

Testing the Limits – Paul Dewitt Takes Lesson

By Stephanie Wurtz



It's dubbed the "race where legends are created." For the past 30 years, runners have attempted 100 miles of challenging Colorado Rockies terrain, many succumbing to the brutality of the course. Any number of mental, physical and emotional challenges can befall a runner during the Leadville 100. Every year, about half of the entrants fail to finish. Paul Dewitt has won it twice.

"I try to demystify it for the average person," Dewitt says of ultra-distance running, and racing. "It's supposed to be hard and supposed to be a challenge, but you shouldn't be miserable or putting your health in danger. The ultras are more diverse and accessible to more body types and fitness levels – mental toughness or better decision-making can make the difference because there are so many factors involved."

Dewitt grew up in North Carolina, began competing as a runner at age 12, and ran the 1500m and cross country at North Carolina State. The intensity of road running and collegiate-level racing eventually pushed Dewitt's interest to other athletic events like triathlons, backpacking and rock climbing. When he arrived in Colorado at 25, Dewitt instantly fell in love with trail running.

"I was looking for something that wasn't a road marathon, without the constant battle of PRs. In road racing, every race is the same: flat and fast. The neat thing about trail running is they're all so different; each is a different challenge and it's not such a numbers game with pace per mile."

Living in Colorado, the Leadville 100 beckoned. It was the first ultra Dewitt signed up for, though he completed others as

part of his Leadville training. In his first 40-mile race, Dewitt got beat by a minute and ran through "ridiculous cramping."

"I remember afterwards, the [winner] was asking me, 'What did you eat? Drink?' I had no salt pills, I ate nothing, so I learned a lot of lessons the hard way."

Those lessons led to Dewitt's instinctual development of an effective training strategy. Eating, drinking and salt intake are a huge part of ultra running success that can overwhelm runners of all levels, Dewitt says.

"Know what works for you and your stomach, know what shoes you're going to wear, what you like to eat. Study the race so you know what to expect," he says. That's where Dewitt's experience comes in – helping set expectations about the things runners do or don't need to worry about. He's run through it all.

"I was known as a low mileage runner who did other things, too, not just running," Dewitt says of his training philosophy, "That's another interesting thing about ultras – a long bike ride or hiking a 14er, that is training, too."

He won and set course records in a whole range of trail marathons and ultra races. Then, with his competitive career winding down, Dewitt began coaching in 2007. Initially, he was contacted by higher-level runners wanting to achieve the same success Dewitt found in Leadville.

"I had hit a PR in everything from the trail marathon to the 50K, and began battling injuries, including arthritis," Dewitt says of his transition from runner to coach. "I knew I didn't want to compromise running forever with tearing my body up more extensively. It was perfect timing, allowing me to stay involved in the sport I loved in a new capacity."

As a coach, Dewitt says one of his top accomplishments came in working with Scott Jaime, who was already a very high-level runner. Dewitt helped coach him to a finish in the Hard Rock 100 cutting two hours off Jaime's previous time. And it may not have been running that made the difference. Dewitt put uphill treadmill walking into the training plan, to prepare him for the terrain and pace. "He was skeptical, but it worked," Dewitt says.

Some of his proudest coaching moments also come from runners who make significant transformations. "Having Paul as a coach gave me the confidence I needed going into the Leadville Trail 100," says Jenni Leppert, who ran and finished her first LT100 attempt in August. "The plan included VO2 workouts, cruise intervals and long runs that helped to achieve my goal of finishing. His advice on nutrition and crew and pacers was very beneficial, not to mention the support on race day!"

"A runner will call me up and want to do a 50-miler for the first time, and they achieve that and it's really rewarding." It's a reward that tastes so sweet because of what some might call the considerable, incessant suffering it takes to get there. And even an elite coach like Dewitt knows unforeseen and intangible variables are always part of an endurance race.

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