The Frequent Long Run
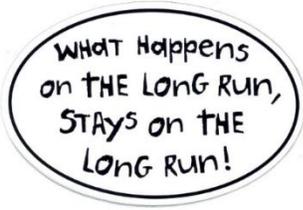
WHAT Happens on THE LonG RuN, STAys on THE LonG RuN!

What is a long run? Obviously the answer varies for each runner. As a boy, I remember my first "long" hike in boy scouts, a five-mile walk from close to my home, to Salt Water State Park on the Puget Sound in Washington. It seemed like it took all day and was so very far. To me back then, a one-mile run was long. As a teen, as I began to do some regular one-mile runs, three miles seemed long. As I again tried to run regularly in college, a very long run became eight miles.

As I discovered ultrarunning, a long run in my mind was ten miles. A 50K run (31 miles) seemed to be a very long event that took careful planning to do. In 2005 I would look at the race calendar and started to think about traveling to participate in 50K runs which to me back then, was still a mega-distance. But as I gained a longer mileage base, and with more experience, that 50K distance seemed to grow shorter and no longer seemed to be a massive run. 50K eventually turned into my definition of "the long run."

By late 2010, I had finished 35 100-milers and I was training for a new challenge in my ultrarunning experience, a 48-hour run. Running well past the 100-mile distance in an event seemed very daunting and I was very nervous about it. To get ready for it, I decided I would try something very new for me, a weekly run of at least 50K. This seemed like a crazy idea, but as it progressed, I felt myself become stronger and the runs became easier. To finish out 2010 I ran ten consecutive weeks of at least a 50K run. They included some pretty tough runs: Pony Express Trail 100, Antelope Island 100K, 39 miles down in the Grand Canyon, and 42 miles in Capitol Reef National Park.

Capitol Reef National Park

I discovered that with this consistency, I recovered very fast from these runs and the pain decreased during them. How did I do on my Across the Years 48-mile run? I was pleasantly surprised. During the first 24-hours I covered 116 miles, by far the furthest I had every run in a race. When 48-hours arrived, I had run 187 miles and won the race! I became a strong believer of the benefits of doing the frequent long run.

I finished off 2010 with 25 runs of at least 50K during the year. In 2011, I repeated that with another 25 long runs, and in 2012, a year of injury recovery, I completed just nine. In 2013, I specifically started concentrating again on doing the frequent long run. Getting older, my motivation for doing many mid-week short runs was greatly decreasing. Pushing myself out of bed in the morning before work became increasingly difficult. So, instead I looked forward to the long Saturday run and I piled up 20 consecutive weeks of at least a 50K run, and a total of 31 such runs that year. That 20-week stretch included five 100-mile finishes.
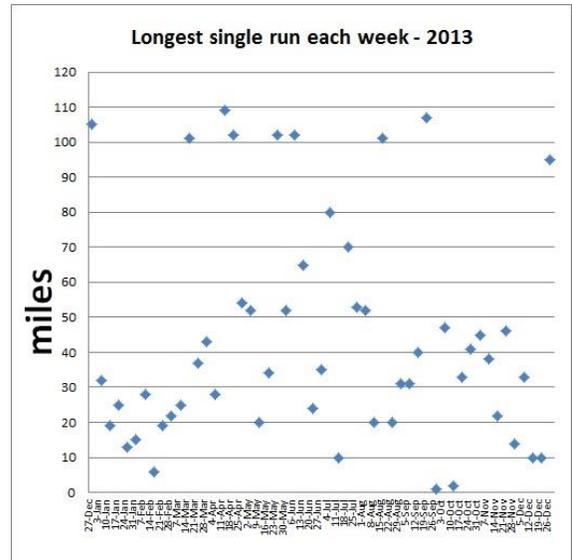
Most reasonable people probably consider that crazy. What about tapering for those 100-milers? Tapering and long recovery is required, right? No. My experience is that if I am consistently doing frequent long runs, many at a comfortable pace, that a long taper does nothing to help my race performance. Yes, I will rest 2-3 days before a race, but I've seen no real difference between a short rest and a long taper. I've

had most of my best race performances with no tapering at all. At my age, life is short. I would rather be running than resting.

Taking a look at that stretch in 2013 with 20 consecutive weeks of 50K runs, I ran a solid 21:48 100 miles at North Coast 24-hour and five days after finishing, ran Salt Flats 100. I knew that I would feel fatigue after just five days of rest, and I did for the first 20 miles or so, but then everything came together I still went on to set a personal record on that course of 23:28 for 8th place. All this at age 55. Would I have performed better with a long taper instead? Perhaps, but I've run that race with and without tapering, and my best finishes have been without tapering.
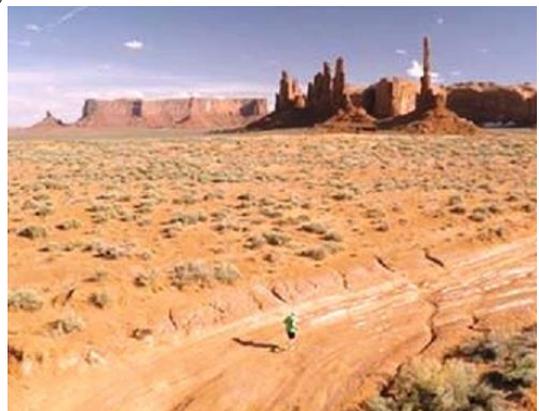
What about recovery time? I discovered that with these frequent long runs, my recovery time between each of them started to decrease to the point that usually I wasn't even sore on the next day. My 100-miler recovery time decreased from two weeks to about 4-5 days or less. After some 100-milers I'm baffled that I end out with very little muscle soreness. The body adapts.

Some ultra "coaches" insist that to be successful in running ultras that you must add long back-to-back runs. This is the practice of running two long runs (25+) on two consecutive days. Those who promote these insist that the value is getting time on your feet and stressing your body to perform even when you are tired. Perhaps these have value, but I have never included them in my training so don't believe those who claim this practice is a "must." I would rather listen to my body, recover when needed, and work to avoid injury. Instead I strive to do a long run about once per week.

What do I do to recover from these frequent long runs? I rarely go out and run the next day. I usually take off at least a couple days to recover and rest. I listen to my body and know when it is safe to run again without incurring injury. This means I probably run on average fewer days than most runners. In 2013, I ran only on average 2.5 days per week, but still reached 3,200 miles and finished eight 100-milers. Some people think 100-mile runners need to train nearly every day to finish well in 100-mile races. The secret truth is: you don't have to. By running only 2.5 days per week in 2013, I had more time to spend with my family and kept a good balance of life. Yes, I did still averaged 62 miles per week that year, but most of those miles came in a big chunk.

Once I became a believer in the frequent long run, I continued in 2014 with 24 weeks of long runs. But that was nothing compared to 2015, when I ran at least a 50K run in 40 of the 52 weeks that year. I finished eleven 100-milers and ran a personal record 4,564 miles, averaging 88 miles per week. All this and avoiding any injury at age 57. I believe the frequent long run helps me avoid overuse injuries.
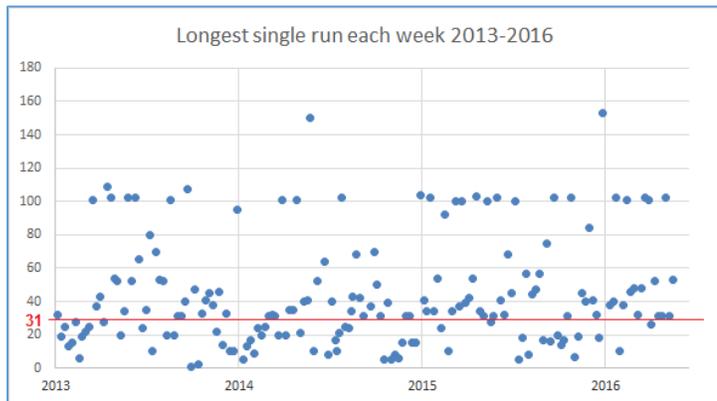
Running Monument Valley 100 in 2015

As of this writing in 2016, I've continued the long run strategy and have run at least a 50K run for 17 out of the first 19 weeks in 2016. I finished five 100-milers in that span. In 2015, I was starting to believe that my advanced age had finally caught up to me, and maybe this long run strategy was slowing me down. But much to my surprise, thus far in 2016 my 100-mile times have been: 20:51, 22:22, 23:24, 24:28, 24:50, and 25:43. It had been six years since I had a stretch of good times like that. The 20:51 time has been the best 100-mile time in the world so far in 2016 for ages 57+. My point here is that I credit the frequent long run for this consistency (not my shoes, not some backpack, not some gel, no silly product hashtags here).

By 2016, the frequent long run became pretty routine. I had great fun planning my long Saturday runs. To keep my interest and passion high for running, I tried to find creative runs to do. Many of my runs were far more interesting than running a local 50K or 50-mile race. I simply invented my own courses. Dreaming up these runs is part of the fun. I would look at the maps, search Google, check Strava heat maps, and eventually come up with a run that looks very intriguing and within 31-50 miles.

I've learned how to carry very little on these runs. I will usually only carry two handheld water bottles, some gels and candy in my pocket, and in a small camelback, a couple burritos, more gels, candy, my phone, and some foot-care products. For my chosen courses, I need at least 1-2 water stops, springs, creeks, or stores to fill my bottles back up. For some, I'll drive and drop something off at a strategic point.

In 2016 some of my creative long runs included:

- Cathedral Valley Loop – 47 miles. This was one of my most spectacular runs in the rarely visited northern section of Capitol Reef National Park. I ran by amazing mini monoliths and wonderfully colored red cliffs all day.
- Onaqui Mountain Loop – 48 miles. I ran around a remote mountain range in the Utah west desert. It included running on random trails made by wild horses.
- Remote run in San Rafael Swell – 32 miles. This run was in a totally new area for me, on Sid Mountain and included lots of exploring. I did a tough descent in to canyon and a long run along a river.

Cathedral Valley

- Golden Spike Run – 51 miles. This was the most amazing historic run I had ever experienced, running for the first time on this historic transcontinental railroad bed. There was so much historic evidence to see and explore along the way.
- Quad Squaw Peak – 31 miles. For this run, I did tough repeats to climb to the top of a local peak four times.
- Sanpitch Mountain Range – 52 miles. I ran a mountain range end-to-end, most if it above 8,000 feet. It was a navigation challenge and I ran into a bobcat and two rattlesnakes.
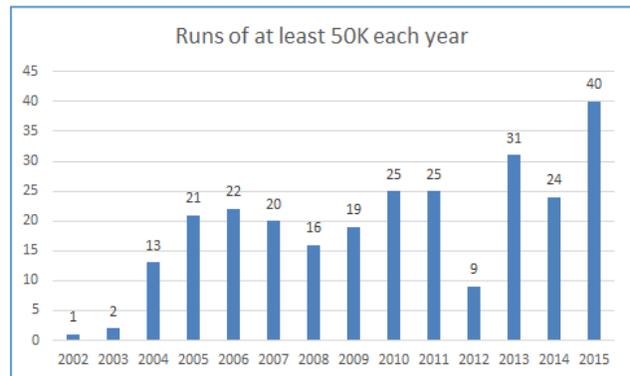
I will typically start these runs very early in the morning and finish by noon or a little later on Saturdays, still giving me time to travel home or get other things done.

For 2015, I only ran in one race of 50 miles or less, a chance to run in an area normally closed to public. I can now invent my own 50-mile or 50K run, usually with just a few days' notice. Why pay a race fee or travel a long way to run only 31-50 miles? I now save that for 100-milers. That is why when you look at my race results on ultrasignup, in recent years they mostly include only 100 miles or fixed-time races.

Runs of at least 50K each year

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Runs	1	2	13	21	22	20	16	19	25	25	9	31	24	40

285 long runs lifetime (as of 2016)

How much does the frequent long run benefit younger runners? I wish I knew. Perhaps it benefits the elderly runner more by maintaining the muscle and joint strength. Other runners in their 50s are now trying it, hoping that it can help them continue to finish 100-milers and enjoy long runs for years to come.