

Ultrarunning: An Autoethnography of a Runner's First 50-mile Race

Michael Lance Whisenant

Department of Learning Technologies, University of North Texas

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Dr. Scott Warren

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Michael Lance Whisenant.

Email: LanceWhisenant@my.unt.edu

Abstract

Running is largely individual and requires a tremendous amount of discipline and determination to complete races that are longer than a marathon (many consider a 50k the starting point of ultra-running). This study is a foundational autoethnography of a runner's first 50-mile race through the Ouachita Mountains near Little Rock, AR. A lightweight recording device was attached to the runner's hydration pack and served as the recording instrument in capturing the runner's thoughts, comments, and emergent themes that happened throughout the race.

Additionally, ten research articles are examined that explore the psychological mindset of runners who complete ultrarunning events to determine the potential commonalities among this group of people. It is the researcher's opinion that identifying the commonalities from this autoethnography, as well as examining several pieces of literature pertaining to the psychological mindset of ultrarunners, that the information obtained will provide a holistic understanding of the running community and why we strive to test our physical bodies and mental fortitude.

Keywords: ultrarunning, autoethnography, adversity, affirmation, psychology, coding

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This paper seeks to understand the use of autoethnography as a research approach to the sport of endurance running, specifically ultrarunning. For those unfamiliar with this type of research, I will describe the principles of autoethnography and how this research method is necessary for the research project described in later sections. For illustrative purposes, this paper is partitioned into distinct sections that allow the reader to a) understand what autoethnography is b) gain an understanding of the ethos of ultrarunning via a literature review, c) provide background information on the runner (myself) and the preparation that went into the 50-mile race, d) the method and procedure of data collection that forms the foundation for the emergent themes, and e) the actual, experienced run.

The data will then be compared to prior research articles in hopes of finding commonalities with my own interpreted themes. My hopes are to build a foundation that allows future readers to understand the physical and mental stresses that the human body can withstand, as well as to provide a concrete example of physical and mental fortitude. In doing so, I hope to contribute to the growing literature pertaining to the individual's ability to be resilient and to endure when faced with difficult circumstances. It is the researcher's opinion that, rather than just conduct desk research or ask other ultrarunners about their race experiences, I must experience for myself the capabilities of my own self-will thus leading credence to the phrase "practice what you preach." I will be entering Last Man Standing races, 24-hour races, 100-mile races, and others to fully immerse myself in the sport of ultrarunning. For this study, however, I will only be focusing on the emergent themes in the Ouachita Trail (OT) 50-mile race to see if what I discuss in this foundational paper mirrors what other researchers found when exploring the sport of ultrarunning. In conclusion, I will examine some of the strengths and weaknesses of

this type of qualitative research, while suggesting possible areas of exploration as it relates to ultrarunning and information gathering. With that being said, it is important to discuss what autoethnography is, and how it will be utilized throughout this paper.

A Brief History of Autoethnography

After reading multiple articles pertaining to the use of autoethnography as well as the history behind this particular research methodology, the same term “crisis of representation” habitually emerges. In exploring this phrase further, it appears to have arisen from an anthropology perspective in the book *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). This volume, according to Butz and Besio (2009), essentially criticized the ability to claim impartiality and positionality due to the self being an integral part in research method and observation. From this, a self-involved form of observation emerged in the form of autoethnography. “The auto, the self (autos); the ethno, ‘race’ or nation (ethnós) - nowadays more usually applied to a socio-cultural group; and the graphy, the writing (graphein) or other form of representation” (Allen-Collinson, p. 5, 2012). This type of research, due to its self-involved nature, requires “high levels of critical awareness and reflexivity and, many of us would add, self-discipline (Allen-Collinson, p. 5, 2012). This can open the door to criticism in that some might characterize this form of research as simply a form of self-promotion and/or egotism. However, “autoethnographers recognize the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process. For instance, a researcher decides who, what, when, where, and how to research, decisions necessarily tied to institutional requirements (e.g., Institutional Review Boards), resources (e.g., funding), and personal circumstance (e.g., a researcher studying cancer because of personal experience with cancer)” (Ellis et al., p. 2, 2011). With this being said, it is vital that the researcher conduct a critical analysis of their interpersonal conclusions to provide a cultural view that is understandable to

both members and non-members. It is the opinion of the researcher that this methodology is appropriate and fitting when attempting to understand ethos of ultrarunning; in short, incorporating myself into a group and writing about the lived experience(s) of this culture.

Literature Review

According to Running races 2022 - 2023: Ultramarathons held in the USA, 2,516 ultramarathon (UM) running events are scheduled for the 2022-2023 calendar year. “The distances of UM races vary from 31 to over 100 miles and are often distinct due to the challenging environments in which they take place (e.g., forests, mountains, jungle, and desert)” (Simpson et al., p. 176, 2014). Studies have been conducted on ultramarathon runners’ motivations (Krouse et al., 2011; Hamer et al., 2002; Masters & Ogles, 1998), interpersonal relationships (Harman et al., 2019), and self-talk (McCormick et al., 2018) with much of the research conducted without the researcher being fully immersed in the ultramarathon; meaning they were tasked with asking a participant to relay information.

Referencing prior literature, Harman et al. (2019), were attempting to determine the impact that social interactions had on ultra-runners while competing in a race (in this instance, Britain’s Spine Race). Social interactions included those that were enacted between the runner and other racers, volunteers, family, friends, medics, and the public in general. It was determined that these social interactions (some of which developed into interpersonal relationships) had a significant impact on the ultra-runner’s psychological mindset. These interactions occurred before, during, and after a race and had an overall positive impact (especially during the race in which the runner’s psyche is potentially vulnerable, which could lead to a runner quitting).

Similarly, McCormick et al. (2018), were interested in the effect that motivational self-talk had on runners competing in a 60-mile, overnight ultramarathon. Twenty-nine runners were

randomly selected to be placed in a group which utilized motivational self-talk, while others were placed in an alternative group. The researchers did not find a significant result (or performance benefit) pertaining to motivational self-talk. However, it was determined that many runners found the self-talk mediation helpful and continued to use the skills taught them in future races.

Likewise, researchers Simpson et al. (2014), were interested in learning about the training and competition experiences of ultra-runners. Twenty-six runners were selected via purposive sampling and selected from various websites pertaining to ultrarunning. All participants were interviewed, and each interview session began with the following open-ended question: “When you think about your experience of competing in ultramarathons, what stands out for you?” The researchers were interested in conducting a phenomenological study to determine the meaning and commonality among the studied population (in this case, ultrarunners). Five themes were discovered related to the runners’ experiences: community, preparation and strategy, management, discovery, and personal achievement. In conclusion, the researchers found that their results were consistent with prior studies, and that ultrarunners should employ “various cognitive strategies such as restructuring, self-talk, arousal management, and attentional focus control” (Simpson et al., 2014, p. 184).

In a qualitative study conducted by researchers from the University of West Virginia and Temple University, 12 ultra-runners were interviewed about their perceptions of mental toughness. Interviewees were asked multiple questions pertaining to their definition of mental toughness, traits involved in mentally tough people, personal experiences witnessed and experienced, and how they developed mental toughness. Common themes that emerged were: “physical toughness,” “too crazy to know when to quit,” “goal-oriented,” “positive self-talk,”

“obsessive,” “perspective,” and “prior race training/experiences.” These themes, found by Jaeschke et al. (2016), provide an excellent insight into the mind of an ultrarunner yet still fail to provide the much-needed first-person perspective. In a similar mode of investigation,

Researchers from various colleges in Australia were interested in learning the resilience characteristics demonstrated by ultra-runners. Twenty ultra-runners were selected based on age, gender, and having completed an ultramarathon within the past year. They were then tasked with completing the following questionnaires: Conner-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC), Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ), Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ), and the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire- Brief Form (MPQ-BF). Results indicated that runners differed significantly from non-runners in that they were more resilient, more likely to use positive reappraisal, and lower in affiliative extraversion. These results supported the researcher’s hypothesis in that ultra-runners are more resilient than their counterparts.

In reviewing these articles, a centralized theme that emerges is one of the researchers seeking data from the runners. While this is a common practice in research, it is my opinion that, combined with questionnaires, interviews, and other means of obtaining data, the investigator should experience the race themselves to gain a first-person understanding of what they are studying. This perspective could lead to a more robust knowledge base since the researcher would be completely involved and living the investigation project. This thought process is the foundation of this study, as well as the guiding principle for future projects involving the ethos ultrarunning. In terms of this initial paper, I only have one objective and guiding principle: Finish the race and document via a recorder my experience. This allowed the research process to occur naturally as I did not have a specific objective to accomplish. It is my opinion that by

conducting this initial investigation in this manner, I will be able to build upon key tenets found in this venture and thus establish legitimacy as my research will have been grounded and sensible.

Methods

This study was designed prior to my first 50-mile run, the OT 50, which occurred on April 9, 2022, in the city of Maumelle, Arkansas (located near Little Rock, AR). Due to this being an autoethnography, and that my spoken comments were the sole data to be examined, I did not seek my university's institutional review board. Any references made throughout the paper that involves other runners or volunteers, are not the individual's quoted words, only a generalized form of the statement as I understood it.

I am a thirty-six-year-old male and have been running consistently since 2019. I began competing in running events in October 2020 by completing my first half-marathon. After this, I completed my first marathon in May 2021 and subsequently experienced my first running injury. I was able to finish the race yet sustained an injury to my Iliotibial Band (IT Band). At mile 20 of the race, I experienced a sharp pain in my left-knee, yet I did not know the root cause of the issue; I merely knew it hurt. I finished the race and assumed it would heal via rest and did not give it anymore thought. I then began increasing my distance, increasing my strength-training workouts, and monitoring my nutritional intake due to the intense enjoyment that running provided me.

I ran my first ultramarathon in the form of a 50k (31.1 miles) in November 2021. During this run, again at mile 20, I experienced a sharp pain in my right-knee. I instantly knew this was the same issue that I had previously experienced, albeit a different knee, yet I did not want to stop and fail to complete my objective. So, I began powerwalking as this did not cause any pain.

When I felt I could run, I would proceed to shuffle while landing on my left leg and swinging my right so it would not bear much impact. I could only do this style of running for a few minutes until the pain returned. However, I was able to complete the race in six hours and twenty-five minutes, yet I knew I had an issue that needed to be resolved. I visited a Physical Therapist in early January, and it was determined that my IT Band was the cause of my discomfort. I was given a list of strength-training exercises which focused on strengthen the muscles around the inflamed tendon. Problem solved (or so I thought). In March 2022, I completed my second 50k and had no issues with my IT Band yet learned valuable nutritional information that greatly assisted me in my 50-mile race.

I feel it is important to mention that I do not have a running coach, nor do I follow a prescribed workout via an application or other method. My training regimen was built through trial and error and learning what worked for my body and mental mindset. I wear a GPS tracking watch that allows me to monitor my run, heartrate, and other information pertaining to my run or workouts. The information gained from my runs, coupled with reading multiple articles, and pursuing multiple websites, is my source of knowledge.

The OT 50 is an out-and-back trail run that begins with a climb up Pinnacle Mountain at mile five of the race. This climb, approximately a 1,000 feet accent (see Appendix A) in less than a mile, is then followed by traversing rolling hills and rocky terrains along the shore of Lake Maumelle. The total accumulated ascent for the run was roughly 4,000 feet, with an equal amount of elevation loss (see Appendix B). There was a total of 11 aid stations (sites manned by volunteers who provide nutrition and information) for the entire 50-mile course; six on the out-trail and five on the return. Two of the aid stations allowed for the runner to have drop bags (these are bags that the runner packs with their own nutrition and then submitted to the

volunteers prior to the start of the race). At each aid station, the volunteers would document your race number and inform you of the cut-off time for that station and whether you were in danger of being removed from the course. To successfully complete the 50-mile run, the runner had to cover the trail in 13 hours.

Prior to the start of the run, I had attached a small audio recorder to my hydration vest as this would serve my way of narrating my thoughts in real time throughout the run. I was able to capture 11 hours of data as my recorder failed to document two hours' worth of audio. However, the information gleaned is purposeful, revealing, and served as viable data sources for this project. In the week after the run, I uploaded my data to a transcription service (otter.ai) and open coded the themes that emerged from the data. Again, I did not have a specific question that I was seeking an answer for. My research goal was to allow the data to present itself in the form of commonalities and experiences.

Results

Three prominent themes emerged as a result of the open coding analysis to which I have labeled: Affirmation, Adversity, Assistance. The following paragraph is a summary of the run as I feel this will provide perspective as to why the aforementioned themes were chosen.

So, the run was essentially a 50-mile obstacle course and it beat me up good. The climb up Pinnacle Mountain is straight up and you are climbing boulders. It is a beautiful view at the top, but I couldn't linger for too long because I still had another 44 miles to go.

The actual running trail is more rock than dirt (I kicked at least 50 rocks that were disguised, or I just didn't see them; my toes took a bruising but fortunately my shoes are quality and have a solid toe-guard) and at Mile 17 or 18 is when we started crossing streams. Some streams you were able to cross from wet rock to wet rock and others you just had to plunge in

and get soaked from the knee down. One stream, more like a river, had a rope you had to grab in order to cross it. I was running with wet feet for the duration of the run, and I didn't have time to change my socks for this reason: In my haste to leave the aid station at mile 16, I missed the sign for the trail and ended up running .4 miles in the wrong direction. I then had to run .4 miles back, find the trail, and try to make up the time I lost.

And to top it off, my IT Band flared up in my left knee on mile 20. I had to land and push with my right leg and swing my left leg so it would bear only minimal impact. Fortunately, I could power walk and it didn't hurt so I was speed-walking 15-min miles to make sure I made the checkpoint cutoff times. When I was falling behind my minimum 15-min pace, I would do a shuffle-style run to make up time. I couldn't do this for more than 100 yards at a time or my IT band would scream at me.

Oh, and I rolled my right ankle at mile 40. At that point in the race, I didn't care about the pain or if I had to crawl across the finish line; I was going to accomplish my singular goal of finishing the race. The cutoff time was 13-hours and me and another guy walked in with 10-15 minutes to spare (see Appendix C). Of the 50-mile runners who finished the race, I tied for last, and I have never been prouder to finish in last place

The following analysis of the coding schema will provide direct comments from the run as well as provide insight into my personal experience of the race.

Affirmation

Multiple times throughout the run, I would affirm my goal of "finishing the race" either to other runners or to myself. The following statements were transcribed from my audio recorder and "cleaned" in that punctuation was added.

- "I don't care if I finish in last place, as long as I FINISH THE RACE!"

- “The goal is to finish the race.”
- “Because that is the only goal is to finish this thing; I don't care if I'm dead last, it doesn't matter to me.”
- I've got to get there even if they try, later on, I'm close the end and its close to 13 hours and that's it; I'm gonna run 50 Miles. It'll be recorded on my Garmin watch and it's 50 Miles.

Adversity

Throughout the race, I experienced pain in my left IT band, starting near mile 20. I also proceeded to roll my ankle at mile 40.

- “My IT band is super flared up. I thought I had this problem solved whenever I went to therapy to get what I can do to strengthen it and everything. I thought I had it figured out; I think I do, it's just this freaking course. I don't know how many times I kicked my foot over a rock. How many times I have almost fallen; how many times I've tweaked it. I am just happy I can walk.”
- “Not about to stop, I'll freakin' crawl if I have to; can't tell you how many roots and stones I've kicked; my toes, oh my god, I can't imagine how badly they're gonna hurt; there goes another one; almost fell. My legs feel no cramping, no soreness, it's just this freaking IT Band.”
- “Nothing I can do about it right now. I've taken my prescription strength Ibuprofen already. So, this is as best as it's gonna get. Fortunately, I can walk.”
- “I'm making it as good as I can; I'm ready to get out of these woods. Yeah, I mean, I probably kicked 30-40 stones today. I can't imagine what my toes are gonna look like tomorrow. Like, I don't understand that. Like, I don't see how I'm still kicking them.”

- “I’m too close and I’m just going to just deal with this and then I’ll deal with it when I get done.”

Assistance

The aid station workers at each station were incredibly supportive in their actions and words. They helped fill up my hydration pack while I ate oranges or bananas and recorded my bib number to document my process throughout the race. Encouragement was offered in the form of: “You got this!”, “Only x-number of miles to go!”, etc. At one particular aid station, mile 40-ish, I could not get my fingers to operate correctly. The worker took my pack and proceeded to refill my pack while offering words to the extent of: “That’s why we are here, to help you when you can’t help yourself.” Fellow runners would offer platitudes as we would pass one another: “You got this!”, “Great job!”, and “The aid station is not too much longer!”, and other similar comments. I did not witness one derogatory comment, nor did I experience or witness any negativity.

Discussion

According to Gorichanez (2015), “ultrarunning is a difficult undertaking, and athletes typically undergo periods of desperation and sometimes pain during events.” I find this statement to be factual based on my experience in the OT 50. In referencing my comments associated with the Adversity theme, I experienced pain throughout the majority of the race. While I did not despair, I did experience moments of anxiety due to being close to the cutoff times mandated by the aid station volunteers. However, prior to the race, I had determined that if I could keep a 15:00 minute pace then I would be able to complete the course in the allotted 13-hour timeframe. This knowledge provided a calming effect because I knew I could maintain this pace even in my weakened state. Gorichanez (2015) also mentioned what he called “support memes.” This

phrase, as defined by the author, means “a quick exchange of compliments, which served as offerings of social support.” This finding coincides with my theme of Assistance and lends credence to the notion that, while ultrarunning is an individual sport, there is a social connection that exists while undergoing the same experience.

Concerning the Affirmation theme that arose from the data, Schmeichel and Vohs (2009) were interested in self-control and how the tasks required to maintain this control could become depleted, and that by self-affirming their control they were able to persevere when in a depleted state of mind. This notion ties to what I experienced in my run. There were moments of anxiety, fatigue, and disappointment in that the race was not progressing the way I had envisioned it would. Yet, by repeatedly telling myself that “I am going to finish this race” or that “I don’t care if I finish in last place, as long as I finish the race,” I was able to habitually remind and self-affirm to myself that my goal could be achieved, and that any discomfort is merely a temporary obstacle to my overall goal of completion (see Appendix D).

Lastly, and the dominant theme that emerged, was that of Adversity. Seery et al. (2013) stated that, “exposure to some adverse events is associated with optimal outcomes, relative to exposure to either no adversity or a high number of adverse events” (p. 1181). While I would not say that my outcome was optimal, I did achieve the outcome I desired as well as learning that I was willing to push my body, even while being injured, to achieve my goal. While this might not have been the smartest move, it did present a future research opportunity that will be explored in the second article pertaining to ultrarunning; namely, resilience factors as it relates to goal completion. In short, and without detracting from the current paper’s open-coded thematic findings, I will seek to explore my fellow runner’s mindsets as it relates to their ability to persevere in pursuit of their ultrarunning goals. I believe this information will assist those in the

field of information research, psychology, sociology, and other similar social science fields, to demonstrate the cohesion needed between body and mind to achieve difficult outcomes.

Conclusion

In closing, it is the researcher's opinion that the aforementioned themes of Affirmation, Adversity, and Assistance, follow similar findings from other researchers when exploring the sport of ultrarunning, as well as though who pursued self-control and adversity as a stressor to optimal performance. This leads me to believe that ultrarunning is ripe for more research in the field of psychological mindset, resiliency factors, overcoming adversity, support while struggling, and other areas that would benefit a host of different fields of study. As demonstrated in the literature, as well as the results, the culture of ultrarunning is one that encompasses many of the factors we face throughout life: joy, stress, sickness, pain, self-will, mental fatigue, and others. These influences allow us to grow as a person while learning the limits of what we are capable of. It is my intention to explore these capabilities, as well as inspire others to find out their physical and mental composition.

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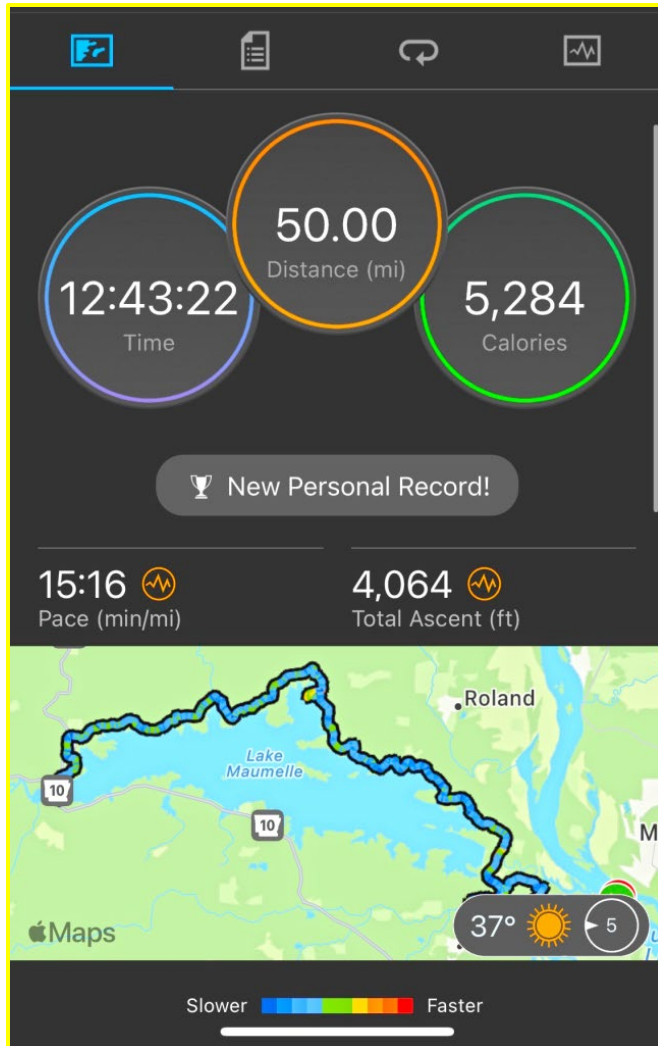
Appendix A



Appendix B

ELEVATION		
Total Ascent		4,064 ft
Total Descent		4,042 ft
Min Elevation		249 ft
Max Elevation		999 ft

Appendix C



Appendix D

