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Why run 100 miles? To live

A father finds balance between family and his passion for the trails.

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By WILL COOPER, JR. / FOR ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

I could hear the voice mail playing, but I didn't want to listen to it.

Earlier this year I signed up for the Angeles Crest 100 mile Endurance Run, known as the AC 100. But three weeks ago I changed my mind and decided not to run this grueling race.



Ultramarathoner Will Cooper of Corona del Mar refuels at night. "In the later stages of the race, warm soup is very appetizing."

TRINA MCMANN
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— a time for me to run, but also a time to spend a few precious minutes with my daughter, the one who is

Why did I change my mind?

It was an easy decision. The event itself was enough of a reason -- running non-stop for 100 miles in the San Gabriel Mountains during the hottest time of year? Need I say more?

I told my family and friends. Everyone was supportive. Everyone understood.

Everyone except one guy, my friend Bino McMann; the guy on the voice mail.

How could he question my decision? I had already run five ultra marathons this year ranging from 50 to 100 miles in length.

The training and mental fatigue were taking a heavy toll. I have a business to run. I have a wife and two daughters I wanted to spend more time with. I needed to get my priorities straight.

But the voice mail kept playing over and over in my head.

"Now I know what this is all about, you're not running AC. That is bull**** Willie. Don't give in to anybody. Run AC!" the voice mail continued.

"Run it, man. You'll be sorry if you don't."

Don't give in to anybody? You'll be sorry if you don't?

These are not words you would hear from your family therapist, especially coming from a guy who could use a therapist. But now a seed of doubt had been planted.

To run non-stop for 100 miles in the mountains isn't something you just wake up one morning and decide to do. The physical preparation is relentless. Months of training on mountain trails to acclimate to the heat and terrain are only a prerequisite. The real challenge is mental. The commitment must be unwavering.

Then one evening, I was running around UCI before picking up my daughter from swim practice. This routine has become a staple for me

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growing up so fast.

Thoughts began to flood my mind as I ran. I needed a break from running, but what about my commitment? I had made a commitment to myself to run AC 100. If I did not run it, would I regret it later on? At that moment I decided, once again, to run AC 100.

Ultra runners are really just normal people. They are the electrician who crawls in your attic when you need wiring in your house.

They are the parent who tends to her child's needs before her own.

They are the working men and women who report to the office every day.

Most of all, they are just people who want a little more in life. Something real, not material. Something they have to dig deep within themselves to achieve, and the deeper they dig, the more satisfied they are.

Something that makes them feel alive.

I ended up making a deal with Bino. I would run AC only if he crewed for me and paced me from mile 75 to the finish. My crew would help me with equipment, nutrition and other needs I might have along the route. A pacer would accompany me along the later sections of the trail to ensure my safety.

"I'm in!," Bino said without hesitation.

Bino's wife, Trina, and another friend, Jeff Padilla, also volunteered to crew for me. Then Chris Cole, a three-time AC finisher, agreed to pace me for a section of the race. My team was now in place. There was no way I could change my mind now.

At 4:45 a.m. Saturday morning on July 23, I stood with some 125 of my fellow ultra runners at the starting line of the AC 100.

Below the stars, I nervously wished other runners good luck. No one knew which of us would fall victim during the odyssey that lay ahead. AC 100 is one of the hardest ultras in the country, and many of us simply wouldn't make it to the finish line. Yet we bowed our heads during the pre-race prayer and asked our maker for guidance.

As the sun rose over the San Gabriels, we began our journey. What lay between me and the finish line was beyond intimidating – 100 miles of trail, 21,600 feet of cumulative elevation gain, eight mountain passes, scorching summer heat and the darkness of night.

To make the distance I would be running all day and all night with no rest other than brief stops at aid stations to refuel. I wondered out loud to myself.

"Will I make it?"

I put my head down, focused on the trail under my feet, and resolved to keep moving forward.

From the start at Wrightwood (elevation 5,890) we climbed to the Pacific Crest Trail (8,505) where we ran with fresh legs and light spirits through pine forests. Mt. Baldy sat majestically on the western horizon, a gentle reminder of the beauty around us and the difficulties yet to come. We passed by the top of the chair lifts at Mountain High Ski resort then began the 3.6-mile climb up Mt. Baden Powell, elevation 9,399.

I continued to run through the heat of the day, reminding myself that knowledge is patience, and being patient brings big dividends on these long journeys. The elevation and heat continued to take their toll on my body, but I knew these harsh elements would eventually pass. One by one, the miles ticked away. Little by little, my confidence grew. When I picked up Chris Cole, my first pacer, the air was cooler and together we ran with a purpose -- passing many other runners along the way.

Then Bino paced me, and we ran together under the night's sky for the next 25 miles.

I reminded him that he was the only one who questioned my decision not to run this race. He reminded me that this journey would soon be over and I would be spending time with my family.

From the top of Mt. Wilson we saw the city lights beneath us; the end was now in site.

I knew at that moment that I had so much in my life to look forward to, and for that I would have no regrets. We turned and saw my crew standing under the finish line.

Then, just like that, I raised my arms in the air. And I felt *alive*.

TRUE LIFE: If you've got a first-person story that's true, well-written and 1,000 words or fewer, send it to Andre Mouchard at amouchard@ocregister.com. We don't pay, but we often publish.

Will Cooper, Jr. is an Orange County resident. He writes about his running experiences on his blog "An Ultra Runners Blog" at www.runlonger.blogspot.com.

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7:22 PM on August 4, 2011

An impressive feat but at what costs? You have a wife and two kids who need your time more than you your training needs your time. Healthy? Physically maybe but is this mentally healthy? Extreme time consuming events? For what? Just to say you did it? It's almost in the same category as someone who walks across the US for some cause. Everyone praises these people but inside they're all saying "Is this guy nuts?"



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7:09 PM on August 4, 2011

Congratulations! Thank you for sharing your inspiring story. You Ultra Runners are amazing!



HALJALIKAKIK

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1:39 PM on August 3, 2011

Congratulations, Mr. Cooper - Great story! The AC 100 is brutal and I don't know how you all do it.

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