

Pushing the Limits

If you think about it, the soul of adventure is all about stepping out of your comfort zone and into new territory. Here, seven writers recount tales of adversity that explore why we test ourselves outdoors.

Illustrations DAVID DORAN



Surviving a Very Long Run

By Megan Michelson

If the torn hamstring wasn't a sign, then the raging wildfire inching closer to my house surely was. This run just wasn't meant to be. I should give up now, I thought, and take up Pilates.

My friends Kathleen, Amelia and I were training for our first 50K trail-running race. The three of us had become running buddies through the pandemic as a safe way to interact with others. On a whim, we'd signed up for

the Mount Tam 50K, held in early November. The race would start at the beach and climb 6,800 vertical feet through staircases and switchbacks above the Pacific Ocean, crisscrossing California's Mount Tamalpais State Park and Muir Woods National Monument, just north of San Francisco.

But then wildfires halted our training for weeks. It was late summer 2021, and the devastating Dixie Fire was burning hundreds of thousands of acres across

Northern California, turning our air quality into a smoldering ashtray. When the Caldor Fire broke out south of Lake Tahoe, near where I live, prompting evacuations for thousands of residents, I thought, OK, that's it. I can't even breathe outside, let alone run. The race is another pandemic casualty, I figured, one more thing I'd have to cancel.

Running 31 miles isn't something I particularly wanted to do. (Does any sane person want to rise before dawn and run hills for five hours straight?) But it's something I wanted to know if I could do. I like running—it clears my head—but I'd never run close to this far before.

With the fires eventually contained and the air quality stable, we had no excuse not to get back into running. (Silver lining: The pause in training let my hamstring heal.) By November, I was as ready as I was going to be. At the starting line, runners with hydration vests looked way more serious than me, and I felt jittery with nerves. But I had my friends there, and we resolved to start out slow, enjoy the ocean views and try not to whine. Finishing with dignity was the end goal.

A few hours later, I found myself slogging up a climb known as Cardiac Hill. I felt surprisingly upbeat, invigorated by the scenery and the strength of my lungs at sea level. I passed a defeated-looking woman who was walking slowly. "You got this!" I cheered her on as I ambled by. She glared at me silently. On the final downhill toward the finish, I felt that euphoric yet exhausted high when you realize you're almost done with something challenging, and there's a burrito waiting at the finish line.

Then the woman I'd passed earlier flew by me on the final mile, looking shockingly fresh. "I ate Oreos at the last aid station!" she hollered on her way by, as if that explained her renewed energy, while I felt like a grubby mess. We all have our moments, I guess.

When it was over, Amelia, Kathleen and I peeled off our dusty shoes and plunged into the Pacific Ocean. It felt like I was washing away hours of sweat, months of hard training and years of hesitation, of wondering what my mind and body could truly handle. Turns out we're all tougher than we think. We just need to light a fire within.