

Lessons Learned from DNFs



The DNF “Did Not Finish” is usually experienced by every ultrarunner. During my first 14 months of ultrarunning, I experienced three DNFs out of my first five 100-mile attempts. For me, my best lessons learned have come after experiencing a DNF. As of early 2018 I’ve now experienced fifteen 100-miler DNFs out of the 112 100-milers that I have started. That is a 13% DNF rate, not too bad. Some races credit you a finish of 100K if you don’t reach 100-miles, I guess to make you feel better, like a participation award. I still consider those as DNFs. Two of my DNFs gave me 100k buckles. My best string of 100-mile finishes without a DNF was 32 finishes in a row.

I recall one year when I was directing my Pony Express Trail 50 and 100 races that a runner was very upset that I would not credit him with a 50-mile finish even though he was in the 100-mile race and quit at 50-miles. This runner said he had never had a DNF and didn’t want to stain his record. I wouldn’t list him in the 50-mile results because those were the rules. I am sure to this day, he doesn’t consider that a DNF, which to him is a failure.

I believe runners should embrace DNFs. Instead of considering them as failures, they should analyze the experience and find helpful lessons to be learned from them. My DNFs have taught me important lessons both about myself and about my running. They have given me the resolve to firmly make improvements for successive races. They encourage me to train harder and to find increased mental toughness.

My first few DNFs were simply due to a lack of experience. I encountered problems that I had never experienced before, didn’t know how to solve them, and eventually came up short. In a previous chapter I covered my first 100-miler attempt, the 2004 Bear 100, which I DNFed at mile 87. There were several causes: Fluid retention during the night (lack of sodium), bonking (lack of carbohydrates), and slow pace (lack of carbohydrates.) Clearly my biggest lesson to be learned was that of proper fueling.



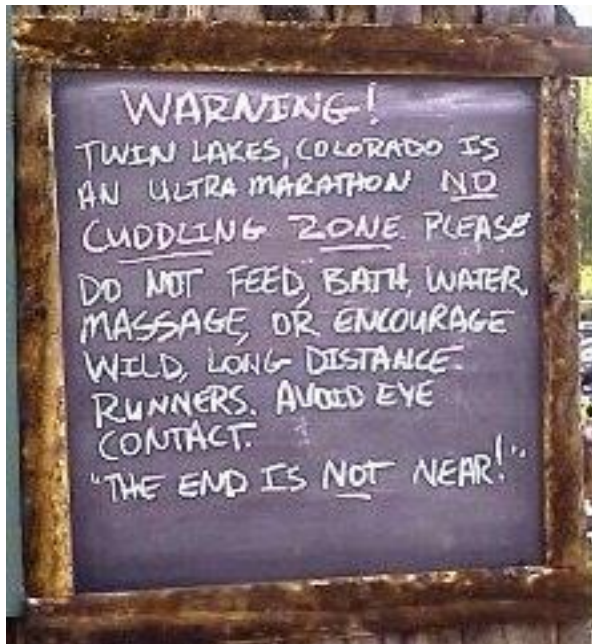
My next DNF was at the 2005 Vermont 100. I DNFed around mile 80, even though I was still ahead of the cutoff time. My first mistake was that I ran it before fully recovering from a recent internal surgery. The stress on my system became fully evident after the race. But the big impact was heat and humidity. This was the first hot race that I had run in. I still did not take in enough sodium and the heat really took its toll on my body. I bonked again, like I did at The Bear 100 and lost all my motivation. I flagged down a car heading to the finish. Recovery was very tough and I made a stupid mistake trying to fly all the way home from the east coast without a day to recover. I’ve never had a rougher recovery. On the flight home I really started to bonk and crash. It was painful. I eventually pulled out of it but I learned a lot about my problems with heat and going through proper recovery.

I bit off more than I could chew, attempting the 2005 Leadville 100. I had a great experience leading up to the race, boarding with elite runners including Joe Kulak and Todd Holmes. I soaked up all their conversations, just glad to be rubbing shoulders with them. But just a half mile into the race, the altitude

slammed me hard, forcing me to slow down significantly. Clearly I had not prepared enough for a high altitude race. I later experienced congestion, coughing, and swelling in my throat. My race really fell apart once I noticed bad swelling in my hands and I couldn't get my ring off a swollen finger. I worried, slowed down, and concluded that something was wrong and that I needed to stop. I convinced myself that it would be dangerous going up and over Hope Pass again. Once I reached the halfway point at Winfield, the volunteers helped me get the ring off and I realized how great I still felt, so I continued on. But my slow paced had doomed me. I was now the last runner to successfully leave Winfield by the cutoff time. I ran up fast over Hope Pass, but by the time I returned back to Twin Lakes, I had missed the time cutoff by a few minutes and wasn't allowed to go on.

I learned about altitude and the effects on my body. I also learned that I shouldn't worry about silly things that can be solved. Finally I learned that you shouldn't mentally quit and slow down – you may regret it if you change your mind.

[2006 H.U.R.T 100](#) in Hawaii wasn't much of a DNF. I took my wife out there for a vacation and I didn't want to have the race ruin our vacation, so I quit when it felt right. By about mile 70 I again bonked hard and when I reached the next aid station my bad knee was experiencing swelling. Quitting was the right thing in that case and I enjoyed the rest of our vacation. I had again entered a race that I wasn't really ready for yet and would have missed cutoffs anyway. That DNF did not bother me.



Beat up at H.U.R.T 100

But the DNF that bugged me the most was, [2008 Leadville 100](#). I entered the race with 17 consecutive 100-mile finishes without a DNF. A year earlier, I had a great race at the [2007 Leadville 100](#) and finished in 60th place. I was confident that I could get that sub-25-hour buckle. My race was good and on the return to Twin Lakes at about mile 60 I was on schedule and 20 minutes faster than the previous year. But then the cold rain started. I experienced several problems and once I reached Fish Hatchery, mile 76.5, I quit.

My biggest mistake was that I had my heart set on the sub-25-hour buckle and once it slipped away, I lost my motivation. I was hours ahead of cutoffs, with only 23.5 miles left and I quit. Over the years I've watched many elite runners quit races because they were having bad days. "I'll save it for another day," they say. To me this is mental weakness and I had succumbed to such thoughts. If I didn't want to finish, I shouldn't have entered the race in the first place. I had lots of excuses. I was cold. My hip hurt. I wasn't having fun anymore. I didn't have a pacer to help me face the snowy pass ahead. I quit. By the next day I was really kicking myself. I vowed that I would never quit a 100-mile race again for such lame excuses. I would only quit if I was truly injured or if the cutoff time forced me to quit.

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I learned my lesson and became much more mentally strong. From that point on, I finished 32 consecutive 100-miles without a DNF. I used my Leadville 100 DNF as a rallying thought. When things would get rough and I would start thinking about quitting, I would remember how I felt the day after that DNF. I've always been thankful for that DNF because it taught me so much about myself. Lessons learned that day could be applied to many other areas of my life.

During this period of success, one of my roughest races was the [2009 Bighorn 100](#). I had poor fitting shoes that really tore my feet apart. Adding to that problem, my stomach shut down during the night and I suffered pretty badly. At one aid station a volunteer said, "I have seen at least a couple runners who have looked worse than you." I mentally quit the race twice. I slowed way down, ready to quit at the next aid station. But both times, I sat there, watched the other runners come and go, remembered the Leadville feeling, and reminded myself that I had a good streak going. Both times, I solved my problems and pushed on. My finish time was bad, one of my worst ever, but I was proud that I worked through terrible lows and didn't quit.

But I did finally quit at 2012 Javelina Jundred. It had been a very rough year. I had been sidelined for six months with a massive stress fracture in my tibia. But I came back and finished two other 100s that fall. At Javelina, the heat slammed me. I was well ahead of cutoffs but realized that I would not finish before dawn and just couldn't face the thought of running through another hot morning. I wasn't having any fun and felt sick, so I quit. With all I had faced that year, I felt content about that DNF and have never felt bad about it. There were no lessons learned other than, sometimes I deserve a break.

In 2013 I DNFed Grand Mesa 100. I had a good race going and then the rain came. It poured for nine solid hours. Only a handful of tough, prepared runners finished. I was not prepared and didn't have the clothes needed. I did beg a jacket from a crew, but that wasn't enough to combat the elements and after experiencing hypothermia, I knew it was time to quit around mile 75. It was the safe thing to do and I learned that I should have been much better prepared. I did return in 2014 and finished the race.

In 2015 I finished a personal record 11 100-mile races. But now at an older age, mentally it was becoming much tougher to avoid the DNF. At Antelope Canyon, at mile 90 cold rain was coming down, my drop bag was in a puddle with all the clothes soaked, and I quit. I felt great about my decision for 24 hours but then reality kicked in and I kicked myself. How could I quit with just ten miles to go and plenty of time to finish and plenty of energy? I wondered if I had lost my drive. That race woke me up again and in the next races when I considered quitting, I remembered the feeling. Still, I quit 2015 Wasatch at mile 75 with plenty of time to finish, but I was very ill from the heat, and would be ill for days to follow. It was smart to quit that race, a course that I've lost interest in running. As of early 2016, I have finished 13 out of the last 14, with eight straight finishes without a DNF. I again reached a point where I wasn't thinking about quitting during the tough points of a race.

But in 2017 as I turned 59 I discovered that I was having great difficulty with my pace in mountains 100s that seemed to be routine in earlier years. Within a couple weeks of each other I didn't finish both Cascade Crest and Wasatch Front 100s. At both I was being chased by cutoffs by less than a couple hours after 50 miles. I had not paid any attention to cutoffs in more than ten years, so it was pretty discouraging to realize I had lost so much speed in the mountains. I needed to train harder on climbs and also come to terms that I was finally slowing down faster with age. I did redeem myself by finishing 2018 Bear 100 in bad muddy conditions for the last 15 miles.

Are there any good reasons to DNF? Yes. My list includes:

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1. Injury. This needs to be a true injury that you shouldn't run through. Pain and discomfort isn't necessarily injury. You can tell the difference. I once ran an entire 100-miler with a stress fracture, and my tibia continued to fracture the entire time. I knew something was wrong but I was too stubborn to quit. I should have. It cost me six months of running. (But I did get that 500-mile jacket.) At 2018 Rocky Raccoon in poor conditions, I fell five times and at mile 60 felt unusual injury pain in my left knee. I wisely quit a couple miles later, and within a couple weeks discovered that I had a torn meniscus. I was very wise to quit that time.
2. Not making cutoff times. If you don't make the time, you don't have a choice. The race officials might still let you go on. Plead with them. But if they make you stop, you stop. Next time, don't go so slowly.
3. Dangerous conditions. If weather conditions are too dangerous for you, do the smart thing and quit. Normally race officials will stop a race that becomes dangerous, but perhaps you just haven't brought the right clothes to face the weather. Next time, be more prepared.
4. Serious illness such as kidney problems, serious dehydration, bad hypothermia. Don't be stupid. Don't endanger your health.

Are there bad reasons to DNF? Yes, many. My list includes:

1. Blisters. Fixing feet is easy. You need to learn how to fix feet and have the items you need to fix them. I don't usually get blisters, but in some races my feet have been a blistered mess, but I still finish.
2. I wasn't going to meet my desired goal or placing. "Not my day." "I'll save it for another day." If you aren't going to finish, you should not have started.
3. Tired. Resting and snoozing is for after getting to the finish line.
4. I broke my hand. This happened to me at about mile 30 at Bighorn 100 one year. No big deal, I don't run on my hands. I finished. Another time I broke a rib. It hurt big-time, but I finished the race.
5. Stomach problems. That is miserable, but it can be solved. Learn how to jump-start your stomach again. I've gone through entire nights with terrible stomach problems, but eventually solved the problem and finished.
6. Throwing up. Learn how to throw up without missing a stride. This is no reason to stop.
7. Too cold. Run faster, put on more clothes.
8. Sore muscles. Everyone gets sore. Unless it is a serious muscle pull, you may be surprised in a couple hours it works itself out. I've never quit because of a sore muscle.
9. Too sleepy. Take a short cat nap. Run faster. Listen to music. Find another runner to talk to.
10. Too hot. Be careful. Bring your body temperature down. Make sure you are alert again and continue on with some company.
11. Bad hair day. Excuses can be many when times get tough.

My list of DNFs 100-mile DNFs include:

1. 2004 Bear (mile 83 – timed out)
2. 2005 Vermont (mile 80 – effects of heat)
3. 2005 Leadville (mile 60 – timed out)
4. 2006 HURT (mile 73, finished 100K - Injury)
5. 2008 Leadville (mile 75 – snow, mental weakness)
6. 2012 Javelina (mile 80, finished 100K – heat, mental weakness)
7. 2013 Grand Mesa (mile 70 – rain, hypothermia)
8. 2014 Cascade Crest (mile 65 – mental weakness)
9. 2014 Bear (mile 70 – rain, mental weakness)
10. 2015 Antelope Canyon (mile 90 – snow, mental weakness)
11. 2015 Wasatch (mile 75 – ill from heat)

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12. 2016 Javelina (mile 80 – heat, mental weakness)
13. 2017 Cascade Crest (mile 75 – slow, mental weakness)
14. 2017 Wasatch (mile 55 – slow, mental weakness)
15. 2018 Rocky Raccoon (mile 63 – serious injury)