

Running on Empty: An Ultramarathoner's Story of Love, Loss, and a Record-Setting Run Across America

It isn't stretching it to say that most major accomplishments in life involve going through some pain to get to the finish. In ultramarathons, pain along the way to a successful finish is anticipated as part of the price one pays. Both life and ultramarathons, then, seem to be made for either masochists or people who have a lot of penance to pay.

In some instances it can be both.

In Marshall Ulrich's case, both seem to play a major role.

His book, *Running on Empty*, is on the surface an account of his successful 2008 attempt to run from San Francisco to Manhattan—hopefully setting a new course record along the way. But the book is early on much more than that. It is a hard, honest look by “Marsh” at an only too-human life lived most often on the edge.

His ascension—or devolution—to ultrarunning and mountaineering as the primary focus of his life after his young wife Jean dies of cancer while he fashions a steel cocoon to protect himself from the world is certainly understandable. The fact that the steel cocoon excludes other human beings from sharing in his emotional involvement with them (including his children) is painful to follow, but again, not unusual. Tune in to Oprah or Dr. Phil for a fill of remoteness after tragedies—or in some instances on those TV shows, anguish and drama after a stubbed toe.

Marsh takes on the challenges of mountain peaks (he has ascended each of the “seven summits”—the tallest peaks on all seven continents) and long-running footraces. At both endeavors he was successful. So successful that in some instances he had to fall back on creating new and undreamed-of challenges to keep his focus clear. At one point he ran the grueling Leadville 100 and the equally-grueling Pikes Peak Marathon on the same weekend. He was the first runner to do the Death Valley/Mt. Whitney “quad”: Running from Badwater in the pits of Death Valley to the peak of Mt. Whitney and back, then repeating the same out-and-back course, a distance of nearly 600 miles.

As his athletic and business accomplishments mounted, his personal life stalled. He married and divorced, he remained remote to his children, he constantly polished the steel cocoon.

But little by little, as he aged, some wisdom and self-examination came with the years, and he began to open himself to his family and friends. Ironically, at the same time his aging began doing what age does to even the most accomplished athlete, whether a running machine or a thoroughbred race-horse: he began to slow, he began to occasionally experience an injury, he began to confront his mortality.

Now safely sheltered in a new marriage with Heather, on better terms with his children, and facing the reality of the years of abuse on his aging legs, he set out to do what many consider the king of ultras: A trans-America run.

But, being Marsh, it was going to have to be an attempt at setting a record for the run. Record attempts supply deeper motivation, a clearer focus, and a determination that is lacking in a casual attempt to run from west to east coast. But like last year's battered stock car brought out to take on the fresh new Daytona 500 field of cars, Marsh didn't go into his transcon attempt fresh and healthy and properly aligned.

There were physical, psychological, and sometimes sociological obstacles in his path. The latter primarily consisted of Charlie Engle, Marsh's running "partner," the 12-step guy who'd put together most of the sponsorship for the joint attempt and who expected to be recipient of the majority of the publicity—until he crashed and burned.

The deteriorating relationship between Marsh and Charlie and the evolving relationships between Marsh and his wife and crew and the film crew that accompanied him would have fascinated Shakespeare. Anyone who has ever done an extended and grueling event knows first-hand that as the conditions worsen, people become more of whomsoever they were to start with—some of which can be hilarious while most of it tends to be a horror show.

Marsh's litany of aches and pains are mixed liberally with the pains of the constantly-evolving human interactions along more than 3000 miles of sometimes bad, sometimes exhilarating road.

In this book, the journey is the thing: whether it is the journey through his life that Marsh shares or the journey from west to east or the journey the reader makes with a mixed-nuts assemblage of characters. And in that regard the book isn't so much about running as it is about traveling through life—through a life filled with joy and sorrow, accomplishment and disappointment, laughter and tears. It is a life lived to the extreme, and a life that Marsh generously shares by subverting his own ego to make it honest and real.

Of course, we do breath a sigh of relief when he finally reaches New York and takes a big puff from that big cigar that symbolizes yet another finish to a chal-

lenge both met and suffered through. But for people like Marsh, the next finish line is just around the corner.

Readers can see and read more of Marsh's experiences at www.marshallulrich.com.—**Rich Benyo**