

'There's way more strategy and head stuff in 100-milers,' one ultra runner says. The physical part is easy: 'Just keep running'

What makes them go?

Runners are different. Not only do they border on obsessive about all things running, they don't quite get why the rest of the world doesn't share their love of pounding the pavement. But as different as most runners are, ultra distance runners take their obsession to new heights – or lengths.

Take Michel Gouin, for example. His specialty is running 24 hours – non-stop.

That means eating while on the run, literally, and foregoing sleep in favour of covering more ground.

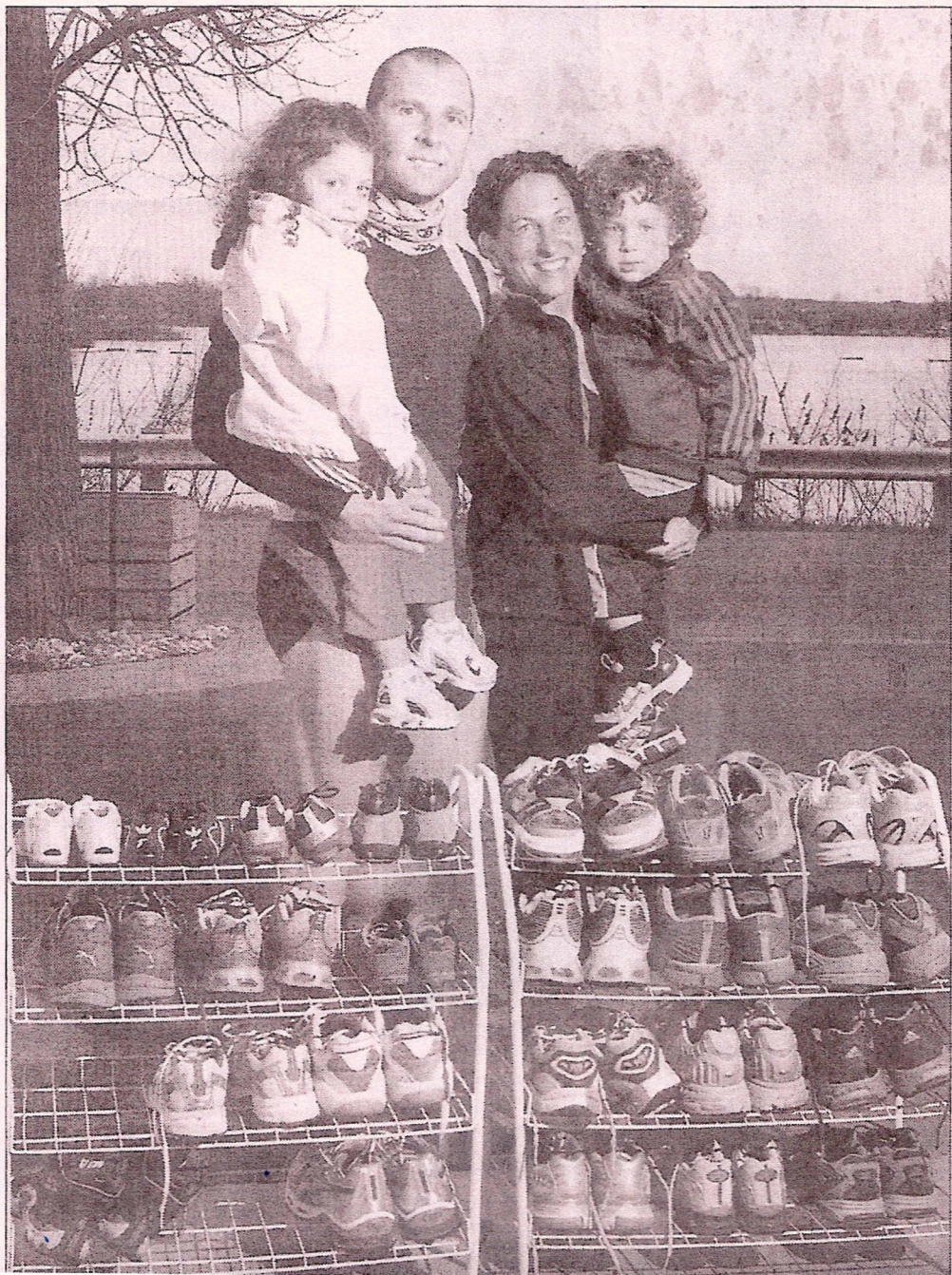
A resident of Drummondville and president of the Association of Canadian Ultramarathoners, Gouin logs an incredible 5,000 kilometres a year.

"I've been doing this for seven or eight years now," he said.

Ultra distance is defined as any distance greater than the 42 kilometres it takes to complete a marathon. While distance runners have been testing their mettle for decades, the sport was officially sanctioned in 1991 by the International Association of Athletics Federation.

Ultras are run in one of two ways – by distance or by time. The shortest race measures 50 kilometres and the longest is a 1,300-miler held in New York (runners run a one-mile loop 1,300 times). Timed events range from 24 to 48 hours, with some races lasting multiple days.

Gouin prefers the 24- and 48-hour ultra events. In fact, he acts as host of an annual 24-hour run annually in Drummondville. This year's race is



"I don't know," admitted Markus Wiaderek, who is attempting his first 100-kilometre event in June and a 160K run in July.

His first foray into the sport was a 50K run, which is just a tad over the marathon distance. He liked it. So he started training for longer distances and completed an 82K run in Virginia.

Wiaderek said he finds running long distances peaceful and compares his mind/body connection similar to that touted by yoga fanatics.

His wife however has a different view. "He's an addict," Patrizia Izzi said, laughing.

According to Izzi, ultra distance running suits her husband's "extreme" personality. He has also invested a lot of money feeding his running jones. Not only is he travelling the world to compete, he's got a thing for running shoes.

"We have a wall of running shoes in the garage," said Izzi, who estimates the wall to be about 30 pairs of shoes high.

How does Izzi deal with a husband who dreams of finishing longer and longer runs?

Let's just say she takes an "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" attitude. She'll be running her first 50K run at the same time Wiaderek tackles his first 100K in June.

Oh, and did I mention they have 3½-year-old twins?

By now, you're probably wondering what sets an ultra distance runner apart from the average guy who's happy jogging a handful of kilometres a few times a week.

"Desire," said Peter Collins, the architect behind Montreal's Mount Royal Summit 50/100K Quest, a run that takes off from Beaconsfield and meanders along bike paths to the summit of Mount Royal (100K runners start earlier at the summit and join the 50K group in Beaconsfield where they do the whole route again in reverse).

According to Collins, most ultra distance runners start as marathoners who are looking for a new challenge. And unlike those who raise the bar by running faster, ultra distance runners up the ante by going longer.

Collins promotes what he calls the "fat ass" style of ultra running, which he says ignores the concept of running against the clock.

"Take it easy. Keep it low-key. Run with friends and enjoy yourself," is his mantra.

In ultras, runners "go as they please." That means they can run, walk or take a break to eat or sleep (depending on the distance). Other than the time lost, there is no penalty for stopping or walking.

But not everyone is content with just getting from A to B.

Take Barbara Freedman, for instance. She isn't a "fat ass" kind of runner. Sure she's a keen participant at Collins's Summit Run, but this 55-year-old Dawson College administrator is serious about going the distance. She got the ultra bug a few years ago and now 50- and 100-milers are a regular part of her racing schedule.

"There's way more strategy and head stuff in 100-milers," said Freedman, who claims ultra distances are 95 per cent mental. The physical part, she said is easy. "Just keep running."

Of course, racking up the miles in this way takes a physical toll. Freedman has had her share of injuries, but so far, nothing has caused her to stray from her goals.

Collins, Gouin and Wiaderek say they have been relatively injury-free, something they credit to the slow, easy pace of ultra running, combined with a gradual training program that slowly allows a body to get used to the strain of high mileage.

So how do you know if ultra running is your cup of tea? You don't, until you try it. Which is how Wiaderek got hooked.

"Life is short," he said, "so do it now."