



Groundhog Day Handbook

I know I always come back to something I learned as a Marine during thirty years of service – it’s hard not to when the essence of being a Marine never leaves you. In addition to thirty years as an active-duty Marine I have spent the last 24 years as part of the ultra-running adventure community. I found over the years doing extreme endurance events that there are so many things I find similar to the Marine experience. In many ways they are synonymous. The elements never seem to be perfect. You want it to be hot until it is, then you want it to be cold. One minute you feel great and the next minute not so much. Both are filled with moments of suffering and times when you know you have accomplished something exceedingly difficult. There are the feelings of deep isolation and also the sense of being part of something bigger. There is camaraderie based on a shared experience. In short, they both are experiences of extreme contradictions.

“We must remember that one man is much the same as another, and that he is best who is trained in the severest school.”

While thinking about the Greenspring’s 24-Hour Race next week this saying and others popped into my mind. Thucydides wrote this in his comprehensive work the “History of the Peloponnesian War.” I always felt like this one was the unofficial motto of the United States Marine Corps. We were always fueled by mantras like “if it ain’t raining we ain’t training” - “pain is weakness leaving the body” - and one of my all-time favorites “train like you fight.” If you do a race like GS-24, hopefully you practiced and trained like you plan to execute. Doing a short loop over and over can kind of feel like Groundhog Day. Undoubtedly you trained hard and prepared mentally. Going around a short loop for 24 hours can challenge anyone even if the weather is perfect, though I have already established it never is. I wanted to put together a short “how to” playbook for those doing this race or similar ones. Yes, I do realize the irony of this all. You would never catch me signing up for a 24-hour race doing loops – though I have done similar things in the past. My son thought I was nuts doing a marathon in our Cul de sac during COVID – so I am no stranger to mind numbing experiences. Bigfoot 200? Moab 240? Looking Glass 100 KM? Sign me up – I prefer the big mountains, terrible climbs, lots of rocks, and technical descents. However, I have been doing this awhile and have seen those things that it takes to be successful doing a GS-24 type of race. Well, here they are folks, and yes, I know some of them are in the Runner’s Handbook, but this is not just for GS-24 but other events as well:

Training. Really not much I can tell you for GS-24 as it is upon us, at least for the 2025 version. However, in case you come back here are some thoughts. There are several approaches for this, and everyone is different. Having worked with several folks who are ultra-athletes, there are a couple of key pillars. Well-conditioned athletes will excel at these events more often than not.



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Many simply try to put in as many miles as possible each week. If you don't have a training plan you should. There are plenty of people out there who can help with this, or you can do your own research. I have seen a ton of plans that are just how many miles you should do each day. If you want to excel you are going to have to increase your conditioning. You can't do this simply by running every day at the same pace. There should be some faster runs in your program and of course those longer "time on feet" runs. Do you have to go out and do thirty miles in order to do a 24-hour race? It depends on who you ask, but my answer is no. Focus on conditioning, time on feet periodically, and become more durable. Durability is the ability to withstand wear, pressure or damage. In short it empowers you to endure when you have been on your feet for hours. You can gain this by improving your conditioning, training your core, and doing some type of strength training. You do not have to be a gym rat but having your entire body ready for this will help. Not everyone will agree with this and that is ok. You should include power hiking as part of your training as most people walk in ultras, and they don't walk fast enough. Learn to push your walking pace and use this on your races as an advantage. Don't forget to "train like you fight." As you get closer to your event, using your longer runs to rehearse in the conditions you expect is important. You should be rehearsing with the gear you will be wearing on race day. Rehearse your nutrition and hydration plan in detail. Practice at night if you are doing part of the race in the dark. In short, don't leave small things to chance and this will help you problem solve when the time comes, and it will.

Have a plan. Understand in your own mind how you plan to approach the race. I know this sounds funny but honestly there are a ton of us that just show up and wing it on race day. When I say have a plan I mean know how you will approach the race in stages, how you will ensure you are able to keep going, and how you will deal with problems. Races of this distance are all about problem solving. Another Marine saying is "no plan survives contact with the enemy" or as Mike Tyson said, "everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face." I think about this in every race as I know my day will be defined by the first time I get punched. Once I have dealt with that first issue, I generally know I am going to be good. However, having a plan is important. Practical examples are how you plan to pace initially, when you will rest, and how much you plan to eat or drink each lap. A lot of people have a run walk interval and stick to that. Way too many people will go out too fast on the first few laps and wait until they are hurting to start a run-walk interval. Some of the very best at these events do this in the beginning. Have a plan – it should not be I am going to run until I am broken and then figure something out.

Problem Solving. As I said, we all get punched at some point on these events. Don't be afraid to slow down, take a seat, and deal with whatever is bothering you. Small things that are



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annoying at mile ten may cause you to quit later in the day as it has grown into a major issue. One of the best pieces of advice I ever heard was at 180 at the Moab 240. One of the medics/aid workers was talking to someone that could not get calories down. She said, “your body will tell you what you need.” Sounds simple, but I know too many folks who have disregarded this and paid for it. I personally have paid dearly for disregarding something my body was telling me. The challenge is that your mind can trick you into believing things are either better or worse than they are. Your mind will devise ways to save you from yourself – to make the suffering stop as its role is to protect you. So, thinking through some of the potential issues ahead of time is important, that way you are primed for the issue if it arises.

Mental Resiliency. This is obviously one of the biggest challenges. Something I learned a long time ago was that in reality you don’t feel any worse at mile 75 than you likely did at mile 40. For sure you are more fatigued but your ability to run and move is likely about the same. As long as you don’t have any big issues with nutrition, hydration, or injury this is true for most. However, in your mind it will seem quite different. This manifests itself differently for each of us. As I said in the previous point, your mind will trick you if you let it. One of the keys is to stay in the moment. Take it one lap at a time and don’t think too much about what is left or how much is behind. Know what your “why” is or the reason you are doing this. Focus on that, have some touchpoints you can grab onto when your mind is trying to take you places you don’t want to go. It may be music, a song, it can be a mantra or simply reciting the “why” over and over. We are all different and deal with this in our own ways. Most of us do a great job preparing physically but do not think about preparing mentally – think about it ahead of time and practice this while training. A few years ago I was trying to figure out a way to deal with the fact I looked ahead too much and let it get me down mentally. I devised something I called the “last one” that I used in CrossFit and other training, to include runs. Essentially, I took the last set or last quarter of an event and disregarded it. The last one would be set four of five or miles 50-75 of a hundred. Amazingly over time my mind has learned to not think so far ahead and instead of fading in the toughest sections, when you are tired and still not close enough to be “almost there” I have become more resilient. Perspective is really important here as well. You get to do this – there are many people who cannot. You are here because you want to be, you have a “why” and what you are learning about yourself is invaluable.

Aid Station Time. This is where dreams come to die in races like this. That tent or chair can look quite inviting every two miles. Limit your time here – if you are shooting for a big number nearing 100 miles, forty plus stops of three minutes equals a lot of wasted time. This does not mean you should not plan for breaks or reset periods as these can keep you going when exhausted. Just don’t get into the habit of long stops. Grab food and hydrate and go. If you



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need a reset moment or two, take it. Eat on the go. Of course, you will have issues and will need time to fix your feet or change out of an irritating clothing item. Save your time to problem solve when you have real problems.

Those Feet. GS-24 is a forgiving course and foot problems will not be as prevalent as they are on some types of terrain. However, pounding your feet for 24 hours will create minor issues for some, and potentially major issues for others. Stay on top of this early. If you have hot spots at mile ten, they are likely not going to get better unless you deal with it. Same with blisters or shoe issues. Take the time to deal with this early. One of the top reasons people drop (along with stomach issues) early is due to their feet. May seem obvious but wear shoes that are comfortable. Some get caught up in thinking they need aggressive trail shoes or similar when they would be better off with a comfy pair of road runners. In this format you have the ability to bring several pairs. Same with socks. For those that have done super long events over 100 miles it is amazing what cleaning your feet, changing socks, and emptying your shoes of debris will do for you physically and mentally. Please whatever you do, don't share pictures of your nasty foot injuries on Facebook or Instagram – please just don't!

Hydration and Nutrition. Anyone who does these events a lot could likely write a book on this. I am assuming you have practiced these habits during your long runs or rehearsals for this event or any event. As I said previously, your body often knows what it needs. The best strategy is to fuel and hydrate consistently instead of gorging periodically. This is easier on your stomach. If the weather is hot and humid, ensuring you consistently hydrate – to include electrolytes is exceedingly important. If you want to know how bad it can get if you don't, just ask me to tell you my Mount St. Helen's story. Again, we are all different and some folks need less than others. The connection between eating, hydrating, and electrolytes is a complex one and getting out of balance can result in many bad things that can impact your race. As I said at the beginning of this, practicing ahead of time is important. In a race of 24 hours at some point you are going to have to eat something substantial. You won't be able to go this long on gels or liquid nutrition. Have an idea what works for you ahead of time. You will likely know what looks good and what doesn't. Some try to force themselves to eat when their body does not want it and this usually results in major nausea. If you get to this point where you know you need food but are sick, take it in small doses.

Base Camp. I am always amused by the variety of base camp set ups. Anything from a folding chair to a full-blown tent complex with TV included. Whatever works for you, I think. The key is that it helps you be super-efficient, organized, and capable of assisting you solve problems. Some have family and crew. Making it too comfortable can hinder minimizing those break times



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that add up significantly. In reality all you need is a place to sit and something to cover whatever stuff you have (or it will be soaking wet in the morning moisture).

Finally Done. If you made it this far, congratulations. Hopefully reading this was not like Groundhog Day but informative. I learned most of what I know through trial and error and hoping this will help you if you are doing GS-24 or any other longer event. As I said, not everyone will agree with all this and that is ok. Our experience base across the sport is different. Best of luck to you as you toe the line at GS-24 and any other races in the future.

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Note: Greensprings 24 is one of the Happy Cat Fitness races that takes place in the Williamsburg area. It is also a means to support the Arc of Greater Williamsburg, an organization that does a great job assisting adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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