

# The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, The Ultramarathon Version

## *The Northwest Passage Interview with Robert Towne*

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*Northwest Passage (NWP): Have you always been athletic? What other sports/athletics/activities have you done in your life?*

**Robert Towne (RT):** I'm not sure I've ever considered myself athletic. Just determined. In high school I participated in wrestling and soccer. I was an okay wrestler and less than okay soccer player. I've always enjoyed endurance activities like backpacking and biking.

*NWP: Are you drawn more to team sports or individual sports? Why?*

**RT:** Individual sports. Individual activities such as running have a social element but the emphasis is obviously personal and about the challenge.

*NWP: At what age did you complete your first marathon? Where was it?*

**RT:** I ran my first marathon in 1990. I was 38 years old and I ran the Portland Marathon with Russ Buswell. We both worked at the Salem District

*NWP: What inspired you to become an ultramarathoner? Did you know other people who were doing them? ...Or do you think you might have a bit of a wild/crazy streak?*

**RT:** I've enjoyed running for almost 20 years and ultras provide a challenge that is very different from the marathon. Ultras are any run longer than the marathon. (A marathon is 26.2 miles) The typical distances are 50k, 50 miles, 100k, and 100 miles. Most ultras are run on trails and forest roads. It's been said that ultras are all about eating and drinking with a little scenery thrown in. For me a marathon is a long race where you attempt a fast finish. An ultra is an adventure that *you hope you can finish*. Due to the duration of the event you need to learn to eat without getting sick, drink appropriately, maintain your electrolyte balance, deal with weather extremes and elevation, learn to run alone at night in unfamiliar territory, and try not to trip on every root and boulder. Plus the community of ultra runners is very welcoming. What's not inspiring about that!

*NWP: At what age did you complete your first ultramarathon? What, how long, and where was it?*

**RT:** I ran my first ultra in July 2006 in Spokane. I was a few days shy of my 54th birthday. The race was called "Let's Climb a Mountain" and is 34 miles long. The race boasts only one hill – the entire race. You run from downtown Spokane to the top of Mount Spokane (2000' to 5600').

*NWP: What was your very first thought after you crossed your inaugural ultramarathon finish line?*

**RT:** When I arrived at the top of Mount Spokane, the race organizers were cooking hot dogs. And my first thought – after being happy I had finished the grueling hill climb on a very hot day – was “I really don't want a hot dog.”

*NWP: After that first one, did you think you'd ever do it again? How soon after the first did you complete another?*

**RT:** Two weeks after completing " Let's Climb a Mountain" I ran the Mount Hood 50 miler. I got lost during the race and added a couple of extra miles. So there I was at Timberline Lodge having run 27 miles with 25 more to go and wondering what I'd gotten myself into. Nine hours after starting, I finished. The next year I ran the same race without the two mile detour and completed the run one hour faster.

*NWP: What does your body feel like after you finish an ultra? What about your brain/mind?*

**RT:** My mind usually feels great – that endorphin high times 10. The body? It depends on how hard I ran but usually not so great.

*NWP: What inspires you to continue these ultramarathons?*

**RT:** I'm inspired by the continual lessons in living such as dealing with disappointment, perseverance, developing relationships, trust, hope, and discipline. Plus you get to run in really special places. I've completed long distance runs in 15 states and three countries.

*NWP: What is the longest race you completed? How many hours and days did it take?*

**RT:** In 2008, I completed a 100 mile run in South Dakota. It took me 19 hours and 11 minutes to finish. I was on track to have a sub 19-hour finish, but at mile 96 my legs declined to work and I "enjoyed" a leisurely early morning walk to the finish. I finished in 8th place. Most 100 mile races allow the entrant 30 hours to complete the run. If you can't finish in the allotted time you're disqualified.

*NWP: Have you won races? What are some of your awards or highest places?*

**RT:** In the last year, I was the overall winner at four ultras. I am the USATF age group National 50 mile Trail Champion. In 2008, I had the 63rd fastest 100 mile time and the 53rd fastest 100k time in the United States and was the age group winner at the Marine Corp Marathon in Virginia. I hold the masters course record for the Spokane Marathon. My marathon personal record, which I set at age 50, is 2:51.

*NWP: How do you train? How do you build up to a race? How many miles a week do you run? Do you train with others or mostly by yourself?*

**RT:** I race to train. Which means I do a series of shorter runs (marathons, 25k, and 50k) prior to longer races. On weekends when I'm not running an event I run the hills and trails around Spokane with my ultra buddies. I average about 50 to 60 miles a week.

*NWP: After a race, how do you recover? How many days/weeks (months?) does it take for full recovery?*

**RT:** The rule of thumb is that it takes one day to recover for every mile you run. So, in theory it would take 100 days to recover from a 100 mile event. Since I usually run two ultras a month, it's safe to say that I never recover. I'm pretty sure running 10 to 14 events a year is not a particularly healthful pastime. I'm planning to scale back the number and do more cross training to prolong my career and realize a little recovery.

*NWP: What kind of food and meals do you eat in training for your ultramarathon? And what's your favorite first meal after an ultramarathon?*

**RT:** More important than what you eat before and after a run is what you eat during the event. In any running event longer than 3 hours you have to be able to eat at least 300 calories per hour. Finding food that's agreeable for long duration physical exertion is a trial and error process. Many (runners) – fortunately not me – have difficulty keeping food down. Besides the usual energy gels and electrolyte pills, I'm partial to fig newtons and PB&J quarter sandwiches. And chicken noodle soup at night. The only time I ever drink pop is during a run. Defizzed cola is a great “pick-me up.” At the completion of the run you have what's considered the "golden 30 minutes" where you need to eat something – anything with calories and protein. Many runners like to eat and drink beer at the finish line.

*NWP: How many ultramarathons do you complete over the course of a year? How far apart are these events?*

**RT:** Since July of 2006, I've run 11 marathons and 23 ultras. Since I do most of my running between March and October that works out to approximately two long distance runs per month. On occasion I've run on back-to-back weekends. In 2008, I ran 14 marathon or longer runs and had to sleep most of November to recover.

*NWP: What was your hardest race? What happened?*

**RT:** Just last month I ran the Miwok 100k in the Marin Headlands outside of San Francisco. Billed as one of the most beautiful runs in America (if you like running 62.4 really hilly miles) with views of the ocean and Golden Gate Bridge. I can only guess on the views since I spent 13 hours in a torrential downpour with cold, fog, mud, and really strong winds. I started in the dark and ended at dusk and had acute plantar fasciitis for the entire run. It wasn't any fun but I'll be back.

*NWP: What would you recommend to a BLM staffer interested in ultramarathons? How should they start? What might they do to explore the world of ultramarathons?*

**RT:** Thank you for this question. I wouldn't necessarily recommend ultra running to anyone as much as I would suggest finding life balance. Many of us have had or plan to have a long career with the agency, and if I've learned anything in 34 years of Federal service it's that you need to define yourself by what you love not by what you do. So develop a love affair with something not work-related. Find an anchor whether it's family, faith, or fitness and use this to renew your mind and regain your perspective because life events and a few people will find openings that can pierce

**your soul. When this happens you'll need a refuge. So you know, running isn't my anchor but is certainly part of the rope that connects me to land.**

**After all that's been said, if someone is interested in long distance running – Oregon and Washington are the places to be. The ultra running community is especially strong in these states, and most larger towns have groups that regularly enjoy the trails. Bend and Ashland are well known for their great trails. You can call me if you're interested and I can suggest some runs.**

*NWP: If you could be a professional at any other sport, which would it be? Why?*

**RT: A drummer in a rock-n-roll band. I know that is not a recognized sport, but it should be. If that doesn't work then a Tae Kwon Do instructor.**

*NWP: What real or fictional location would be your dream ultramarathon race course? (Like Scotland, the Rings of Saturn, etc...) Why?*

**RT: I just returned from Santa Fe where I was able to run and hike at elevation (12,000). It might not be as romantic as Scotland, but it's a beautiful place with incredible trails.**

*NWP: Have you ever had a favorite running partner?*

**RT: My favorite partner was no one at all. It was nighttime in the Black Hills of South Dakota and I turned off my light and ran by a blood moon and starlight with the mantra of footfalls interlaced by the rhythm of my breathing. It really doesn't get any better.**

*NWP: Have you ever hallucinated during an ultramarathon? Have you ever seen a UFO after you've been running continuously for 12 hours...? ☺*

**RT: I haven't but some of my running buddies have, and their stories are pretty wild. Hallucinations usually happen at night, alone, and many miles into the forest – what a combination when you're freaking out.**

*NWP: Do you have any heroes in the world of athletics? If so, who are they and why?*

**RT: In the sports world I'm most impressed by the person who works, raises a family, and perseveres in their chosen athletic endeavor. It takes a small army of people including massage and physical therapists, doctors, orthotic makers, and chiropractors to keep humpty dumpty together. I watched an 86-year-old set a world record in the 10k – that's heroic.**

*NWP: As you get older, do you find that doing ultras is \*easier\* or \*harder\* than when you were younger? Why?*

**RT: Ultras are scalable events. (Sounds bureaucratic, doesn't it?) By that I mean, you know it's going to be a really long day or two, and if you need to go slower than planned, you go slow. If you need to walk, you walk. If you're having an especially good day you go for it. If you can stay healthy you should be able to run ultras for a long time provided you can beat the race cut-off times. So in many ways it could be considered "easier" as you get older – and hopefully wiser.**

*NWP: Do you think there will ever come a day when you might stop competing in Ultras? Or will you keep “driving the car until the wheels fall off?”*

**RT: I hope to keep running and keep the wheels on. I'll be 60 in three years and hope to set some course records for the over 60 age group. You really need to be conscious of your physicality or you'll end up spending all your time rehabbing injuries. I've had three Achilles surgeries and would like to avoid any more overuse injuries**

*NWP: What question did I not ask that you'd like to answer?*

**RT: One more is “How are you able to work and still have time to train?” And the answer is four people: Karen, June, Sally, and Tanya. The first three represent the Spokane District managers and the best group of leaders I've ever had the good fortune to work with – they truly have my back – or, more appropriately, my legs. Tanya, my wife, is my crew on most of my runs. The crew spends a lot of time waiting for the runner and is somehow supposed to divine what the runner needs (food, socks, change of shoes). Usually after a few hours the runner is less than agreeable company. Last year Tanya spent her birthday following me around the Black Hills of South Dakota. Happy Birthday. I also need to thank a couple of understanding bosses – Ed and Mike.**