

TAKE YOUR PERFORMANCE TO THE NEXT LEVEL



Secrets I Learned Running

50 Marathons in 50 Days—and How You Too  
Can Achieve Super Endurance!

**DEAN KARNAZES**

*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WITH MATT FITZGERALD

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Dean's blood work summary, in Appendix E, is included courtesy of Bryan Bergman, PhD, University of Colorado Assistant Professor of Medicine.

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*This book is dedicated to my mom and dad,  
who always gave me the liberty to wander freely.  
May our adventures never end . . .*

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# Acknowledgments

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I'll preface these acknowledgments by saying that I'm one of the luckiest men on earth. Why? Because I'm surrounded by some of the greatest people on earth. To them, I owe everything. The list is long, and at the top would be my wife, Julie, and my daughter and son, Alexandria and Nicholas. Your ongoing support, encouragement, and positive spirit have provided me with immeasurable inspiration and motivation. I can never thank you enough.

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# Preface

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*Men's Fitness* has stated that I might just be the fittest man on the planet. *Time* once claimed that I'm no mere mortal. *Wired* hailed me as the perfect human. Let me share a little secret with you: I'm really just average. Perhaps even a little below average. I know this better than anyone. I'm not bestowed with any superhuman powers. I don't have any special gifts. There is no magic in my genetic makeup. I'm just an average guy.

So how am I able to run hundreds of miles at a clip? How was I able to complete fifty marathons, in fifty states, in fifty consecutive days? Just how do I do these things? I wrote this book to answer that question. There are lessons I've learned along the way that can help you achieve your own amazing feats of endurance, however you define them. Some of these lessons are nothing more than practical tips that I've picked up along the road, as all runners do; others come out of challenging experiences and help illustrate an approach or attitude that has proven effective for me. In either case the aim of this book is to share with you the things that have helped me accomplish my goals, in the hope that you will be able to accomplish yours, no matter the scale.

Just remember, as extreme as some of my accomplishments have been, you are reading about an average guy. An extremely average guy.

# Road Trip

**O**n a bright Saturday morning in February 2002, we set out on another road trip—Karnazes family-style. No bags were packed the night before our departure. No alarms were set to help us get an early start. Everyone rolled out of bed on his or her own schedule. And then chaos erupted. There was a mad scramble to fill bags and load them onto the Mother Ship, our beloved twenty-seven-foot RV. In the kitchen of our house, food appeared on burners, countertops, and tables and promptly disappeared into mouths. Children's laughter rang out frequently, and the occasional ball or other projectile toy sailed across a room.

Every few minutes, my dad asked one of us if we'd seen some item he desperately needed and couldn't find. The last of these items was the keys to the Mother Ship. He had just left the kitchen in search of them when my wife, Julie, entered.

"Is Popou ready?" she asked, her use of the Greek word for "dad" a sure indication that she was getting in the spirit of the weekend. The unstructured Grecian chaos of my family's operations sometimes unnerved her, but at other times, like now, she happily joined right in and became one of us.

"Popou's looking for the keys," said Alexandria, our seven-year-old.

"Who's got Nicholas?" Julie asked frantically, suddenly realizing she hadn't seen our four-year-old son for quite some time.

"Popou said he's already in the RV with Yiayia," Alexandria replied, referring to her grandmother, my mother, in Greek as well.

Young as he was, Nicholas was already showing signs of having inherited his father's insatiable wanderlust: He would walk right out the front door if left unattended for more than a few seconds.

"Wait a minute," Alexandria continued. "If Nicholas and Yiayia are already inside the Mother Ship, they must have the keys. How else could they unlock the door?"

She was, of course, correct. Being outwitted by a child was hardly a blow to Popou's pride, however. He didn't really care; he just wanted to get on with the adventure and was glad that someone had finally located those stinking keys he'd been searching all over for, for the past ten minutes.

At last we buckled ourselves into the Mother Ship and Popou began to guide the vehicle northward with sure hands. We sang and joked and quoted movies as he expertly piloted the craft along the highway.

Over the years, what I've come to realize is that the difference between a runner and a jogger is that a jogger still has control of his life. A scant hour after we had left our home in San Francisco, I was already stirring, my initial contentment replaced by a familiar restlessness. "Pull over," I said.

Having anticipated the inevitable, I was already dressed in my running gear. At the first available



turnout, Dad guided the Mother Ship off the road. We had perfected our routine on many past family road trips. Sometimes I would leave home on foot before the family, and they'd pick me up along the roadside a few hours later. Other days I would wait until we reached our destination and then take flight. Once in a while, I would run all night and meet them in the morning. Today the formula was pretty simple: I'd run up the highway while they went shopping for supplies, secured our campsite, and prepared a gourmet lunch.

I gave Alexandria and Nicholas each a quick peck on the cheek while dashing toward the exit. I squeezed my mom's hand, embraced Julie, and saluted my dad.

"See you guys in a bit," I said, and I was out the door.

Today I would cover twenty-six or twenty-seven miles—roughly a marathon. The ultimate challenge for many runners, this distance represented a typical weekend long run for me. Sometimes I would run a marathon on Saturday and another on Sunday. I had run two hundred miles nonstop more than once and I was completing several one-hundred-mile races in extreme environments each year, so a leisurely run of just a fraction of that length wouldn't take much out of me. I could just enjoy the hypnotic cycle of my breathing, the rhythmic contractions of my muscles, and the splendor of the day. It was a typically perfect Napa Valley winter morning, not a cloud in the sky, the air dry and neither cool nor warm, a gentle breeze refreshing my exposed skin.

There were two pieces of mandatory equipment I always carried with me on these runs: a cell phone and a credit card. Three hours into my workout, the phone rang.

"Hey, hon, we forgot to get Parm—" A convoy of semis roared by, drowning out the rest of her sentence.

I stuck a finger in one ear and pressed the phone against the other. "*Say again?*"

"We forgot to get Parmesan. You know, cheese."

"Ohhh!"

"Could you stop and grab some on the way?"

"Sure thing."

When I sauntered into the campsite some ninety minutes later, the others were just finishing their preparations. It was a beautiful spread of fresh pasta, sourdough bread, Caesar salad, vine-ripe melon, and cookies hot from the microwave (the Mother Ship didn't have a conventional oven, so they improvised). They had it all set up outside on a picnic table.

"Did you get the Parmesan?" Alexandria asked.

"Darn it! I knew I forgot something," I said, slapping my forehead.

"Daaad!" my daughter scolded smilingly, then dashed behind me and reached into the running pack on my back. She had me totally figured out.

After lunch, we took a long hike. My thoughts wandered in a familiar direction as we picked our way along a narrow trail bordered by a row of trees. These family road trips were like a taste of heaven for me. They had it all: my favorite people, adventure, freedom, and plenty of opportunities to run great distances. We made four or five such trips each year, usually within California, but some had extended as far as Oregon and Colorado. Other times the whole family would fly to a more distant state, where we would rent an RV and enjoy the same mix of camping, sightseeing, and, for me, running. On each of these jaunts, I sooner or later found myself wishing it could last longer and extend farther. But this time, I went a step beyond the usual wishing: I got a clear picture of what this perfect vacation could look like.

One thing that I truly live for is challenging myself to complete epic tests of endurance that sound totally impossible. Always searching for a new challenge to embark upon, my imagination now

suddenly dreamed up the quest of attempting to run a marathon in each of the fifty United States in only fifty days. Every day would be just like this one, except in a different place with a new landscape and a new local culture. It would be a test of endurance for the whole family, with all-night drives of hundreds of miles punctuated by my solo trots of 26.2. The kids and my folks could join me for short segments along the way, as they sometimes did. Even Julie could participate, although she typically runs only when being chased. My mind was awirl with possibilities.

Then I hit my head on a branch. What was I thinking? There was no way we could ever afford to execute this half-baked scheme. Julie and I both worked to make ends meet. And what about school? Nicholas was getting ready for kindergarten, and Alexandria was a very studious second-grader. Not to mention, my mom still worked as a public school teacher down in Orange County. She could never take that much time off work, and her retirement was four years away. There were just too many obstacles to overcome. So that day I cataloged the idea in my mind as a dream. A crazy, far-fetched dream.

But over the next few years, a series of fortunate accidents breathed life into this dream, and ultimately took it farther than I could ever have imagined.

First, I secured an athlete sponsorship agreement with The North Face, an outdoor apparel and gear company based in the San Francisco Bay Area. I still needed a day job to pay the bills, but the corporate support helped defray some of the costs of traveling around the world to compete. Moreover, I believed it gave me a launchpad for bigger goals. Mere months after officially signing with The North Face, I worked up the gumption to submit a proposal for my “50 marathons, 50 states, 50 days” adventure to the company’s marketing department. It was a fairly modest proposal. I basically just asked them to cover gas and food while I gallivanted across the country with my family. However, I made the classic inexperienced sponsored athlete’s mistake of not really thinking through the small matter of what was in it for the sponsor. I just figured I would wear their stuff and maybe provide a little logo exposure in *Outside* or *Runner’s World*.

The marketing folks at The North Face clearly did not see much in the proposal for them, and they sat on it. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months. I think they hoped I would just forget about it.

Then another fortunate accident happened: I wrote a book that, almost overnight, made me one of the better-known runners in America—one of the few whom nonrunners actually knew about. The book chronicled my wild adventures as an all-night runner and became a surprise best seller. Suddenly the crazy long runs that I’d been doing for the past decade became “news.” I was interviewed on the *Late Show with David Letterman*, on *60 Minutes*, and by Howard Stern. Race directors and running club presidents around the world began inviting me to give motivational talks for their participants and members, which often attracted standing-room-only audiences. *Runner’s World* and *Outside* put me on their covers, and *Time* ran a feature story about me. *Time* magazine! My private adventures were now a public curiosity.

My visibility within The North Face also got a strong boost. Then, in 2005, three years after I had first conceived my big idea, a man named Joe Flannery became the company’s new vice president of marketing. He took one look at my moth-eaten proposal and had a vision of his own.

I was a bundle of nerves when I sat down in Joe’s roomy center office to talk about it.

“I want to make this bigger,” Joe said.

“What, you want me to run more than fifty?” I joked.

Joe laughed briefly. “Not longer, bigger,” he said.

Joe’s vision was to transform my eccentric family vacation into a massive transcontinental fitness lollapalooza and media extravaganza called The North Face Endurance 50. Instead of running fifty

arbitrary solo marathons measured by the Mother Ship's odometer wherever I felt like stretching my legs in a given state, I would run fifty official, certified marathon events that would be open to other participants. There would be pre- and post-marathon activities and additional events, just like at other marathons. Local and state government agencies at each marathon location would be brought on board. Joe and his staff would design an aggressive media campaign whose objective was to ensure that every man, woman, and child in the United States heard about the Endurance 50 at least once. The brand exposure for The North Face would be tremendous!

*Great, I thought. My family vacation has just run amok.* Joe must have seen my face fall. That's when he played his full hand.

"Dean, you've become an inspirational figure for a lot of people," he said earnestly. "This is an opportunity to inspire more folks than you ever dreamed you could reach. Not to mention, a big fundraiser for Karno's Kids," he added, referring to the charity I had created to motivate and empower young boys and girls to become physically active.

That settled it. I was back on board, with a vengeance. If I die having contributed nothing more to the world than inspiring a handful or more of nonrunners to become runners, I will die knowing I did what I could to make the world a better place. It's not that I lack the imagination to find a bigger cause. It's that I believe there is no bigger cause. Running is much more than a good way to lose weight. It's a cure for depression and a potential path to personal growth and self-fulfillment. It's my recipe for making this world a more harmonious home to the human species.

"I'm in," I said.

Joe's first move was to call Merrill Squires, founder of the Squires Sports Group. I guess you would classify SSG as an event production company. They're logistics experts with extensive experience in creating roaming festivals, like the 2002 Olympic torch relay run across America.

"Sure, we can do this," Merrill told Joe confidently. But SSG had never undertaken anything quite like the Endurance 50 before. They had never even *heard* of anything like it being attempted. I later learned that, behind his back, Merrill's friends were giving him one-in-twenty odds of pulling it off.

The challenges were enormous. First, we had to find fifty marathon directors willing to re-create their events on a smaller scale on a date we suggested, or allow us to run our event concurrently with their normally scheduled marathon. Then we had to sequence these events so that it was feasible to caravan from one to the next in time to set up and run each marathon during the small window of opportunity that police support, local permits, and road closures afforded. Infinite details of transportation, supply sourcing, insurance, and personnel had to be worked out. And not least, we had to recruit enough sponsors to cover the whopping \$1.2 million price tag for our unprecedented "expedition," as it came to be designated.

Fortunately, I was not personally responsible for making all these things happen. The role I was destined to play in The North Face Endurance 50 was decidedly different from the one I had envisioned for my family vacation. If the Endurance 50 was a movie, then others would take on the responsibilities of producer, director, location scout, set crew, and camera operator. I would be the so-called talent. The small star of a very big show.

The fifteen months of intensive preparation—which included some six thousand miles' worth of training runs and ultra-endurance tune-up races—that I endured between the time Joe Flannery layered his vision on top of mine and the start of marathon number one are a blur in my memory. The fast-forward button finally was released in September 2006, when I flew to St. Louis, Missouri, and from there drove to the bucolic town of St. Charles to begin what would turn out to be the most intense fifty days of my life, hands-down.

St. Charles was the site of the Lewis & Clark Marathon, which would be one of eight “live events on our tour. A popular twelve-year-old event, it attracted roughly five thousand participants. St. Charles was also the starting site of the historic Lewis and Clark expedition. This year marked the two hundredth anniversary of that remarkable journey, so starting the Endurance 50 there seemed fitting.

The morning after arriving, I met up with Joe Flannery in a large parking lot. “There it is,” he said, “your new home for fifty days.” He was pointing at a huge tour bus fully cocooned in vinyl wrapping that displayed colorful graphics and attention-grabbing sponsor logos. “And here are your new friends,” he added.

Before me stood a motley crew of scruffy-looking guys, mostly in their twenties, some of whom I had met once or twice before, others of whom were complete strangers to me. I would spend the majority of the next fifty days and nights within breath-smelling distance of these fellows in a cramped, mobile locker room, complete with barracks-style bunk beds stacked three-high. I hoped we wouldn’t kill one another.

Among the crew members I knew slightly already were Jason Koop and Jimmy Hopper. With his lanky build, square jaw, and matted hair, “Koop” looked like he’d just walked off the set of *Chariots of Fire*. An accomplished former collegiate runner now working with Chris Carmichael, Lance Armstrong’s personal coach and trainer, Koop was here principally to monitor my nutrition and physiological adaptations. “Hopps” had the look of a Southern California surfer dude, with a nest of blond hair that he would inexplicably shave off before I saw him again the next morning.

New to me were English, our English bus driver (it took me all too long to discern that the man was from England *and* his name was English), and Dave, veteran manager of many a rock band tour who had been hired to manage our expedition because, well, a rock band tour was the closest model for our expedition we could think of. English had feathery silver hair, a matching goatee, and a meaty handshake. Dave had darting eyes, slicked-back hair, and a way of seeming to hover in the background even as he stood and spoke with everyone else. They were the two elders in the group.

Unbeknownst to me, the younger members of the crew had already devised their own unique version of the Endurance 50: fifty states, fifty days, fifty phone numbers! They were hoping to entice some unsuspecting volunteer into giving them her phone number in each of the states across this great nation of ours. An ambitious goal, no doubt, but as I came to learn, they were every bit as determined as I was—darn resourceful too.

Dave explained that they were going to set up the “Finish Festival” in this parking lot as a sort of dress rehearsal for the performance that would be repeated tomorrow and again daily for seven weeks afterward. I then left for last-minute logistical meetings. When I returned two hours later, I couldn’t believe my eyes. The gang had erected a small city of tents, carpets, banners, and stages. The scene looked more like a corporate-sponsored Moroccan street bazaar than a hotel parking lot. People scurried around with hammers, drills, and other tools, lugged coolers filled with food and drink, and squinted at assembly instruction papers. Music blared from zillion-watt loudspeakers. Everybody was drenched in perspiration from hauling all this stuff around. A towering inflatable finish arch that served as a makeshift entrance to the dream city teetered back and forth like a blimp getting ready for flight as two local volunteers brought on board just for the weekend (a tactic we would repeat at each venue) struggled to stake it down.

I stood in silence, taking in the chaotic tableau, my stomach alive with a gnawing sense of foreboding.

That evening was to be my last chance to get a full night’s rest for nearly two months. My mind raced as I lay awake in our hotel room next to Julie. It hit me suddenly: *I have to run fifty marathons*

*in fifty states in the next fifty days!* I believed then that I could do it, but I knew there were dozens of possible mishaps that might cause me to fail. Anything from a twisted ankle to out-of-control blistering to being hit by a car could bring the whole extravaganza crashing to a premature halt. And I was aware that the running would be the “easy” part of this quest. Running fifty marathons in fifty days from my front door would be one thing; running them between frenzied Finish Festivals and multi-hour bus drives would be quite another.

I had failed before, but never with so many people counting on me to succeed. I thought of the thousands of runners who had signed up to run with me at the forty-two specially created events, the teachers all around the country who’d designed activities for their students centered on the Endurance 50, the scores of magazines, newspapers, and radio and TV stations that had budgeted space and time to cover my exploits, and the sponsors that had shelled out great sums of cash to make the whole thing possible.

When you spend as much time anticipating a major undertaking as I spent anticipating the Endurance 50, your mind imagines so many possible scenarios that, by the time you actually begin, you’re half convinced that the event can offer no surprises. But it always does. The Endurance 50 surprised me in many ways, but above all by the way it challenged me to apply virtually every lesson about running, and about life, that I had ever learned, and taught me countless new lessons to apply in the future. Lessons worth sharing. So, here goes . . .

# The Right Foot

*Day 1*

*September 17, 2006*

*Lewis & Clark Marathon*

*St. Charles, Missouri*

*Elevation: 989'*

*Weather: 82 degrees; humid*

*Time: 3:50:52*

*Net calories burned: 3,187\**

*Number of runners: 4,800*

I sat stiffly in a cold hotel conference room with a needle in my arm. It was five thirty in the morning on Day 1 of The North Face Endurance 50. The phlebotomist who had been hired to stick the needle in my arm—a stout, thin-lipped woman in her mid fifties—filled three vials with blood and then handed me a small plastic cup.

“Urinate into this,” she said drily.

I would have to endure a version of this morning ritual roughly twice a week throughout my autumn tour of America.

Fifty days, fifty states, untold needle-sticks.

The idea was to monitor some of my body’s important health indicators over the next seven weeks. A couple of recent medical studies had suggested that running long distances might be physiologically damaging. I wanted to prove them wrong—or die trying.

I felt light-headed and mildly queasy as I made my way toward the marathon expo and starting area. But I had other reasons for that. The scene was chaotic. Runners, their supporters, race officials and volunteers darted in every direction with harried determination. The Endurance 50 festival area was packed. That familiar-looking Moroccan street bazaar was now in full swing. I’d had no idea it would be this hectic.

Making my way through the crowd, I nearly ran headlong into a lean man wearing a priest’s robe. It was my dear friend, fellow ultrarunner, and licensed justice of the peace Topher Gaylord.

“Gaylord!” I exclaimed. “Er . . . I mean, Father! Man, am I glad to see you.”

“Follow me, son,” he said. Topher had flown from Italy to be here, clerical robe snugly packed in his suitcase.

We found a break in the crowd, and there stood my family: Julie, the kids, and my parents. Topher took hold of a microphone and began reading aloud from a prepared text as I put an arm around Julie’s waist, Alexandria produced a bouquet of flowers, and Nicholas offered up a velvet-covered ring box. Julie’s face took on a stunned expression as her eyes darted from Topher’s robe to the flowers to the ring box and finally my face. Then they filled with tears. Surprise, Julie! We were renewing our wedding vows.

Attracted by the words of Topher’s heartfelt sermon as they rang out from the PA system, a crowd of hundreds formed around us. Moments after the “I do’s” had been exchanged, as though it’d been

choreographed, the race announcer's voice called out, "Five minutes to race start!"

In marathon running, few things are more important than starting on the right foot. Physically and mentally, you have to be in the game. You can't really control what happens after eighteen or twenty miles. That's when the real suffering begins, and it's always worse than expected, even if you've run many marathons before. You just have to push through it with all the strength you have in your body and mind.

You can, however, control the first part of a marathon, and if you're wise you will control it in ways that make the last part—well, not easier, but better. You can resist the urge to start too fast, make sure you drink enough fluids, run the tangents, and so forth.

The surprise wedding reenactment I laid on Julie this morning was my way of starting this marathon of marathons on the right foot. The Endurance 50 was conceived as a dream family vacation but it had become something different. Julie hadn't been able to take a leave from her practice as a dentist, so the rest of us would see her mostly on weekends. But her inability to come along for the full journey hadn't stopped Julie from playing a hero's role in planning the family side of the adventure. She had worked tirelessly for months on end. One night I stumbled home from a run at 1:30 AM to find her on the phone with Travelocity, arranging flights, car rentals, and hotel stays for my parents and the kids. Her generous heart deserved to be honored—publicly—and now it had been.

Upon hearing the announcer's five-minute notice, the crowd quickly began moving toward the starting line. My entire family exchanged one last hug. Topher whipped off his gown to expose the running gear he wore underneath. The two of us made our way to the starting chute, saying little. The gun went off, the crowd surged forward, and my five-year-old dream took one step into reality, and then another, and another.

Topher and I found a comfortable groove at a slightly sub-four-hour marathon pace. The first miles followed flat roads that passed through the historic section of St. Charles. The air was warm, wet, and still. Soon it would be hot, wet, and still.

A number of the runners in our vicinity spotted me and sidled up to offer and receive encouragement. Five miles into the race, a lanky boy of twelve or thirteen years found a slot on my shoulder.

"Are you Dean?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm Dean," I confirmed.

"I'm John," said the boy. He told me he was running the one-loop half-marathon that was being held on the same course as the marathon, which covered the same loop twice. John added that I was an inspiration to him, and he had come here with his mother in the hope of meeting me. I felt a rush of inspiration from the boy as his words sank in.

"You're doing great!" I said. Topher seconded that opinion. And he was doing great—for a while. John was all smiles as we passed by his mother at the ten-mile mark. She hollered and held up a sign that read GO TEAM DEAN! But the sun's rays were becoming mercilessly intense. John had never run so far before, and it appeared he was pushing harder than his natural pace to stay alongside us.

At eleven miles, his breathing was labored and his shoes clomped heavily on the road. At twelve miles, he was hunchbacked and grunting with effort.

"You can do it!" we yelled.

With a quarter mile left to the finish, John began weaving, and his stride fell apart completely. He was no longer running but lurching forward like a man on fire.

"Come on! You can do it!" we shouted.

With only one hundred yards to go, John stopped abruptly in the middle of the road and sent a

cone-shaped torrent of vomit shooting to the ground with the force of a fire hose.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “Do you want to sit down for a minute?”

“Go ahead. I’ll walk,” John finally managed as several concerned spectators gathered around him to provide support. Topher and I resumed running, and I silently wondered whether we had just committed some form of child abuse. *Some inspiration I am*, I thought.

The carnage spread among the marathon runners on the second loop. By now the temperature was in excess of eighty degrees. Topher and I began passing struggling runners at the rate of two or three per mile. These poor folks had not started on the right foot. Many of them had come here with time goals that were no longer realistic in the conditions, but had refused to adjust their pace. Now they were paying the price.

## How to Avoid Sickness During a Race

- Eat your pre-race meal at least an hour beforehand.
- Avoid milk and lactose, as well as highly fibrous foods, for at least twenty-four hours prior.
- Consume easily digested foods such as instant oatmeal, bananas, and energy bars in your pre-race meal. If you eat your pre-race meal within an hour of the race, it should contain no more than five hundred calories.
- Don’t drink too much fluid during the run. Let your thirst guide your drinking rate. Drink only water or a sports drink such as Accelerade.
- Train properly for the race so your body is accustomed to the level of exertion that will be called for. For example, complete at least one training run of twenty miles or more before running a full marathon.

“This is kind of brutal,” Topher said.

“Yeah, man, it’s toasty out here. I feel sorry for these people.”

We crossed the finish line ten minutes faster than planned—perhaps a little too fast, given what still lay in front of me.

I spent the next two hours giving interviews, smiling for photos, signing books and posters, and chatting with fellow runners. At one point, I looked up from my seat to find John the twelve-year-old runner and his mother standing before me. He looked as good as new.

“Did you finish?” I asked hopefully.

“Piece of cake,” he replied. He was beaming from ear to ear.

As I signed his well-worn copy of my book, John told me excitedly about his future race plans. It’s a funny thing: If you’re truly born to run, erupting within sight of the finish line can be as likely to hook you on the sport as winning the race.

**QUICK TAKE:** *Raw ginger is a wonderful digestive aid for minor upset stomach and nausea. Try pickled ginger and ginger chews for a gentler response, or use freshly cut gingerroot if you’re seeking stronger relief. Use it either before you run to prevent problems, or during a run at the first sign of trouble.*



Moments after John and his mother bid me farewell, I felt raindrops against my skin. At first, it was just a misty sprinkle, but within fifteen minutes it was pouring buckets.

The crowd scattered. The Endurance 50 crew sprang into action, scrambling like a retreating army to disassemble and pack away everything before it got drenched. The festival area began to look more and more like a battlefield. Strewed everywhere were saturated posters, soggy half-eaten food scraps, and debris spilled from overflowing trash cans. A humid fog rose from the soaking hot pavement. The crew worked in gloomy silence. The banter and laughter that had punctuated their cooperative efforts only yesterday were not to be heard.

When the tedious job was completed at last, Topher bid us a hasty farewell. He would catch an evening flight back to Europe. Julie gave me one last hug. She too was heading for the airport. My parents and the kids climbed inside their small rented RV to follow the tour bus on a three-hundred-mile drive to Memphis, site of tomorrow's marathon.

Inevitably, a healthy sampling of wetness and filth created by the recent deluge was tracked onto the bus. A dank stench now filled our cramped quarters. The windows clouded over with condensation. Everything inside our mobile locker room became damp and slimy, and the floorboards were a slippery hazard.

## After the Marathon

Given our travel requirements, my typical post-marathon routine during the Endurance 50 was not ideal for recovery. Here's what you *should* do after finishing a marathon:

- Drink plenty of water to rehydrate your body. Drink enough so that your urine is consistently clear or pale yellow in color.
- Eat a nice hearty meal containing protein to repair your muscles, as well as carbohydrate to replenish your depleted muscle fuel stores. Examples include fish with rice pilaf, a turkey wrap, and pasta with meat sauce.
- Immerse your legs in an ice bath for ten minutes to reduce swelling and muscle pain. I do this regularly at home, but it wasn't practical during the Endurance 50.
- Hit the sack early and sleep as long as necessary to wake up feeling fully rested.
- Try to run—okay, hobble—the next day for at least twenty minutes to work out the stiffness.

“Well, this is pretty,” I said to English with forced levity as I stepped aboard the bus. He grunted affirmation.

After we began rolling, I felt the exhaustion come on. It was not the muscular depletion I was accustomed to feeling after a hard run but the brain-centered fatigue that one feels at the end of one's wedding day, after twelve straight hours of meeting, greeting, gabbing, smiling, solving small crises and being on stage. The marathon had taken a little out of me, but the post-race festivities had taken most of what remained. I wondered how the heck I could possibly keep this thing together all the way to New York, our final destination forty-nine days in the future.

# How to Officially Run Fifty Consecutive Marathons

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How is it possible to run fifty official marathons in fifty days in fifty states when most marathons take place on the weekends? Our solution was to involve the race directors of all the marathons whose sanctioned courses we chose to officially run. Sure, it required a ton of work and became a massive, painstaking undertaking, but it was the only legitimate way to accomplish the goal of running fifty marathons in fifty states in fifty days. It took us many months to get all the logistics in place, but it was the right decision.

We knew that many of the marathon course maps posted on the Internet were either incomplete or followed routes that were not passable on foot except on race day. Without the help of the race directors, we wouldn't be certain we ran their actual marathon. Anyone could question our credibility. We had gone the extra mile in every other phase of planning the Endurance 50; none of us was willing to compromise here.

From all this planning, hard work, and forethought, we now had an official starting line, a mechanism for following the sanctioned course, an official finish line, and an official race clock. Without all this in place, someone could legitimately debate the validity of the accomplishment. We had taken the extra measures to ensure we had the certification to prove each marathon. Done any other way, I couldn't have slept at night.

We also wanted potential participants to be able to sign up for the Endurance 50 marathons just as they would any other marathon. So interested runners could go to the Endurance 50 Web site and register on an [Active.com](http://Active.com) page just like they would for any other running event. They were sent an official entrant's packet prior to the marathon, and they were entered in the system and cross-referenced upon sign-in at the marathon start. To all appearances, this was just like every other race.

*Did we start on the right foot after all?* I asked myself. The surest way to experience a disastrous marathon is to run before you're ready—before you've done the hard training that's necessary to prepare your body to go the distance. The chaos of today's post-race autograph frenzy, the unexpected brutality of packing up and leaving in a monsoon, and the dispirited looks I now saw on the faces of Koop, Hopps (now bald-headed), and Dave, our rock-and-roll tour manager, suggested we might very well have bitten off more than we could chew. Enduring forty-nine more days of this seemed highly improbable.

Moments later, I caught myself making emergency contingency plans. We could return the sponsors' money, ditch the tour bus, and finish this thing on the small scale it maybe should have started on. But I realized this vision was an idle fantasy. Forget the sponsors—how could I disappoint the dozens more Johns out there waiting to have an experience like his (minus the hurling, I hoped)? No way. The Endurance 50 would have to be all or nothing.

*Quit your whining, Karno,* I told myself. *It's going to take a lot more than a bumpy start to stop this expedition.*

On the long drive that night, I read an e-mail that lifted my spirits and reaffirmed my commitment to keep going, not to mention providing a good belly laugh. It was in reference to the surprise renewal of my wedding vows with Julie. It went like this:

## Message to Dean Karnazes

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Dude, you suck. You've now set the bar so high that none of us will be able to rival that. My wife keeps asking me what my plans are for the next marathon. I know *exactly* what she's getting at!

Good luck Karno. Just, please, for the sake of all of us guys out here, don't pull anything like that again.

# Thank You for Your Support

*Day 2*

*September 18, 2006*

*St. Jude Memphis Marathon*

*Memphis, Tennessee*

*Elevation: 778'*

*Weather: 78 degrees; heavy rain showers*

*Time: 4:19:58*

*Net calories burned: 6,374*

*Number of runners: 17*

**I**deally, on the day before you run a marathon, you do a short jog in the morning to release some pent-up energy, relax the rest of the day, eat a healthy dinner, and turn in early. On the day before I ran the re-created version of the St. Jude Memphis Marathon on Day 2 of The North Face Endurance 50, I had a predawn blood draw, ran a marathon in the morning, signed autographs for two hours, rode three hundred miles on a bus, and checked into a hotel at 1:00 AM.

Shortly after sunrise, I joined the crew back on the bus. English then drove us downtown in search of the official starting line near the corner of Fourth and Beale streets. After a while, I realized we were repeatedly circling the Memphis business district.

“There’s nowhere to park.” English said calmly, almost cheerfully.

The St. Jude Memphis Marathon is normally run on the first Sunday in December. Today was September 18. A Monday morning. Rush hour.

## Dean’s Routine

Each day of the Endurance 50 was scheduled to follow roughly the same time line:

5:00 AM Wake up.

6:00 AM Blood draw and urine collection (when scheduled, following research protocol).

6:30 AM Breakfast.

7:30 AM Arrive at starting line.

8:00 AM Start.

Noon Finish (plus or minus one hour).

12:30 PM Finish Festival.

5:00 PM Wheels up.

6:00 PM Dinner on bus.

Midnight Arrive at next destination (plus or minus two hours).

Repeat 50 days.

At last we ditched the bus in a place of dubious legality and dashed blindly to the starting area across an intersection with no crosswalk. Awaiting our arrival were the seventeen runners who had signed up to run with me, race director Wain Rubenstein, and a large contingent of Memphis police officers who had just witnessed our death-defying group jaywalk (or “jayrun,” as it were).

I shook Wain’s hand and expressed my sincere gratitude for all the hard work he had done to make this event possible. Thanks to Wain, my new running friends and I would complete a formally sanctioned marathon this morning, with a certified course and an official race clock.

Staging marathons is a tough job. It demands long hours and with few exceptions is not especially high paying. Race directors take pride in giving most runners a great experience, and they grieve over the complaints they receive from a small number of participants who missed a turn or couldn’t find their favorite sports drink flavor at an aid station. Race directors, their staffs, and their race-day volunteers are the unsung heroes of our sport.

## Sign Me Up

The number of runners in each Endurance 50 event varied considerably, from just one (the re-created Deadwood Mickelson Trail Marathon in South Dakota on Day 10) to forty-two-thousand (the live Chicago Marathon on Day 36). The eight live events were the largest, of course, because they had all of the infrastructure in place and permits lined up for mass participation. Most of the forty-two re-created marathons were capped at fifty participants, because that’s the largest number we were able to obtain permits for. When support from local event organizers and officials allowed it, we were sometimes able to accommodate more runners. Other times, local authorities required us to cap the field at fewer than fifty runners.

Few of the early Endurance 50 marathons sold out. Interest steadily grew, though, and after a couple of weeks most events filled to capacity, with long waiting lists forming for some. None of us could believe it. In fact, many of the later marathons saw their share of “bandits”—non-official participants who missed the cutoff but wanted to run anyway. I had no problem with that during the re-created marathons. Many of these folks made generous donations to our charity to cover their participation.

After introductions were made, we turned our attention to the commanding officer, who gave us the game plan. His team would not close the roads entirely for 26.2 miles, as they do during the live marathon, he explained. Instead, they would create a sort of roaming road closure, using motorcycles to contain us runners in a manageable pod and sending patrol cars ahead to stop traffic as we ran through intersections.

“Can we order food?” one of the runners joked.

“Only if it’s doughnuts,” an officer shot back, drawing laughter.

I’d been on group runs before and was aware of at least some of the challenges this format would present. First of all, not everyone runs at the same pace—especially over such a great distance. How would the group hold together? Beyond differences in people’s running pace, shoelaces come undone and need retying. Overheating occurs, and layers of clothing must be shed. Chafing arises and demands prompt attention. Also, what happens when nature calls? How welcome would the watchful eye of a police escort be then? There were bound to be more bumps in the road along the way. I just

hoped these would be molehills and not mountains.

As they would at many of the daily marathons throughout the Endurance 50, Alexandria and Nicholas started us off by shouting, “On your marks . . . Get set . . . Go!” While we runners spent the next four hours sweating, the kids passed the morning by participating in homeschooling (or was it roadschooling?) under the tutelage of their grandmother, now retired from classroom teaching. They would break for lunch in time to hold up the finish line tape, hang out with us at the Finish Festival, and then usually do some sightseeing with my mom and dad while we packed and got ready to drive to the next state. All in all, not a bad routine.

Scarcely fifteen minutes after the first strides were taken of our inaugural re-created marathon, sure enough, it started raining heavily. Some of the runners had tied rain gear around their waists in anticipation of the inclement weather, but most had stashed their extra clothing in the SAG wagon that was trailing us. SAG stands for Support and Gear, although neither of these things was being provided at the moment, because the Toyota SUV that was serving this role was stuck in traffic well behind us. The rain had snarled intersections, and it was all the patrol officers could do to keep the runners moving along. The SAG wagon was caught at a red light. Fortunately, its crew had a GPS system on board called “Never Lost.” Unfortunately, it didn’t work. After the device sent its occupants the wrong way several times, we started calling it “Never Found.”

## When It Rains

Some runners don’t like running in the rain. Others do. Including me. Running in the rain will do you no harm as long as you avoid totally saturated feet. Once your socks become soaked, your chances of getting a blister increase. Gore-Tex shoes can help keep your feet dry, up to a point. But when it’s really coming down, be mindful of potential blistering, and stop, if possible, as soon as you feel a hot spot emerge. When running in the rain, you’ll find it most comfortable to use breathable rain gear, such as the North Face Diad jacket, designed especially for this use. It will keep the water out without trapping your excess body heat against your skin.

By the time the SAG wagon caught up, the damage had already been done. Most of us were soaked to the bone. Putting on rain gear at this point was useless, so no one even bothered.

Manning the vehicle were Garrett Greene, from the Squires Sports Group, and Koop, whose role in this operation seemed to be expanding by the minute—and thankfully so, because as a runner himself, Koop understood exactly what I needed and when I needed it.

Garrett, on the other hand, was not a runner. He looked more like a lumberjack. A stocky and muscular figure with a laid-back demeanor and a Louisiana drawl, he was officially serving the Endurance 50 in the role of course manager, though currently he seemed more like a mobile vending machine, dispensing dozens of energy bars, bottles of fluid, and energy gels from the window of the SAG wagon as we traveled the next two blocks. As quickly as these goodies were handed out, they were snatched up by the runners and consumed. Empty packaging was then returned to the vehicle.

Back in the real world, Koop and Garrett held jobs that looked nothing like this one, yet here they were busting their tails as high-speed food and beverage servers without a hint of complaint. I felt my heart swell with gratitude for the second time this morning. *Where would we be without guys like these?* I thought.

The rain eventually lightened, the streets began drying out, the sun poked through the clouds, and the runners started sharing their stories. What I heard blew my mind.

“Where are you from?” I asked a tall guy in his early thirties who reminded me of the actor Zach Braff.

“Mexico,” he said. He didn’t look Mexican. Or sound Mexican.

“How long have you been in the United States?”

“No, I live in Mexico,” he clarified.

“Oh. So what are you doing here?”

“Running a marathon with you.”

His name was Brad, and he was indeed an American expatriate, originally from Nebraska. He explained that he had flown in from Mexico City for the express purpose of taking part in this event. He had arrived last night and would leave tonight. Over the next few miles, I learned that Brad had started running only within the past year, after he quit drinking. This was his first marathon. His dream was to create a foundation to help others use running as a tool to overcome addictions.

“That’s a great idea,” I said, and I meant it. There’s no cure for an addictive personality. If you’re going to express a compulsive tendency, it might as well be through running. As Lily Tomlin once joked, “Exercise is for people who can’t handle drugs and alcohol.”

The next runner I spoke with was Wally, an elementary school education director from North Carolina.

“Today’s my twentieth wedding anniversary,” he said.

“Congratulations! How are you going to celebrate?” I asked.

“I’m celebrating right now.”

I laughed, thinking he was making a joke about his current state of suffering.

“I’m not kidding,” Walter said. “My wife surprised me by signing me up and buying two round-trip tickets from Charlotte to Memphis.”

I was speechless.

Another runner had taken a day off from work and driven all night to be here. Later, a big fellow named Paul, from Arkansas, told me he was planning to run three of the fifty marathons with me.

“You’ll see me again in Oklahoma and Kentucky,” he said.

“Wow! How long have you been planning for this?” I asked.

“Actually, I just decided to do the other two marathons now.”

My jaw dropped.

Our tidy little pod began to disintegrate at mile twelve, as a couple of the first-timers found themselves struggling to hold our pace of roughly nine minutes per mile. This wound up happening at most of the subsequent events, and in the majority of cases it didn’t cause major problems; Koop and Garrett did a terrific job shooting back and forth among the various splinter groups to provide needed aid.

The sun now had an unobstructed view of our progress, and the air was warming. Worse, my wet socks had softened the skin of my feet. As we shuffled past Sun Studio, where Elvis made his first recordings, I could feel a blister developing along the arch of my right foot, and I mentioned it to Koop.

“Do you want to tape it?” he asked.

“Nah. Let’s just wait till we reach the finish.”

Bad call. We got separated from the SAG wagon again, and that little hot spot on my foot developed into a nice baby volcano. By the time the finish line came into view, it was ready to erupt.

# Aid Station Etiquette

Without the support provided by the volunteers who manage fluid stations and perform other essential duties, running events wouldn't happen. Make their jobs easier and more enjoyable by observing these points of etiquette:

- Call out what you're looking for as you approach the aid station. For example, "Water!" or "Sports drink!"
- Make eye contact with your chosen volunteer and extend your arm toward the cup being offered several paces before you reach him or her.
- Thank the volunteer who hands you your drink.
- Try not to stop or slow down in the flow of runners. Instead, pull off to the side to drink, if necessary.
- To avoid potentially spraying other runners, don't throw your cup across the way, but drop it straight down, preferably in one of the trash cans provided along the course.

I quickly forgot about my foot, however, when I saw Alexandria and Nicholas stretching the finishing tape across the road. A couple of dozen spectators lined the streets, shouting encouragement as we made our way down the final stretch.

We runners spontaneously joined hands and lifted our arms in the air as we took our last few strides together. Cameras flashed, hands clapped, bells clanged, and police sirens wailed. My kids greeted me with big hugs.

Now the second marathon began. Hopps ushered me over to the media area (or "mosh pit," as I began calling it). The television networks were given precedence. CBS was first. Then Fox. Then came a barrage of reporters from newspapers, radio stations, and magazines. After doing my best to remain coherent throughout the interviews, I staggered over to the huddle of tired runners who had been waiting patiently for me at the Finish Festival.

## The Rub

A lot of people thought I would be getting lengthy rubdowns and massages during the Endurance 50. I should have been so lucky. The reality is that there just wasn't any idle time for such niceties. Upon completing a marathon, many of the runners wanted to have me sign their finisher's certificate or book, and perhaps snap a photo or two. Most were tired and sweaty, and wanted to get to a shower. I didn't think it would be fair to make them stand around for an hour waiting while I got a rubdown.

On the bus, there was simply no extra room to house another traveler. We were already cramped with our existing crew. There was no way I was going to burden those guys with another passenger. In the spirit of being a team player, I had to make sacrifices. The bodywork and massages would have to wait until Day 51.

By the time I had signed everything and talked with everyone, it was getting on into the afternoon. "Shouldn't we be going now?" I asked Dave. After all, we had a 425-mile drive to Mississippi ahead of us.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, but there was still stuff strewn everywhere. Our Moroccan bazaar looked



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