

Marathons Just a Warm-up for Ultrarunner

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In 1989, as a tune-up for Australia's Westfield ultramarathon, Brian Purcell ran 240 miles in 48 hours around a quarter-mile oval track in Texas, breaking the American record by 13 miles. He spent the next four days in a wheelchair.

A few months later, Purcell, a Marin County native, undertook the Westfield, one of the more grueling pursuits in the history of sport -- a 629-mile nonstop road race from Sydney to Melbourne.

For the first five days he set a blistering, almost inconceivable pace, running for 15 hours straight, breaking for a 45 minute nap,

and running for another 15 hours. He maintained the same routine around the clock for 470 miles.

"Then I hit the wall," he said. "It came on slowly, over a 12-hour period. I had to re-set my goal to just finishing."

He walked the final 160 miles, came in fifth, and thought he might never recover.

"During the race, my mouth got so sore from eating that I couldn't chew anything anymore, not even raisins," he said. "All I could eat was mush. I lost 15 pounds. I didn't know if I'd ever run well again because I lost so much muscle mass.

"It was the hardest thing I've ever done," he said. "They've discontinued that race."

Thirteen months later, Purcell surprised himself and many in the ultrarunning community by finishing second in the Squaw Valley-to-Auburn Western States 100-mile trail run -- the world's elite 100-mile race -- in 16 hours

39 minutes, just 15 minutes off the record pace he set in winning the event in 1988.

Two weeks ago, at the age of 49, Purcell completed his eighth Western States, finishing 15th out of 425 entrants, all of whom had to qualify into the event by running either a 50-mile or 100-mile race within rigorous, world-class time parameters. He defeated all 164 runners his age or older, including longtime rival and 1990's U.S. national teammate Mark Richtman of Novato, who had to drop out at the 80-mile mark due to dehydration. In the final stages he also ran down title-contender Vincent Delebarre of Chamonix, France.

"The big difference between shorter races and a race like this," Purcell said, "is the pain lasts a lot longer. There are so many things that can go wrong. I was hurting at 50 miles, but experience helps. I tried to break the course into small, do-able sections and tried not to think about the 10 more hours of running."

"In every 100-miler you do, at some point you say, 'No way,'" said Don Allison, the publisher of Ultrarunning Magazine. "What's amazing is that Purcell is still active. Most of the winners of this race have retired. Longevity in this sport is very difficult, both physically and mentally."

"Brian has extreme talent, but he has also stayed motivated, which is so hard to do when you run at that top 1 percent level," said Western States race director Greg Soderlund.

Purcell describes himself as a "chubby teenager" who didn't participate in sports in high school or college. He began jogging for exercise in his mid- 20s, to offset the travel demands of an accounting job. Four-mile runs gradually evolved into 10-kilometer races, then half-marathons and then full marathons. Still, he had little interest in ultrarunning until he attended a summer training camp at Pike's Peak, Colorado, in 1984.

"At some point they showed a video of the Western States," he said. "It looked so

beautiful and challenging. I knew I wanted to do that."

Since gravitating to ultrarunning 21 years ago, Purcell has put up numbers that are staggering: He has run 38 races of 50 miles or more -- 17 of which have been 100-mile races -- and he has won 18 of them.

One event, however, was different from all the rest.

"I read about this 50-mile 'Man Against Beast' race in Arkansas, which sounded like a challenge" he said. "It was runners against horses. I got lost on my way to the race so I started 20 minutes late. At 25 miles I had caught up to the lead runners.

"But there were no water stations for 15 mile stretches," he said. "They expected the runners to drink out of these horse troughs. By the end, I managed to beat all the runners as well as all the horses, though the horses did have mandatory vet stops to make sure they

weren't overheating. Anyhow, the Australians always like that story."

Is Purcell living proof, as a recent study hypothesized, that human beings are meant to run long distances?

"The hard science is there," Soderlund said. "Our muscle placement, the way we are built skeletally, our stride length -- we are designed to cover a lot of ground."

"Some people are geared to run long distances, but some aren't," Allison said. "Just like some of us can read a book all day and others can't sit still. I think it's a misconception that in primitive times everyone loved to run."

"I would agree with the study," Purcell said. "When I take regular long runs, I think clearer and feel more in balance with all the stresses in life. I think we are built to be in motion."

Purcell's next major focus is the 2006 Comrades ultramarathon in South Africa, a 54-mile street race between Pietermaritzburg and Durban that attracts 15,000 runners. An added incentive is that he will turn 50 before the race and can compete to become the top 50 plus ultrarunner in the world.

Meanwhile, at home in Sebastopol this summer, he is coaching, though limiting the mileage of his eager 9-year-old daughter Rita, who has already excelled on a national level in trail-running and snowshoe racing.

What continues to motivate him to compete, Purcell said, is simple: He enjoys it.

"On the face of it," Allison said, "ultrarunning seems so absurd and ridiculous. But when you get as deeply involved in it as he has, it seems almost reasonable."

-by Ted Gross

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