

Ultra runners say ‘actually, you can’

By **Andrew Loscutoff**
Correspondent

A trio of Sisters women each possess a penchant for pushing their bodies to the limit and exploring the depths of fortitude through ultra endurance running.

The Sisters women — Ashley Nordell, Rebecca Touvelle, and Riva Johnson — have each competed in many ultra endurance events. Off the trail, these stellar endurance athletes don't look like superwomen; they look much like many of the people seen on sidewalks or in line at the coffee shop. They have kids in the schools, they struggle with the same day-to-day conflicts as everyone else. Yet they accomplish feats of extraordinary endurance.

When asked about what motivates them to keep going, the women all answered that kinship of suffering with friends and competitors is essential. Extraordinary blisters and toenails removing themselves during runs might be insurmountable without community, without those text messages from each other on the dark cold mornings — “better put on an extra layer this morning.” They bond through suffering and come across the other side stronger, with a unique level of friendship.

Training for an ultra endurance event is not much more extreme than a marathon plan. All of the ladies agreed that it isn't extraordinary, and follows a similar progression of increasing mileage. This progression stays modest; their longest training runs might be 25 miles. The women suggested doing a training run or practice race of 50 percent of the distance to be run in the event, then strategizing how to cope with the increase on race day.

Fueling for an event that can last many hours is tricky. The standard rate of calorie consumption is around 200 per hour. This equates to three bananas, or a couple of sport gels. It is not quite so simple: the athletes all had differing advice which culminated into a suggestion to find what works for the individual. Nordell consumes light drink mixes and the occasional gel, whereas Touvelle might reach for something more substantial, a bar or other solids. Stories of vomiting trailside and stomach distress swirled among the group as evidence that fueling truly is personal.

The race itself is a challenge logistically. The runners all spoke of the tremendous amount of support they receive from friends and family. A runner goes through

many checkpoints along the way, and at each station they either receive a drop bag or outside support. They all have essential tools: Band-aids for blisters, Vaseline for chafing, electrolyte tablets, layering clothes, socks, etc. A mental checklist through each area of the body is a good prevention strategy — asking yourself if there is any looming injury before it's too late to deal with it. At these rest stops, a mental break is just as important. A time to see support, loved ones, or friendly encouragement from other bystanders can fix the dark thoughts creeping into the mind. The mind telling the body to stop, to quit, to relent, is amplified in solitude.

Motivation is personal, too, but there are common threads. The thought of letting down the ones who have helped along the way, the sacrifice of family members, ones who have traveled along with the runners was the common thread of motivation to keep going.

Another strategy the trio agreed on was the “optimistic pessimism” strategy. They all know the race will be extremely difficult, and things will get hard, testing their limits. Acknowledging that it will be hard, and at points it will be miserable, they develop strategies to overcome the dark moments and don't gloss over the difficulties with false positivity. Using mantras, music, and simple comforts all helped them. Touvelle has dreamt of heated seats in the car, Johnson of her customary Diet Coke post-run, and Nordell has thought of her most comfortable and warm pair of Ugg boots.

Many runners assume they don't have what it takes to compete or finish an ultra event. The Sisters women all want to lend some helpful

advice: Look at the race as a mission of self improvement, rather than a race or event was Rebecca's suggestion. They agreed that time shouldn't constrain; they all have kids, work, and finances to balance. They make it happen. Running with a stroller, in the predawn light, or juggling two-a-day runs between obligations are all strategies to get in the necessary training.

They love the daycare service at the gym, allowing them to workout while the kids stay occupied. Nordell was especially moved when she commented “my daughters get to be there, seeing their mom do amazing things.” Touvelle agreed.

“My daughters get to be there, seeing their mom do amazing things.”

— Ashley Nordell

The fact that these women are able to take on such a daunting challenge — and overcome it — runs counter to a current social order that promotes instant gratification and rejects too much work and effort for a distant event. The trio of Sisters ultra women all echoed the same sentiment for anyone contemplating taking on such a challenge: “Actually, you can.”



PHOTO BY ANDREW LOSCUTOFF

Rebecca Touvelle, Riva Johnson, and Ashley Nordell all balance everyday life with the demands of training for ultramarathons.

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