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## A 100K ultra? Now that's just crazy

With all due respect to the people who run ultramarathons: You're crazy. Then again, people think I'm crazy for running marathons. So take that "crazy" designation with a grain of salt.

While I don't think I'll be doing an ultra any time soon, I do understand the motivation behind it. Runners like to push themselves past their limits—whether that's running a 5K or 100 miles.

For me, it's marathons—the traditional ones.

I've finished one marathon and I'm currently training for another. To me, 26.2 miles still seems a little impossible. But "impossible" is what draws me to running.

I imagine it's the same for the people who run ultras—a new challenge that'll take them to a new level.

But you still won't catch me running more than 26.2 miles.

# Road killers

26.2 miles? Anyone can do that.  
A growing number of runners are embracing  
**ultramarathons** as the ultimate challenge

Runners make their way up a hill in the 2008 Badwater Ultramarathon, a grueling, 135-mile race that starts in Death Valley in July.

AFP FILE



By Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz  
REDEYE

Brian Gaines had barely finished his first marathon when he decided to push himself to the next limit.

Three weeks after completing the 2006 Chicago Marathon, Gaines nervously lined up for the 50-kilometer (31-mile) Chicago Ultramarathon, hoping merely to finish.

"I wanted to learn what I was capable of," said Gaines, 36, a senior applications developer who lives in Bartlett.

Gaines not only was capable of finishing the 50K (in 5:15:45), but he also said he enjoyed the ultramarathon's more laid-back vibe. Since then, he has run a dozen more ultramarathons—loosely defined as any race more than 26.2 miles—including several 50-milers and a race to see how far he could run in 24 hours.

The thought of running one toenail farther than a marathon might strike plenty of people as crazy, as if 26.2 miles isn't hard enough. And, experts warn, such races can take a serious toll on the body without the proper training. But a growing number of runners are embracing ultramarathons as an ultimate challenge—and a way to escape the explosive popularity of marathons in recent decades.

About 200 runners have registered for Saturday's Chicago Ultramarathon, a 50K that starts at Foster Avenue Beach and loops three times along the lakefront, race co-director Stuart Schulman said.

In 2008, more than 17,000 people in the U.S. finished at least one ultramarathon, a 20 percent jump from 2007, according to Tia Bodington, editor of UltraRunning magazine. Last year, 503 ultra races were held all over North America, the majority in California.

"It's kind of like the new frontier," Bodington said. "So many people have done a marathon, it is like, what is next?"

Gaines said his 24-hour race, held last year on a Wisconsin high school's asphalt parking lot, was his toughest to date. Exhausted and hampered by severe blisters on his feet, Gaines took a couple of 20-minute catnaps at the edge of the track before finishing the race in 72 miles, or 414 laps around the parking lot.

"What I found is that if I keep moving on, whatever I'm feeling at the moment, I'll get out of," Gaines said.

Chicago also hosts lakefront ultramarathons in the fall—both a 50K and a 50-miler. They are popular for beginners because the course is flat, whereas many other trails are on more challenging terrain.

Some runners say the slower pace and smaller crowds at ultramarathons make for a more enjoyable, friendlier experience.

For Lakeview resident Cheryl Lenard, that

camaraderie proved crucial as she struggled through her first 50-mile race last spring, at the Ice Age 50 in Wisconsin.

Lenard started to feel dizzy at mile 32 and was stumbling through the woods when another runner stopped to help her. That runner turned out to be avid ultramarathoner and fellow Chicagoan Adrian Belitu, who offered Lenard some sodium pills—the first time Lenard thought it wise to take pills from a stranger—and walked with her to the next aid station. Lenard ate some food and was able to finish the race in 10 hours, 8 minutes.

“I slept for like a week,” said Lenard, 32, who had run 25 traditional marathons before taking on her first ultra.

Ultramarathons take a fierce physical toll, even for people accustomed to marathons.

“Each jump to the next level is more work on the body, and more work on the mind,” said Dr. Balu Natarajan, whose sports medicine practice is in Lincoln Park.

With so much blood flowing to the muscles, there’s less blood going to internal organs, so it’s important to train properly so that your body gets used to it and learns to work efficiently, Natarajan said. Inadequate blood flow can lead to dizziness or bloody stool, or in extreme cases can cause part of the intestines to die or kidney failure, he said.

Some ultramarathoners don’t eat enough to keep up with all the calories they burn, or they drink too much water, which dilutes their blood and leads to electrolyte and sodium imbalances, Natarajan said. Others suffer stress fractures in their feet, tendonitis or knee and hip problems.

Ultramarathoners often say that their legs get them through the first half of a long race, and their minds get them through the rest.

Belitu, the runner who helped Lenard in the woods, has run several 100-mile races, and recently finished a 48-hour race in 161 miles. He trains at the East Bank Club, where you might find him on the treadmill for four hours, adjusting the incline to simulate mountains, or running 160 laps around the track for a 40-mile training run (it takes about six hours).

Belitu, 35, a mortgage banker living in River North, said he has nodded off to sleep while running and has lost nine of his toenails in a single race.

Yet his greatest challenges are yet to come. This year, Belitu has been invited to run in Badwater, a grueling, 135-mile race that starts in Death Valley in July, when the temperature can reach up to 130 degrees (he’s working the sauna into his training routine).

While he’s at it, Belitu also hopes to complete Spartathlon, a 152-mile run between Athens and Sparta in Greece, and the Ultra



Chicago ultramarathoner Adrian Belitu trains at the East Bank Club, where he logs four-hour runs on the treadmill, adjusting the incline to simulate mountain terrain. He recently ran 161 miles in a 48-hour race. **BRIAN J. MOROWCZYNSKI FOR REDEYE**



“I wanted to learn what I was capable of,” says ultramarathoner Brian Gaines, a senior applications developer who lives in Bartlett. **STACIE FREUDENBERG FOR REDEYE**

Trail Tour du Mont Blanc, a 103-mile race winding through the Alps in France, Italy and Switzerland.

Ultramarathoners are a different breed of people, said Ed Kelly of Evanston.

Despite two heart surgeries, Kelly, 56, twice ran the Marathon DuSable, a punishing seven-day, 155-mile run through the Western Sahara Desert in Morocco, where entrants are required to run with their full gear (sleeping bag, food, etc.) through sinking sand dunes and blinding snowstorms.

Each time, Kelly has lost 15 pounds, and it takes five to six weeks to recover. Brutal, yes, but he couldn’t imagine another way of life.

“If you have to ask why do you do it,” he said, “you don’t get it.” **AELJALDERUIZ@TRIBUNE.COM**

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## On your mark, get set, goof off

**Columbia News Service**

**NEW YORK** When Matt Kleberg finished the Krispy Kreme Challenge in Raleigh, N.C., he didn’t care what time he made or what place it won him. He was concerned with an entirely different achievement: keeping the dozen doughnuts he had just downed from coming up again.

Call it delicious or disgusting, but the Krispy Kreme Challenge is only one of a string of odd-ball races that have popped up in recent years. Adding doughnuts, costumes, mud pits, battles between the sexes—you name it—to the traditional mix, races like the Muddy Buddy Ride and Run, the SkirtChaser 5K, the Portland Waiters Race and the Encierro (bull run) of New Orleans are inserting lighthearted fun back into a serious sport.

While ultramarathoners might ask, “Why stop at 26.2 miles when you could go 50?” these race organizers ask, “Why not get chased through the French Quarter by a women’s roller-derby team of ‘bulls’ with Wiffle bats or run through downtown Portland, Ore., holding a tray of drinks that must not be spilled?”

Hard as it may be to believe, 5,500 people took the Krispy Kreme Challenge in February.

The Challenge, an annual event hosted by North Carolina State University, lays out for its runners a four-mile course that is broken up into a pre-Krispy Kreme-consumption run and an “I’m just trying to keep them all down” run. The intent is to create a mass of glazed-and-confused runners—who this year ate 48,000 doughnuts.

“The majority of runners are not in the front of the pack, and we have to find different ways to challenge ourselves,” says Lena Hollman of the Road Runners Club of America. “For some of us, challenge presents itself in trying to run two miles with 12 doughnuts in our stomach.”

## Fun runs

A FEW WACKY CHICAGO RACES

### The Chiditarod

Held a few weeks ago, the race consists of five-person teams pushing and pulling a shopping cart to the finish line. Elaborate costumes and foul play are encouraged.

### Wacky 5K Run

This West Loop run, also held at the beginning of March, featured a post-race snack food buffet in honor of National Snack Month. A willingness to break your diet is encouraged.

### Elvis Is Alive 5K

Each summer, Elvii take to the streets for this annual Lincoln Park run. Sideburns are encouraged.

### JOIN THE CLUB

In February, Torey Jones, a 25-year-old grad student who lives in Lincoln Park, founded Chicago Ultrarunners (**chicagoultrarunners.com**) to build a community around what is typically a loner sport. The group, which has almost 30 members, organizes runs, holds the occasional happy hour and has an online forum where members can exchange advice.