Now that was a grueling day—definitely tougher than I thought it would be, and more than I was ready for. But wow, what a day to remember!

I decided to enter the Quad Rock 50 against the advice of a good ultra-running buddy, Tre’ Cates (I think his initial reaction was a simple “you’re crazy”). Tre’ introduced me to the odd activity of ultrarunning a few years ago. Prior to meeting Tre’ (who has competed in the Lean Horse 100, Bighorn Trail 100, and Zion 100, among others), I was only vaguely aware that such events existed, and had definitely never run across any of their superhuman participants. Now Tre’ is a bonafide stud, but he’s definitely not built like Alberto Salazar, so such feats were evidently doable by a range of body types. Nevertheless, the concept of running 50 or 100 miles just didn’t seem in the realm of human possibility. I just couldn’t get my head around it.

Prior to July 2012, I hadn’t headed out the door to run (just for the sake of running) since high school, so it had been about 26 years (I’m now 45). I showed some budding promise as a distance runner as a youngster, but ended up focusing on team sports in high school, and never became a serious runner. My running peak came in 8th grade, when I finished 4th in the district finals mile with a time of 5:08. That year I also managed a first place finish in my age group in a local 10k. After that, running was just a way to stay in shape for football.

Since college, my career has been focused on ranching and ranch management, mostly on my family’s ranch in southwestern Colorado. For years, I stayed in decent shape just by virtue of going outside and working hard all day. Climbing mountains while fixing or building fence, being horseback all day, or irrigating for hours at a time all work out the whole body. I sure never felt the urge to go outside and burn yet more calories by running around through the mountains.

But, four years ago, some colleagues and I started a new ranch management business. We find investors interested in owning large working ranches, and then we engage in long term management contracts on the ranches we end up purchasing for them. We hire skilled crews to perform all the day-to-day real work, so now I spend way more time on airplanes and in front of my computer than I do horseback or on top of a mountain with hammer and fencing pliers.

When we started our new company, my wife and I realized we needed to be closer to an international airport, so we reluctantly left the family ranch near Gunnison and moved to Boulder. We ended up in south Boulder, and I quickly became aware that the inhabitants of my new neighborhood were highly enthusiastic exercisers. Boulder Open Space starts just across the street from our house, and I noticed people weren’t out there just hiking, but actually running around on those crazy trails that snake in and around and under and over the Flat Irons and local peaks. Shortly thereafter I met Tre’, and he informed me that these people were mostly trail runners, and that many of them were likely ultramarathoners, himself included. By that time, I’d also discovered that the local dining scene is dangerous to one’s waistline. Combined with my new, town-based sloth, Boulder restaurants and Whole Foods had added 20+ lb. to my frame. I was feeling more fat and unhealthy than I had in my life, and decided I needed to get out there and start burning some calories.

I’ve always relished mountains, so trail running as a form of exercise seemed right for me. On July 23rd, 2012, I finally managed to break my sedentary inertia, walked across Greenbriar Blvd., and started my first trail run. Later I plotted my route on Google Earth, and was somewhat discouraged when I realized it had taken me 38 minutes to run/walk my chosen 3.3-mile loop. But, I kept at it, and after a few more times I didn’t have to walk anymore, and my time dropped to about 28 minutes. Over the course of a couple months, I lost about 10 lb., and was definitely feeling better about my level of fitness, but then Tre’ told me I needed to start increasing my distance, which I think is when I got the trail running bug.

Since that fall of 2012, I’ve gradually added longer and longer segments, with more and more elevation, to my training runs. I started seeing the same people out there on the trails, pushing themselves on the uphills, rejoicing on the downhills, and generally happy to be out there in nature, working hard, just running. I started to get into it, came across *Born to Run*, which I inhaled, and had the good fortune to cross paths with Scott Jurek at a conference in Dana Point, CA. Scott and I were both invited to speak on the “future of protein”—Scott from a plant-based perspective, and me from a grass-based animal protein perspective. There was an optional early morning run for those interested in participating, led by Scott. Of course I showed up, got to jog next to Scott for a while, and learned he lived in Boulder. Now that was motivating!

By February of this year, I was starting to feel like I might actually be ready to try my first ultra. I told Tre’ that I was thinking about the Quad Rock 50, which is when he told me I was crazy. A 50-miler is tough for a first ultra, especially one that climbs and descends nearly 12,000 feet. I decided to ignore his advice, and late one night, on a sort of impulse, just did it and signed up, and then there was no looking back.

But, my travel schedule and family life make training a challenge. It’s especially tough to get in those long weekend runs without getting up at 3 am. I managed to start running tough 15 to 20 milers on most weekends, with similar elevation profiles as Quad Rock. My longest training run stretched out to 25 miles with about 4800 feet of gain, two weeks before the race. I ran/walked it at what I felt was a relatively easy pace, and finished at 5 hours even. My goal was to finish and still feel as if I could keep going, which I did, but it still wasn’t really conceivable how I was going to keep going for twice that distance at Quad Rock. The short of it is that I was ready for 25 miles, but not really prepared for 50 miles, but I was excited to give it a try, knowing that I’d likely have to push myself harder than I ever had in my life, both physically and mentally.

Indeed that is what happened. The first 25 miles were great. I felt genuinely strong and was able to stay right on my target pace, coming into the turnaround right at 5 hours and 30 minutes. I was loving the festive nature of the whole event, and being there on that mountain, working hard with these members of my new-chosen tribe, was inspiring and just plain fun. Once down at Soldier’s, an aid station volunteer led me to a chair, brought me food, found my drop bag, and helped me reload my fanny pack. She was great—wish I remembered her name, but I know she was French. If you’re reading this, thank you so much for that support at that point—you were really, really awesome. My brother and his kids, who live in Fort Collins, came to see me at the turnaround, and it was great to get some encouragement from them as well.

At this point I was definitely starting to ache and was feeling tired, but knew I had a lot more in me, and was excited to start the climb back out and see what was in store. But, not too far into mile 26, things took a turn for the worse, and I immediately knew I was in for a major test. I got a nasty twang in my left calf, and the muscle right behind my right knee, which inserts at the base of the femur and then tapers into a thin tendon that inserts at the heel (which I have since learned is called the plantaris), started to really ache. Before mile 27 was done, my left plantaris started to ache as well, and the plantaris muscles on both sides gradually grew more and more painful and tender the further I went. I couldn’t really straighten my legs and push off, which really impacted my forward progress for the final 23 miles or so. Folks started passing me on that climb out of Soldier’s, and that was the trend for the rest of the afternoon.

I had read a bunch about ultrarunners going through mid- to late-race episodes of grueling anguish, both physical and mental, only to be followed by spells of euphoria and mysterious recovery. I kept telling myself that such an experience must be coming, but nope, it never happened. I just kept thinking of the ultra-running mantra—“relentless forward progress”—and all that talk of not stopping as long as you can take one more step. I know it sounds cliché, but that’s what I did. I eventually hobbled into Arthur’s, and ascending that climb from Arthur’s back up to Towers seemed insanely long and tortuous. There were runners up there at the Towers aid station who’d just completed the loop down to Horsetooth and the climb back up Spring Creek, poised for their final 7 miles of downhill to the finish. I had never been so envious in my life.

As I started out on the short stretch of service road and made the left hand turn back onto that rocky singletrack headed for Horsetooth, a super nice lady caught up to me and could tell I was suffering. By this point, my plantaris muscles were begging me to stop. She asked if I needed some ibuprofen. One of the trail running books I read this past winter was the irreverent but very informative *Never Wipe Your Ass with a Squirrel.* Author Jason Robillard talks about embracing the pain as part of the whole experience, and cautions against trying to mask it with painkillers. At that point, I was still just barely adhering to this philosophy, so declined the ibuprofen, but by the time that nice lady had disappeared around the corner, I was wishing I’d taken her offer.

My wife Daniela, 7-year old daughter Mia, and Tre’ surprised me down at Horsetooth aid station. That was a much-needed boost. I could feel myself swaying and wanting to crumple as I hacked down the zillionth banana and PBJ wrap of the day. I asked an aid station volunteer how far ahead of the cutoff I was—40 minutes. I started to realize that my pace was getting so slow that there was a real chance I wouldn’t make the 14-hour cutoff. I couldn’t stomach the idea of going through all this and not even getting an official time, so I summoned some of my remaining resolve and headed back up toward Towers, now at a hobbling shuffle.

Back up at Towers, I was bad but probably not worse, and able to keep on taking that next step. I filled my water bottle for the last time, grabbed a handful of pretzels, and kept going. That downhill down the service road was pure agony, however. It seemed way longer going down than it had half a day earlier, going up. I knew I had to run it if I was going to finish under 14, so I did. Once back down onto the relatively flat bottom, I knew I still had another 3+ miles to go, and knew I had to somehow run most of it. Tre’ popped out onto the trail in a couple places and encouraged me on, which was a lifesaver. I was truly spent and hurting. On that final uphill grassy stretch back to the road, I had to drop back to a walk, but knew I’d make it. Once back on the road, I “accelerated” back to my “running” gait and pushed it as hard as I could to the finish line, crossing at 13:50:34. I was right in front of 62-year old Fred Abramowitz, whom I later learned was the eldest finisher, and Quad Rock was his 57th ultra finish. Holy cow. Now I want to be Fred. He’s given me something to shoot for over the next couple decades of life.

Daniela, Mia, and Tre’ were there at the now nearly deserted finish line, jumping up and down and screaming. It was awesome. I collapsed in a chair, cried for a minute or so, then Tre’ shoved some watermelon in my face. I inhaled it, seeds and all. Mia, watching intently, observed, “Daddy, you’re not spitting the seeds out.” That gave me a good chuckle and jarred me out of my self-pity. I then ate a leftover veggie burger from the BBQ (all the meat had been consumed), and I must admit that nothing had ever tasted quite so good.

It was then time to get to the car. I stood, but literally could not walk, so Daniela and Tre’ ended up practically carrying me. On the way to the car, Nick Clark was standing there observing my plight. I introduced myself and congratulated him for creating such a great day. It was a very meaningful way to finish those final few minutes at Quad Rock, and an honor to meet Nick. These elite ultrarunners now command my genuine respect as among the world’s most incredible athletes.

Daniela drove back to Boulder, and I imagined I would fall fast asleep in the passenger seat, but instead I was smiling and on a high. Sleep was not even close. Even after I got home, I laid in bed for a couple more hours till my mind was able to finally shift from the day’s events and lapse into a deep slumber.

As I write this on May 20th, it’s 10 days post-race. My plantaris muscles are healing (thanks to Boulder chiropractor and fellow ultra runner Lisa Erikson), but I’m probably still a couple weeks away from being able to run again. I’m ready and anxious to get back out there and get the blood flowing, feel the heat of a new summer, and touch the rocks and grass and trees.

I’m signed up for the Bozeman Marathon in Sept. I’ll run that with three of the Montana cowboys who manage our ranches up there. Then, next February, I plan to do the Bedrock 50, which is a 52 km event in New Zealand’s South Island, in the mountains and valleys west of Christchurch. My company actually manages a high country sheep and cattle station in Lees Valley, which is bisected by this race’s path. The Bedrock 50 is organized and directed by Lisa Nicholls, an accomplished ultra runner herself, having completed multiple races around the world, including Western States. It would be awesome to get some North Americans and Europeans downunder for this event—the scenery is over the top, and hey, it’ll be summertime in February!

Thanks again to the Quad Rock organizers and volunteers. Can’t wait for next year.

Jim Howell