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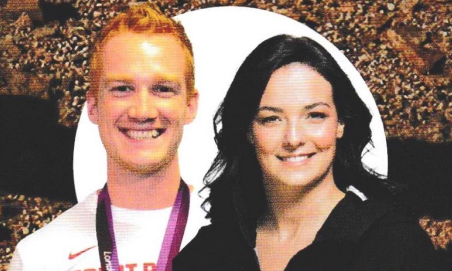
WHY WE LOVE THE OUTDOORS WITH OLYMPIANS GREG RUTHERFORD & KERI-ANNE PAYNE



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HOW FAR CAN YOU GO?

When others may be knocking up shelves, Maxwell Roche decides he'd rather knock out miles. He attempts a DIY ultra along the Thames Path. Just how long can he run for?

Words & pictures Maxwell Roche

As a boy at school I ran... a lot. In fact, by the ripe old age of 10, I was regularly bunking off football and rugby training, not to hideout in the classroom with the other skivers, but to leg it and do cross-country through the woods. At that age it certainly wasn't about fitness, so I can only surmise that I did it purely because I loved it. Running was and still is an emotional and physical escape for me. For the majority of kids, mid winter laps of the playing fields were a cruel and miserable punishment, designed to torture but for me they were nothing but a wished for and welcomed pleasure.

It's no surprise then that since those early days I've continued to indulge my passion - perhaps even my addiction. In the last three years alone I've notched 11 marathons and two ultras, both on- and off-road, and I feel distinctly satisfied with my achievements... nearly. I say nearly because still one question remains - how far can I go?

Each one of us earthlings is blessed with a different set of physical attributes. Some have fantastic minds capable of solving the infinite riddles and equations of the universe; some have necks the size of tree trunks and are capable of hefting unfathomable weights above their cyclopean heads; and some, like me, have gangly chicken-legs, a physical necessity if you are to excel at the ancient practice of long distance running. So since I'm genetically predisposed to it, well trained and experienced in it, and on top of all that, enjoy it, shouldn't I be capable of running a bloody long way? Well, the only way I'm ever going to find out is by running until I can run no more. Age 30 I feel stronger than ever, and



with some ambient fitness still remaining from my last ultra I feel I need to make hay. To date the furthest I've managed is 63 kilometres (39 miles). Best get searching for something longer!

Research began, and a number of races were considered. One in particular "The Thames Path 100" was decided upon which, as luck would have it, started in my hometown of Richmond. Much to my dismay however, the event was fully booked. This got me thinking - why not just skip the troublesome logistics associated with an organised event, and set off along the river in the wee small hours of Saturday morning on nobody's schedule except my own?

I wouldn't earn any UTMB (Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc®) points by running my own DIY ultra but hey-ho.

The Thames Path route is one of those that can be run with relative ease outside of an organised competition, mainly due to the fact that navigation is relatively straightforward - just follow the river. It's 100 miles exactly along the mighty Thames from Richmond to

Oxford.

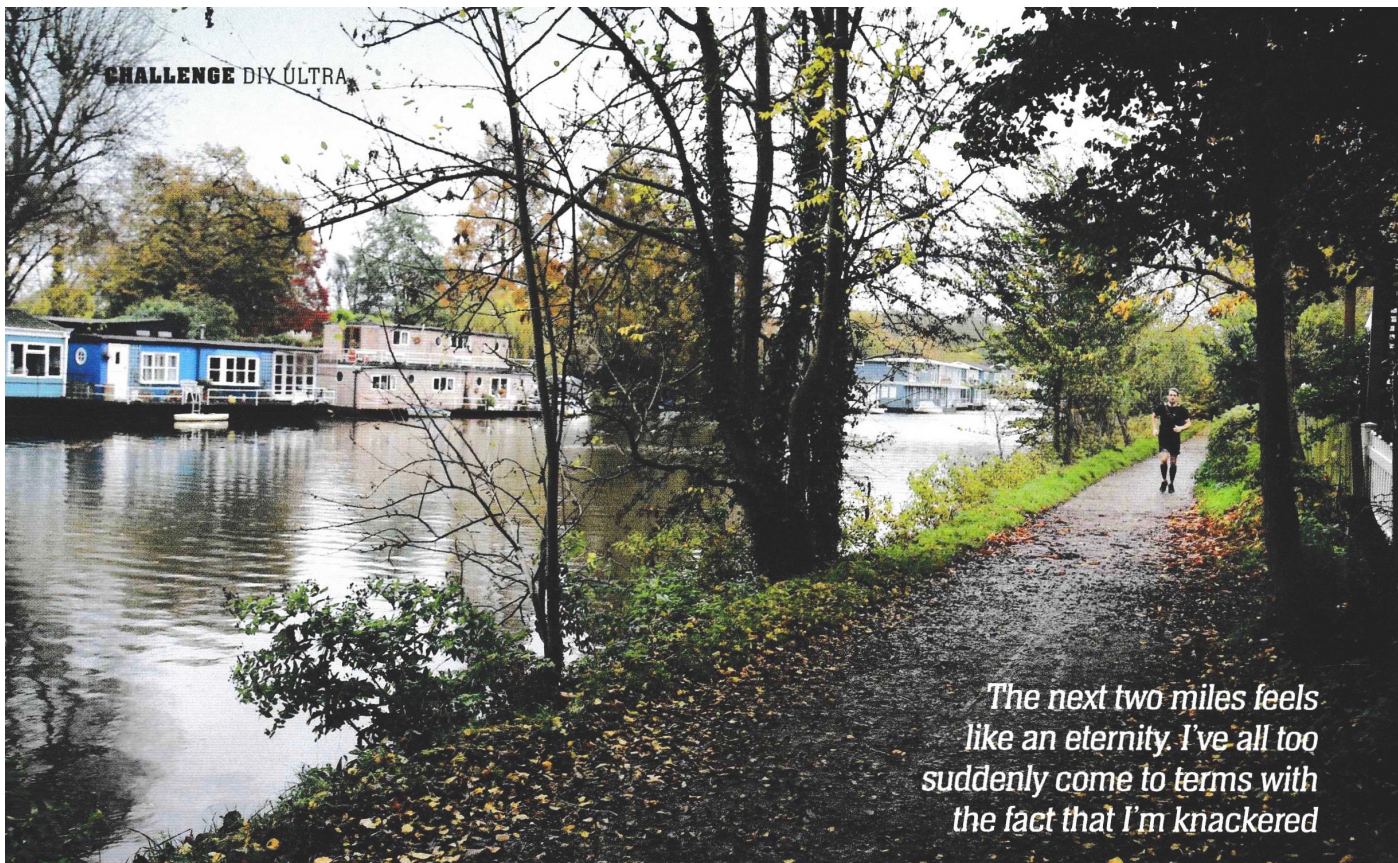
There's definitely something romantic about setting off on a Saturday, on a great adventure, from your doorstep, to test yourself against nobody but yourself, in the hope that you'll achieve something you never have before, without the need to register for any particular event, collect numbers or jostle elbows for position amid thousands of others. It goes back to the basics of running, the joyous simplicity, the opportunity to reflect.

The fateful Saturday is upon me, my legs are limber after last night's pre slumber stretches, my hydration bladder is full and sits securely between my shoulder blades, and my shorts are gliding freely about my thighs following a strong application of anti-chaf cream. My ever loyal little sister Milli (one woman cycle support crew) is busy packing the last of the carb bars and energy gels into her bike panniers readying for the off. Unfortunately for all concerned the rain has begun to fall. Reluctant to stand still any longer I set the GPS and break into a slow plod. Almost immediately a spasmodic pang of worry sweeps over me as I contemplate the fact that it may be as many as 24 hours before I stand still again. Milli hops aboard her bicycle and pedals up alongside. "Common Maxi!" she says "Whooop!" I chuckle and paw the air with head back and eyes closed whilst blowing a nonchalant raspberry. "Save your encouragement Mills" I say, "until I really need it".

Navigation is proving a little trickier than we anticipated, although there's a towpath along the majority of the Thames, there are sections where it ceases. It also changes from bank to bank quite frequently so it's easy to get caught out on the wrong side of the river. However, navigation is by no means our biggest



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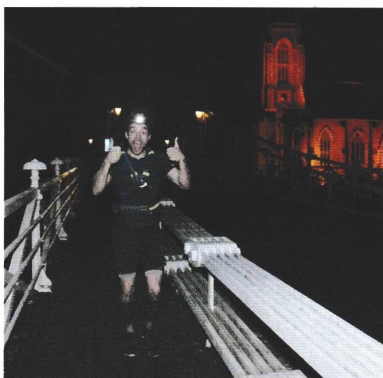


The next two miles feels like an eternity. I've all too suddenly come to terms with the fact that I'm knackered

adversity in the early hours. The weather is proving catastrophic, ceaseless rain and bitter sideways winds clobber us, cutting through our skimpy exercise gear. By mile 15, I'm already starting to wonder if postponing the challenge to the following weekend might be the safest and least miserable course of action. But, just as such dangerous negativity rears its ugly head so does a more positive realisation. I'm out by a beautiful stretch of river, with my heroic sister, keeping fit, on a great adventure, and my next chocolate and peanut protein bar is waiting for me just two miles down the track - could be worse right? My every extremity is tingling with cold, I'm as wet as an otter's pocket wearing barefoot running shoes in three inches of mud but what of it? It was never going to be easy.

From the moment I stop contemplating rescheduling the whole charade, and decide to fully commit, life becomes so much easier. The task I'd set myself that Saturday was not to run any particular distance, it was simply to run until I couldn't, or didn't want to run anymore. This mentality proved one of the most motivating I have ever adopted. There is absolutely no chance of failure because there is no finish line that must be reached. I had decided to set off that morning in celebration of the joyous simplicity of running. I'd chosen to run by the indomitable Thames because the scenery lining its banks is famed the world over with such sights as Windsor Castle and Hampton Court Palace.

After nine hours I've run 45 miles and eaten my body weight in chorizo, handed to me at scheduled intervals by my valiant sister and solitary supporter. Coming to terms with the fact that a run has no end makes it easier to keep going. Between mile-25 and 45 I entered some kind of trance and in fact I can't



remember a single thing of significance occurring in the seven hours it took to complete them. Apparently I bantered back and forth with little sis, and engaged in navigational negotiations, but I remember nothing of it. There was no finish so I didn't dare contemplate it, or yearn for its proximity. I just ran.

It's mile 50 and I've suddenly been awoken from my trance. The river shines below a half moon and the bank runs silhouetted toward a distant cluster of flickering yellow lights. A whole day has passed since Richmond and the only thing that's clearly visible within reach of my head torch is the next two metres of sodden grass. It's not what I can see that's awoken me however it's what I can hear, and smell. Across my frigid nostrils passes the smell of a log fire and of roasting meat. I can hear the hum of jovial conversation escaping through the cracks in a distant doorway. "Wow that looks cosy" says Milli as we draw alongside and peer through the pub's picture frame windows at the merry makers within.

It's at that moment that I decide... enough's enough. "How far's Henley?" I ask desperately "Two miles said Milli as she squints at her mobile through the inky gloom, her weather beaten face lit by the pallid blue light. "Ok, I say we call it a day at Henley, and stop for a roast. I'm not enjoying myself anymore".

The next two miles feels like an eternity. I've all too suddenly come to terms with the fact that I'm knackered. The cold pint of bitter, and the roast dinner, which I've been subconsciously dreaming of all day long is now a mere two miles away. The finish line looms and with its sudden manifestation comes a new mindset. Now I'm contemplating distance and time. After 50 miles and nine hours of running my legs are seized like cold steel. Every step is a struggle that requires steadfast concentration. I ask for a snack, and then another, and then proceed to drink an entire bottle of Lucozade. Finally, and not a moment too soon, we cross the bridge into Henley and I pull up teetering on aching soles.

So, I have my answer: 83 kilometres (52 miles) is my maximum, and baring the last two tortuous miles, I enjoyed every step. Not a penny was spent that day, excepting the pub dinner (which unfortunately I threw straight back up mere moments after eating it), and both sis and I had an undisputedly ultra adventure, straight off our doorstep.

Would more have been possible under the added pressures and provocations of organised competition? I suspect so but there's still much to be said for the casual and carefree motivations of a DIY venture. Such a jaunt is a worthy and enjoyable experiment for all those in fine fitness who can't wait an age for the next scheduled race, and just need to know, how far they can go.