's amazing how much you can adapt to your environment, if you focus on the essentials of what your body really needs to learn," says Smith-Batchen. Take mountain biking and trail running, she says: Besides raw conditioning, the crucial technical skills you need are quick hands and feet. Jumping rope works for that.

Smith-Batchen takes us outside for a brisk, muscle-trembling series of calisthenics. As a working mother herself, Smith-Batchen is an expert at filling the unforgiving lunch hour with 60 minutes of running, jumping rope, and plyometric hopping. She borrows her routines from a sport that's nearly as ancient as running: boxing. It makes sense—boxing demands consummate conditioning and leaves no margin for error.

"Who needs dumbbells when you have a park bench?" she shouts as she leads us through a series of incline-pushup salutes. (Pushing up against the bench with two arms, we then twist at the hip and raise one arm until it's pointing at the sky.) For the tired malcontents among us, Smith-Batchen is ready with a shouted explanation: "You'll need that triceps power to piston your arms when you're making your third 3,000-foot ascent in 6 hours. And if your pecs aren't strong, your chest is going to cave around your lungs when you get tired." Calisthenics, she points out, makes you body-aware; you have to pay careful attention to form and balance, rather than heaving iron around.

I'm quickly feeling a change come over me. It's only day 3, and already I'm feeling differently about my toenails.

FOUR MONTHS LATER, I barely recognize myself from the waist down. I'm running longer and harder than I ever have in my life, but the impact is virtually nonexistent. I used to think a marathon was a big deal; now I run one just about every month, and still have enough energy to get behind the mower for a few hours or goof around with the kids.

Strangest of all, this surge in my workload hasn't caused a single injury, and it's cleared up the ones I already had. All those nagging foot and Achilles problems that have bugged me for years? Gone. Whenever I feel the slightest twinge in my calves or hamstrings, I think of Ray Zahab, check my package position, and adjust. That always takes care of it. Of course, I haven't completely gone over to the ultra-freak side; there's no way you're going to catch me running across Death Valley in July. But there is a 50-miler in Mexico that's looking kind of tempting. . . .

MEH



Notes from Mile 263

What you can learn from the ultra man

Last fall, Dean Karnazes, *Men's Health's* "Behind the Burn" columnist, ran 350 miles without stopping, in 80 hours and 44 minutes. We can't recommend that. But we can all learn from his tips on going the distance.

► **RUN STAIRS TO BUILD STRENGTH.** Too many runners don't think about strength—in their legs and lungs—when facing an endurance test. Find a staircase or stadium, ideally with more than 100 steps, for a weekly workout. Start by running to the top a single step at a time and walking back down. Five sets will leave you sore. Work your way up to 10 sets. Next phase: two steps at a time, walking down, five sets. Final phase: two steps up, single steps down, running both ways, working up from five to 10 sets. Keep at it till you can repeat this routine 3 or 4 days a week.

► **RUN QUICKER, NOT HARDER.** A higher cadence, or turnover rate (how quickly

you put one foot in front of the other), can make you faster with less effort. Elite distance runners stay in the range of 185 to 200 steps per minute. Varying your cadence can conserve energy and shift the load among different muscles. As you fatigue and slow down, focus on cadence, not speed. This might mean taking shorter, quicker steps. Experiment in training. A rule of thumb: If your stride rate falls below 150 to 160 steps per minute, you'll want to shorten your stride and increase turnover.

► **WORK TO RECOVER.** Big distance can mean big hurt. The day after a long run, you must force yourself to exercise. You don't have to run—try a bike ride, a swim, or just a nice walk. The movement increases blood flow, clearing the by-products of intense exercise from your muscles and helping restore flexibility. Carry bottled water and drink all day. Your hydrated cells will thank you.