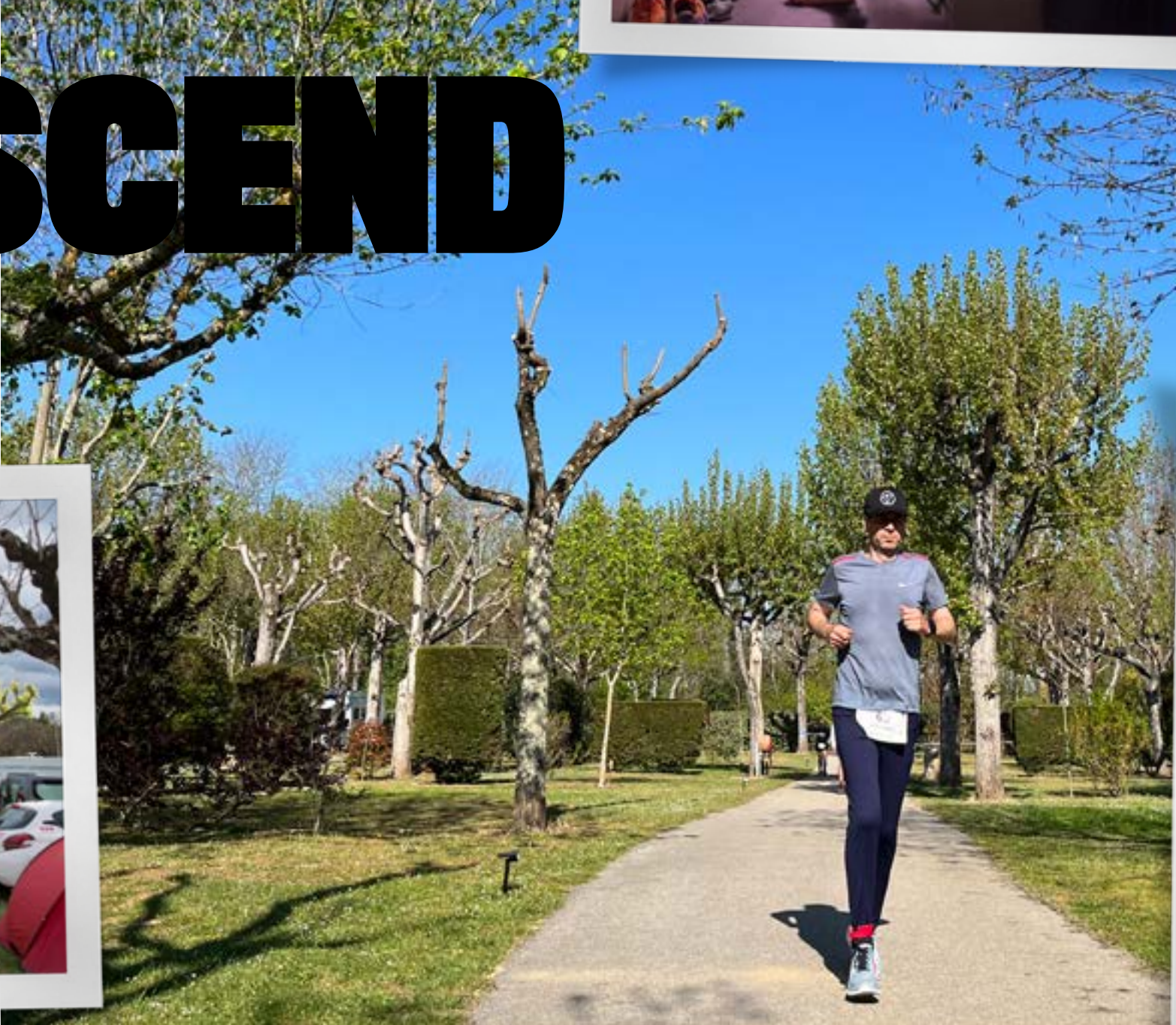


JOY OF SIX



Can running a 1km loop on a French campsite for six days lead you to a higher state of being? Adharanand Finn searches for wisdom and transcendence among the exhaustion and imaginary fireworks

THE TRANSCEND GAME



As I stood on the start line of the 6 Jours de France on a warm and blustery afternoon in the Ardèche region of southern France, I had to ask myself:

What the hell am I doing here?

Am I mad?

A few years ago, after running my sixth marathon, I found myself moving on to ultramarathons. They were tough, but each one was an unforgettable, life-enriching adventure. Although not quite enough, it seems. Like a thrill seeker who needs to keep pushing the envelope, once I heard about six-day races, I was intrigued.

Six-day races are distinct from six-day stage races, such as the Marathon des Sables, in that they run continuously – 24 hours a day, for six days – and rather than traversing a great desert or mountain range, you simply run around and around a short, flat loop – in this case, 1.1km around a French campsite.

Such races, it turns out, have a long and noble tradition. Bizarrely, back in the 1870s, six-day racing was the biggest sport in the world, with world championship events taking place in venues such as New York's Madison Square Garden, in front of crowds of up to 35,000. The results made the front page of *The New York Times* and prize purses were worth up to £500,000 in today's money.

The sport's time in the limelight may have passed, but the history gave some credence to the event. This wasn't just some cranks thinking up ways to torture themselves, but a proper distance with history and records.

For many, the thought of running laps for so long may sound unbearably dull, but I found myself drawn by the inner journey involved. I'd run a 24-hour track race twice before and while the scenery may have been monotonous, the races themselves were never boring. It was the racing experience stripped bare. There was



no epic landscape to distract you, or to battle against, or to lose yourself in. It was just you and the act of moving. As one runner told me, 'In a race like this, it's not you versus the mountain, it's you versus you.'

Numbers game

BEFORE MY SIX-DAY RACE, I set myself a goal. That seemed important. It gave me something to shoot for and a pace to try to maintain. I had once run 100km (62 miles) in just over 12 hours, so I figured running 100km every 24 hours should be fairly achievable. So, I set my goal as 600km.

I started at what felt like a snail's pace. The flat course reminded me of a Scalextric track, looping out in a wide oval at both ends, with a long straight middle section you traversed in both directions. It even had a little chicane. And we were the little cars, except we were more like wind-up soldiers, or clockwork trains chug-chugging around the curves, down the straights, stuck all the time to this little track.

The first sign of tiredness came about three hours in, when I began noticing hills emerging on a course that had seemed flat for the first few laps. On some advice I'd been given before the race, I began to walk the hills. It felt funny to think of them as hills, but it gave a neat run/walk structure to my loop. My legs began to notice the gradual change in inclination and respond accordingly, slowing to a walk at the first sign of gradient. Then, as my legs felt things easing into a slight descent, I'd tip into a rolling jog.

For the rest of that first day, I had my system. At certain fixed points I'd tip into a run, or slow to a walk. I was still clocking a good time and, 10 hours in, at midnight, I'd done a solid 70km. It was time for a rest.

I'd planned to sleep for six hours, but my legs ached so much that I tossed and turned restlessly, hardly sleeping at

all, and rose at 5.30am almost relieved to escape my bedridden ordeal. I'd gone to bed in 11th position (out of 47 runners), but when I checked the scoreboard on my first lap the next morning, I'd dropped to 36th. Yikes. Most people had kept going through the night.

Throughout the first day or so, stepping back on to the course after a break felt almost comforting, like putting on some well-worn shoes. Ah, yes, back here again. I began to feel, as US ultrarunner Camille Herron puts it, like 'a marble in a groove', just slotting back in, rolling with the loop. It also reminded me, in a lighter moment, of Homer Simpson, with his butt groove on his sofa and that feeling of comfort he gets settling back into it. Yes, this loop was home now.

By day two, I was maintaining my goal pace, but breaks were becoming more and more tempting. We had a cabin with a large veranda just a few metres from the course, where my crew – my wife and two of my children – were. I'd wander over and they'd jump into action, 'What can I get you?'

I knew eating was crucial – they call ultrarunning 'an eating competition with some running thrown in' – so I set a target of 60g carbs every hour. My family were enthusiastic, logging everything I ate and insisting I ate more if it wasn't enough. It was so tempting to stop and sit for a few minutes. But the clock was always ticking. I'd see that red line, my 6km-an-hour goal pace, sneaking up behind me. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the laps were getting harder. And the hills kept growing. It was now certifiably a hilly loop. I started bending my own rules on which bits to run and which bits I could walk.

All day, I felt like I was running away from an incoming tide, a gathering storm. Every time I stopped, I looked furtively at my watch. The red line was closing. I had to

549 miles

The women's six-day world record, set by Sandra Barwick in 1990

stay ahead. I felt like a man on the run from the law. Hauling myself up and out again on to the track.

By 9pm on that second night, I was exhausted. As night fell, I slowed dramatically, barely able to run at all. Even my walking had slowed. At this rate, I was going to grind to a complete stop. I reasoned that, since I'd felt good that morning after my sleep, I'd be better off going to bed and getting up earlier. Why slog around for another painful hour now, when I could race around refreshed for an extra hour in the morning? To my addled brain it made perfect sense.

I hadn't expected this race to be so tactical, but deciding when to run, when to walk and when to rest was a big part of it. Was a 10-minute nap more valuable than a lap spent walking? What about a two-hour sleep?

That night, though, I barely slept again, my legs oozing pain as soon as I lay down. When I emerged at 4.30am, bleary eyed into the darkness, the other runners were all still out there, trudging by, bent over, leaning to one side or striding with purpose, jogging, some with head torches, others just following that well-worn groove in the darkness. Had no one else slept again?

It felt like I'd emerged from my warm bed into a scene of madness. It looked, in that moment, like some forced march in a prisoner camp. No one was smiling. They looked ▶

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Adharanand is joined on the course by one of his family support crew.

THIS PAGE: (Left) Unlike many multi-day stage races, there's no stunning scenery to distract you. (Top, right) Emerging from fitful sleep, Adharanand realises many runners have kept going through the night. (Bottom, right) The miles take their toll





ABOVE: Adharanand succumbs to sleep as exhaustion wins the race. **RIGHT:** At some points, he felt trapped in what felt like the sheer madness of the whole endeavour

numb, dead eyes staring. The electronic timing tags we wore around our ankles to click off the laps reminded me suddenly of the tags criminals have to wear. We were trapped on this loop, forced to check in with the timing mat on every lap.

Yet, it was all voluntary. We had even paid for the privilege. Of all the activities undertaken by humans in the pursuit of fun and adventure, I wondered, was anything quite as mad as this? As I sat on my veranda in the dark, pulling on my trainers, preparing to rejoin the fray, I couldn't think of anything.

Breaking free

AT THE END OF EACH LAP, an electronic scoreboard updated your distance. People stopped to check their progress. The numbers were crucial. Everyone had a number, a goal distance, dangling in front of them, pulling them forwards. Was that all this was? A counting exercise? Was there no deeper reason for putting ourselves through it?

At some point on the third day, I decided to release myself from the slave-driving Garmin, constantly whipping me to stay ahead of the 6km-an-hour red line. Surely there was more to this race than clocking up numbers?

With the watch off, I immediately felt better. It was as though I could look around and take in my surroundings for the first time. Such amazing trees everywhere, their fat, upwards branches writhing like horned sea monsters. Smiling French campers cheered as I passed and I waved back. I started talking more to other runners. One was race leader Bob Hearn, from the US.

'Hi,' I said, as he passed.
'Hi,' he replied. I quickened my pace to keep up with him.
'I've had an epiphany,' he said, just like that. 'I've turned off my watch.'

It turned out he had been going through a similar experience of feeling the pressure of maintaining his goal pace. It was a big deal for him to turn his watch off, he said.

623 miles

The British six-day record, set by George Littlewood in 1888. In 1990, James Zarei set the modern British record of 622 miles

He was known for his meticulous pacing and number crunching, and he had come to France hoping to break the US age group record (he was 57). But in recent races, he said, he had started seeing things differently.

The times and record chasing gave a structure to his running, but that wasn't why he ran. What he really did it for, he said, was the feeling of transcendence he sometimes got in a long race like this, a feeling that he had reached a higher state of being, beyond his everyday existence. The last race he had experienced this, he had set a course record without trying. He said he wanted to experience that feeling again and constantly stressing about his watch was not helping.

After a few laps, I had to slow down and let him go, but the time we had run together had flown by easily. There was no doubt the numbers were still important, even to me and Bob, even after we'd turned off our watches. I mean, would anyone run around this loop for six days and not measure it? But the numbers surely weren't enough on their own to justify such a huge undertaking.

I asked another American runner, Amy Mower, why she did these races (this was her fourth six-day race). 'I'm an atheist,' she said. 'But I find god in a six-day race. I get to a point where I feel at one with the universe. And for a moment, I feel like I am enough. That I am good enough as I am. I rarely feel that in the rest of my life.'



PHOTOGRAPHY: MARIETTA D'ERLANGER

Find a six-day race

Unfortunately, there are no six-day races in the UK, and the closest one is the 6 Jours de France (6jours-de-france-gerard-cain.fr). One of the best known races is the EMU six-day race in Hungary, held every September (emusport.hu). In the US, there are the Six Days in the Dome in Milwaukee (run6days.com) and Across The Years (aravaiparunning.com) in Phoenix, Arizona.

Six-day kit list

Shoes

You need a few pairs of different shoes so your feet aren't always working in exactly the same way. Your feet will also expand during the race, so I used shoes one size too big. I used all Hoka shoes, for their ample cushioning. The most comfortable pair during the race, the ones I most enjoyed putting back on, were the Mach 5.

Headphones

I'm not usually one for listening to music or podcasts while running, but I'll make an exception for a race this long. I used Shokz OpenRun Pro – incredibly lightweight and the bone conduction tech lets other sounds in.

Gear

You're not out in the mountains, so something lightweight that doesn't rub is all you need. My three favourite pieces of kit were my lightweight New Balance Impact Running Jacket, Runderwear undershorts and Stance running socks. I got zero chafing and, amazingly, not a single blister.



That sounded more like it. Sure, I wanted to run 600km, but feeling at one with the universe, well, that felt like a more profound reason to run around a loop for six days.

Also in the race were two British ultrarunning legends, Richard and Sandra Brown. I noticed they weren't running together, but were racing at their own pace, each on their own separate journey. Yet they were almost always neck and neck on the leader board. I asked Sandra, who has, incredibly, run over 200 races of 100 miles or more, setting numerous records along the way, if she was locked in a battle to beat her husband. She was just a few laps ahead of him on the leader board, I pointed out.

'Am I?' she said, surprised by the news. 'I haven't looked. I only look at the board about once a day.'

So not everyone was obsessed with the numbers. Why, then, was she out here piledriving her way around this pointless loop? At 74 years old, having achieved what she has, wouldn't she prefer to spend a week away in France doing something a little more relaxing?

'I've done so many of these races,' she said. 'And there's something noble about them. I look around me and everywhere I see courage. It takes real courage to do something like this. It's a wonderful thing to behold.'

'People who haven't done one,' she added over her shoulder, as she began to get away from me, 'they can't understand it. But there's a magic to it. It's really magical.'

Well, I was halfway through one, and at that moment I was struggling to see any magic. There must be a thin line between madness and magic, I thought. But in search of the magic, I ploughed on.

I don't know if it was quite transcendence, or magic, or god, but that night, as I pushed a little deeper into the pain before stopping, things started to get a little trippy. The trees, lit from beneath, began to look like slow-motion fireworks, their leaves an explosion of shimmering lights above my head. I smiled and felt strangely happy, detached from the race and more like I was wandering around an enchanted garden in a dream. Everything looked like a Japanese painting. The landscape had a magical, almost liquid quality to it. It lasted for about an hour, before, like someone had opened a door and let in a cold wind, my legs suddenly ground to a halt beneath me and the thought of sleep swept in and overwhelmed everything else.

Day by day

I WAS LOSING TRACK OF THE DAYS. Because day one started at 2pm, that meant the official start of each new day, according to the timer, was at 2pm – but I had been treating each new dawn as a new day. It was enough to confuse my exhausted brain. At some point, I realised my 100km-a-day red line had overtaken me and disappeared into the distance. I wasn't even going to get close. But I didn't care. I was doing the best I could. I was still going. That was something in itself.

Another piece of advice I'd received before this race was, 'Be kind to yourself.' That's what I was now doing. I told myself I just had to run when I could, walk when I couldn't run and rest when I had to. The numbers could do their thing and we could add them up afterwards. ▶



By day five, I was almost exclusively walking. As someone with a running background, who used to run track and cross-country, I'd always seen walking in a race, even an ultra, as a mark of failure. However, some of those people near the top of the leader board were also walking almost the entire loop as well. If you walked with enough purpose and didn't take too many breaks, you could go a long way in six days. I had to embrace it. Walking was simply part of a six-day race.

My problem was that I had never practised walking. When it came to walking, I was an untrained athlete, someone who had wandered in off the street. How could I hope to keep up? I remember doing an exercise class once where we had to imagine what our legs felt like. Now, if I imagined them, I pictured metal barrels filled with concrete and a toxic liquid seeping out between the joints. Or perhaps they were sandbags. When I tried to run, I had about as much bounce in my legs as though they were heavy sandbags.

The days blurred, the miles ticked by slower and slower. I decided to try to run through the final night. I had to experience at least one night out on the loop. I tried, but I got so slow at times, walking with such a dejected trudge, that I ended up convincing myself of the need for a couple of two-hour sleeps. I watched men and women, many of them in their seventies, eyes fixed ahead, still pushing on. As one of the youngest runners in the race (at 49), I felt pathetic. What were we all doing out here? What were we trying to prove? What about me? What, deep down, was compelling me to keep going?

It felt, in some ways, like an escape. This race meant taking six days out from the world to bury myself in simple movement, destroying any semblance of ego and getting away from all the complications I carried around in my daily life. I was slowly merging with the void.

644 miles

The men's six-day world record, set by Yiannis Kouros, in 2005

'Sprint' finish

AT SOME POINT ON THE FINAL MORNING, after meandering through what you might call a 40-hour bad patch, I looked at the numbers next to my name on the leader board and did some calculations. I'd just passed 450km, which was 279 miles. I had six hours left. Another 35km would take me to 300 miles (485km). That seemed like a nice number to end on. A hefty, satisfying number.

It would mean getting back to running 6km an hour for the last six hours. I hadn't managed that since day two. In fact, I'd barely run at all for 40 hours. Who was I kidding? But the moment I saw it, I got the urge to go for it. I needed something to chase, something to shake me from the lethargy.

I tried a little run. In the previous 40 hours, each time I'd done this my legs had whined at me to stop. But with this new focus on the horizon, with the big 300 miles sitting there like a fairytale castle at the end of a long, winding path, the legs responded. 'Go on then,' they seemed to say. I felt a steeliness to my resolve that I had long thought lost. I was on a mission. 'Come on, team,' I yelled as I passed my family sitting on deckchairs on the veranda. 'Three hundred miles is on!'

My children had long ago lost their early enthusiasm for racing around fetching me things and stared at me blankly. But I was gone, crunching over the timing mat, hearing that satisfying beep, seeing the lap time quicker than it had been

THIS PAGE: (Main image) Reduced to a walk with legs feeling like heavy sandbags. (Inset) Some competitors needed running repairs to their battered bodies. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Adharanand reflects on a unique race experience



for days. I grabbed a drink from the table and pushed on. Was this transcendence? Maybe a little.

After an hour, the reality that I'd embarked on what was effectively a six-hour sprint finish came over me like a cloud blocking the sun. But I wouldn't let it settle. Five hours now. I'd been thinking in four-hour blocks for days. Time had warped. Five hours really didn't seem that long. I poked the cloud away. This really did feel like the finishing straight.

My legs gave me back all the bounce they'd been keeping from me and I made it to 300 miles with almost an hour to spare. My last mile covered in under nine minutes. It's all relative, but after six days, that was flying. I wasn't going to make 600km, but I was ending the race a wiser man, unperturbed by such things and with 300 miles achieved.

Bob had also decided to chase some numbers, eventually running 758km and winning the race by over 100km. 'You lose the joy of it if you make it all about the numbers,' he said. 'But at the same time, you've got to keep the numbers in the back seat. Don't chuck them away. They still have a role.' Without pushing yourself to achieve something, it was too easy to give up. And if you did that, the experience of transcendence was also lost. It was a conundrum we both decided we were still grappling with.

Epilogue

LOOKING BACK, THE RACE WAS strangely never quite as intense as some of the other ultramarathons I've run. Unlike the UTMB or a 24-hour race, in a six-day race – at least the way I ran it – when things get really tough, rather than fight and dig deeper into your reserves, instead you take a rest. You dial things back a little. Then you start again. And repeat. And again. It starts to become your life. The tiredness is a slow-burning, deep, absorbing weight that fills your entire being, rather than a fire that scolds. As such, inside that tiredness, you have time to smile, to joke, to chat.

Twice, I went and stood in the campsite's swimming pool, which was freezing like an ice bath, to help ease the pain in my legs, while my son swam around me with his goggles on. There was even a mid-race karaoke session, in which some of the runners stopped long enough to belt out a number or two.

These experiences break up a race that ebbs and flows like a rising tide of tiredness. Hopefully, in the end, you'll come out with a number you can be proud of, or at least one you can live with, while along the way you'll make some new friends, share some joy, experience moments when you feel reborn and, perhaps, if you're lucky, you'll find the trees exploding over your head like fireworks in a hazy, dreamlike, Japanese painting. 🍵

The Rise Of The Ultra Runners by Adharanand Finn is out now

Breaking it down

Alex Hutchinson, author of *Endure*, on what happens to your body and mind in a six-day race

Sleep debt costs you

'The gorilla in the room is sleep deprivation. It has all sorts of physical and mental effects, but the most insidious is that it saps your will to continue. Studies tend to find that your muscles still work fine after prolonged sleep deprivation, but everything feels much harder.'

It's a mind game

'If you measure a runner's VO₂ max and lactate threshold etc, you can make pretty good predictions about how they'll do in a race like a 10K or even a marathon. But the longer the race gets, the less those tests tell you. Instead, you'll get better predictions from psychological evaluations that tell you about resilience and pain-coping skills, etc.'

Impact hits hard

'If your legs do fail you in a multi-day race, the most likely culprit isn't your lactate levels or glycogen depletion, rather it's muscle damage from all that repeated pounding. Then there's also the basic stuff that can trip you up, such as chafing, blisters and sunburn. It doesn't matter how low your heart rate is if your heels are haemorrhaging blood.'