

## Ready Or Not

Gravelers. They're out there on their gravel bikes, but we don't see them. They cycle on dirt, in the mud, over gravel when possible, avoiding pavement at all costs. They pass the occasional day hiker, avoiding the lecherous and angry dogs. They have the quads of a fitness god. Willing themselves up hills and down wide ravines, they are not mountain bikers; they don't have shock absorption in their frames. They are gravelers, muscling and pushing their path along gravel roads. They heft themselves to their finish, to goal being to finish upright, exhausted, and exhilarated from the long day's effort.

The Unbound Gravel race in Emporia, Kansas, started in 2006, then known as the Dirty Kanza 200, is 320 kilometers (200 miles) long. In 2006 34 riders participated in the race. In 2021, over 4,000 riders picked by lottery crossed the start line in competing in various mileage categories on the Flint Hills of Kansas.

Those gravelers gear up (pun intended) for a long day of eating dirt, swallowing dust, churning their legs attached to pedals taking them up and down at speeds of 3-21 miles per hour, pounding their ankles, knees, hips, backs, arms, shoulders, and heads from traveling along gravel roads, with ruts, rocks, loose dirt, gravel, and mud, in the pouring rain, the high sun, the sweltering heat, all in the same day.

Like fell running or road racing, both on foot, the ability to participate in a gravel race on a level playing field against the best in the world is a part of the attraction. That, and getting really dirty over the course of a long, long day, hammering oneself into the gravel, all to finish, share a handshake, a hug, and an adult beverage. It's play and its serious business for the graveler. The graveler wants the selfie at the finish showing the grit, the grime, and the dust-covered grin. The graveler also wants to compare times with the winners. Same start, same course, same dirt, same finish line.

Gravel races tend to be 30-200 miles in distance. Length can vary depending on how easily the graveler gets up and down the other side. Training terrain may include gravel, dirt, asphalt, bike paths (oh, the horror), and concrete pavement. Training will also include doubt. Loads of doubt concerning the salient issue of whether the graveler can physically complete the chosen gravel race distance.

How will the graveler know? The graveler takes up a weekend day riding all terrains, with breaks. Should the graveler be cycling a 100-miler, something over 75 miles on the last long ride had better be doable. Even with that big ride under their belt, notched into their brain, the graveler will fret over the durability of the gravel bike, the gravel tires not going flat, the body holding up for several hours, the amount of nutrition, the availability of water, and the weather. Always, the weather. These worries – bordering on neurosis – are suffered from the front of the dust-driven pack to the dust collectors at the pack's back.

Pretty much in line with how a marathoner will know after running the last 20-miler before racing the marathon, no matter how fast the attempt. How exhausting was that three-hour plus run? Was there more in the tank? Could the pace per mile been faster with less hills, more rest, and the adrenalin with race competition. And, what about Naomi?

Not every run in the training block is equal. Some are more equal than others and each are essential. The easy runs paced at 80-percent of lactate threshold (determined in a semi-scientific manner) acting as bridges between workouts that are tempos at 90-percent of lactate threshold or are repeats of ever-increasing distance with short recoveries, mimicking tempo runs. Each of those runs, wrapped together in a nicely tied weekly package, lead to the long runs.

Then there is the racing, sprinkled about the training block: a 15km here and there to find strength in holding a pace, two very hilly half marathons with mixed results, a couple of 5km's and a 10km race forcing increased race pace. Each race a step onto a higher platform in form and function to the goal, a fast enough marathon to post a qualifying time for Boston

But in training for a marathon, the long run matters. The long runs lasting longer than two and then three hours, paced at over 11:00 per mile and then in the high 10:00 mile pace, into the low 10:00 pace, and then into the upper 9:00 pace before consistently being run just above 9:00 pace, are telling. Progress within the framework of training.

In this block, for this BQ attempt, no long run was more progressive or important than the 21-miler, run five weeks out from the marathon chosen for the moment. A 21-mile run that was evenly paced, up and down big hills, long flats, limited nutrition,

and equally limited water consumption. The result was an average pace for the run a minute per mile faster than any previous long run. A week later, a 15-mile romp a half-minute per mile faster than the 21-miler. The week following that run, a 19-miler quicker per mile than the previous run. Two weeks out from the marathon, another 15-mile run with the last half at or below the 9:00 mile pace needed for the BQ. Clearly, something has clicked.

Worrying is in our nature. Especially when all is well. We will find goblins and ghosts in every corner of our minds. If those don't work for us, we'll make stuff up. This neurosis is deep inside the marathoner's mindset two weeks out from the race. They need another month to prepare. They want more 20-mile runs in the 14 days remaining pre-race. Perhaps a track workout of running 20 repeats of 400 meters with a minute's rest at 5km pace would do the trick. Time to alter nutrition, change race shoes, go dry, gorge on pasta, eat more meat, and just run more miles will be the secret to success.

Me? I look at over four decades of running logs. October 1991. Old Sacramento. Racing the marathon in 3:10:51. A Boston Qualifier at 7:17 pace. 47 miles per week for the previous four months. A friend's wedding (later followed by a divorce), a 17-miler in 2 hours with the last four miles at 6:30 pace, weekly three-mile cross county races for 10 weeks, a 15km, a 10km, a 5km, a 19-miler in 2:15, a 22-miler in 2:38, a 23-miler, birthday celebrations, a 14-miler at 6:25 pace, an easy 19-miler in 2:15, a flu-induced taper, college football, and a stressful job that would be ending soon after the marathon, were all part of that training block.

32 years later, the current training block averages 54 miles per week following a loss of balance at mile 19 of the last BQ attempt, runs of both 1.5 – 2 hours and of 2-3 hours each week, three hilly 15km races, my 64th birthday, long run dropping from over 11:00 per mile in month one to just over 9:00 per mile in month four, two incredibly hilly half marathons, Spring Training for the 23rd consecutive year (ignoring Covid Era), another wedding anniversary with the love of my life, a hilly 10km race, a hilly 5km race (gotta love where I live and train), trivia night every Wednesday, and working for myself from home.

Using the Google tells me that the most important factor in successful marathon training is consistency. A 20-week training block. Runs on six days in each of those weeks. A weekly tempo run, followed by an easy run, followed by a two-hour run,

followed by another easy run, followed by a quick workout run, followed by the weekly long run of 14-21 miles. The tempo runs are on an out and back courses I enjoy running fast on the way in, each of them hilly, and each well known to me. The easy runs are e-a-s-y, almost a slog, with the last half-mile at marathon pace. The quick runs have evolved into a variation on a theme: 2-5 minutes at a pace with a 30-45 second recovery jog for five miles, equating to my marathon pace.

Ah, but the long runs are where my rubber soles meet the road. Regaining one's balance is a serious undertaking at my age. Every time I get up from my work chair, I do an exercise, strengthening my ankles, my Achilles, my hamstrings, my glutes, my core. I am holding at bay drifting to the right (falling into holly bushes is not recommended), lateral heel whip (bloody midsoles and torn skin from inner ankle bones are unpleasant), and inadvertent knee knocking (who knew?). The long runs are the weekly culmination of my efforts, showing myself that my running form is more efficient than the week before.

My gradual and documented increase in speed is plain to see as well. The first month's long runs were at 11:15 per mile pace, the second month in 10:54 pace, followed by the third month's 10:32 pace, dropping rapidly to almost 9:00 pace in the fourth month. Right now, it's good to be me. The running kids have taken notice, albeit subtly. They no longer wait for me at pit stops, water fountains, or forks on the path. They can see me just behind them. I wave.

In the last several years, I have raced marathons, qualifying for Boston, based on training blocks slower than the times I've run in this block. Each of those marathons were run much faster than the time I am seeking in this marathon. Those prior marathons were each before the falls that came quickly, one after another, in less than one year's time. Leading to the loss of balance in my last attempt. This next marathon is in the post-falls era.

In two weeks, I'm lining up just behind the 4-hour pacer. That's 9:09 per mile pace. Somewhere after the turnaround on the out-and-back course, I intend to gently increase my per mile pace. I know I'll hold my balance. I also know I will be gliding on the way back, looking for the same landmarks I saw on the way out. I may even draft off of other runners. I am not concerned with the weather or the result, My training is what it is. I'm going to get my BQ. If not in two weeks, then it will just happen another time.