



## Ultraendurance Sports: A Call to Action

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*Ultraendurance sports are becoming increasingly popular around the world and have a history and future that should not be forgotten or overlooked. For example, according to UltraRunning Magazine, in 2022 there were 2682 races in North America and approximately 67% male runners and 33% female runners participated with 116,578 total finishes. Social workers are poised to support, develop, and train the next generations of athletes, coaches, families, and support systems of ultraendurance athletes. This commentary is a call to action for more research, best practice development, and advocacy for ultraendurance sports.*

*Keywords: Ultraendurance, Sport, Athlete, Action*

From 50km to 5000km of running to ultramarathon swims and deca triathlons, ultradistance athletes have gained somewhat of a notoriety as a new sort of “Forrest Gump” or “Marathon Maniac.” What is the motivation for going so long? What is the reason people keep training and spending money on grueling and uncomfortable experiences? Injury, dropping out of races, hallucinations, and serious medical complications like electrolyte imbalance can occur when a person goes beyond their limits. As a former ultra-runner, there was nothing like long training days in the hyper-technical trails and mountains of El Paso, Texas, Las Cruces, New Mexico, and elsewhere, on the track, or doing endurance swims when my tendons were not interested in getting “rock massages.”

As social workers, promoting health, wellness and a client’s highest potential is a major skill and goal, but in the realm of ultraendurance sports, more specialized research, care, training, and consultation with professionals and experienced practitioners is warranted. For example, running the Badwater 135 race in Death Valley through extreme temperatures is a different goal than making the 24-hour running Olympic Team than finishing the longest certified foot race in the world: Sri Chinmoy’s 3100-mile race. Also, there are gender differences in endurance exercise, but the bulk of guidelines for ultramarathons are established on research that has excluded women (Kelly, 2023). Notwithstanding, clinically, many athletes need to break training and mental barriers such as the marathon distance and overcome gastrointestinal distress and significant pain and suffering during racing. For example, after a fall that turns bloody at mile ninety of Cocodona 250 hosted by Aravaipa Running an athlete is going to need support.

Medically, of interest, is acute kidney injury and a recent case report finds the potential catastrophic effects of warming temperatures, muscle damage, and electrolyte imbalance on renal failure in ultramarathoners. This imbalance calls to action medical social work expertise, eco-social work futures, and climate interventions (Pasternak et al., 2023). Nutrition, especially for amateur ultramarathoners, is an important field to contribute to. A recent study states ultrarunning is increasingly popular among beginners and knowledge about optimized and appropriate nutrition is needed (Kosendiak et al., 2023). This begs our discipline to refer and educate athletes of all training styles to be mindful and evidence-based with their nutrition and hydration strategies.

A rich area of research is the qualitative and quantitative markers of ultraendurance success and failure to ensure safety and performance skills over the lifespan. Subjects such as justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion could also be fertile to bring to light the successes and experiences of athletes and racers like multiple Guinness World Record holding Masters Centurion racewalker and first African American to finish the Sri Chinmoy Self Transcendence 3100-mile race, Yolanda Holder. Gender and diet, such as plant-based diets, are also important to factor in as many athletes like record-smashing Courtney Dauwalter, Camille Herron, Harvey Lewis and Suprabha Beckjord of 3100-mile race fame continue to inspire and give us frisson inducing performances.

Age is also an interesting factor in ultraendurance racing as there are many wise and elder ultramarathoners showing how it is done to the new devotees of the sport in races such as “A Race for the Ages.” It is important to note the Global Organization of Multiday Ultrarunners (GOMU) has stepped in to honor the records of multiday ultrarunning distances when the International Association of Ultrarunners (IAU) neglected to honor the distances, like the 5000km. In conclusion, this commentary is a call to action for all sport social workers, athletes, and sport social workers to research, develop best practices, and advocate for the sustainability and heart of ultraendurance sports. More specifically:

1. Volunteer and consult with ultramarathons in your area to get front line experience.
2. Develop and conduct research to promote success and medical knowledge in ultraendurance.
3. Advocate for best practice development in sustainability such as cupless races, race directing, sport social work, and sports medicine for the longevity and health of the sport.
4. Increase Continuing Education Units for sport social workers interested in the practice of ultraendurance.
5. Build community in social work and complementary disciplines such as physical therapy and medicine to support the whole lifespan of an ultraendurance athlete.
6. Promote health and wellbeing not only of athletes and their support systems but of our environments and ecosystems.

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