

# 50 Marathons & Beyond

*What to Do, Where to Go, After the Goal Has Been Reached? A Coda to 50 Marathons in 50 Days in 50 States.*

BY DEAN KARNAZES

“Look, that’s him, he’s right there.”  
“Who?” I asked the race official.  
“You were within a minute of him,” he said.  
“Within a minute of who?” I repeated, puzzled.  
“Lance Armstrong!” he blurted.

We were standing at the finish line of the 2006 ING New York City Marathon. I had just crossed the line, fairly pleased with how the race had gone. Not that 3:00:30 was all that fast. Though, as my 50th marathon—in as many days, in as many states—it seemed acceptable.

I thanked the official, “Do you know where to get out?” All I wanted to do was find my family. They had been with me the past 50 days, and it had been the ultimate road trip.

“Yeah, you can get out over there,” he pointed, then added, “Dude, that was insane, you almost passed him.”

Finishing ahead of Lance Armstrong was the last thing on my mind; the only person I wanted to beat was P. Diddy. Not to take anything away from the man, P. Diddy that is—I greatly admire

▶ Three hours flat in NYC, the 50th marathon in as many days. What now?



JB Benna/Journey Film

him for being out there running a marathon—it's just with all that hardware around his neck and those huge rings he wears, it would be somewhat deflating if he finished in front of me, even after 50 marathons.

There was a great celebration that evening (P. Diddy never made it, he was recovering). The 50-marathon expedition was complete, and it had been beyond everyone's expectations. Thousand of runners, young and not so young, had joined in and run alongside me across the country. It was a roaming marathon tour beyond our wildest imagination. Every day we were surrounded by remarkable, energetic people, in all 50 states of this great nation.

The event had been five years in the making, required untold amounts of planning and preparation, and now it was over. The support crew, which had become like family, dissipated, my wife and kids flew back home to San Francisco. I couldn't go with them because the "The Today Show" asked me to be on the next morning. After the show, I found myself sitting alone in a hotel room in NYC, feeling empty. It was done. There was finality to it, and I was unprepared. What now?

## WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, START RUNNING

Rain was falling when I checked out of the hotel. I had no game plan, nowhere to go. All I knew was that I needed to leave. As I stepped onto the sidewalk, the sky above appeared shadowy and ominous, at least what I could make of it through the buildings. The bellman waved good-bye. I waved back, my hand trembling. Never have I felt so terrified; never have I felt so liberated. Over the past 50 days, I had experienced some of the most glorious moments of my life; today I was experiencing one of the darkest.

The forces at play were perplexing. One minute I was on a pedestal—at the top of my game—the next I was feeling lost, confused, without a purpose. I tried to reconcile those emotions, but nothing seemed to work. I tried to come to grips with this vexing internal mayhem, but could not. Everything failed, so I started running.

The streets of Manhattan were busy with people scurrying under umbrellas and taxis darting every which way. I scarcely noticed. Everyone seemed headed toward a particular destination; I didn't have one. There was no guidebook to where I was hoping to go, no defined path to follow, no support crew. The 50-marathon tour had been spectacular, though certain elements—the logistics, the immense coordination, the sponsor obligations—had been, at given points, completely overwhelming.

I had gotten a little lost over the past 50 days and figured that if I ran far enough, maybe I would find myself again. It was Thoreau who had said, "Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves." Sounded like pretty good advice to me.

My intention was to head west, toward the Pacific, toward home. I would take streets that pointed in the direction of the setting sun; that would be the surest way to navigate. New York was on one side of the country, San Francisco on the other. I would just go west. If I didn't tread off the edge of the world, eventually I would run right into it. With my head pointed downward against the incoming storm, I started off into the abyss.

## HARDWARE FOR THE ROAD TRIP

Three days later, I found myself somewhere near the Jersey Turnpike, attempting to cross the Delaware River. I had been sleeping in parks, eating from street vendors as I ran, asking directions from people standing on random corners along the way. I was, in effect, homeless, but by design. My worldly possessions—a few extra pairs of socks, a change of shirts, a puffy down jacket, and a flashlight—were in front of me, riding in a jog stroller that I was pushing. I hadn't showered since I left.

Thoreau had also put forth the notion that a man's wealth is measured by what he can do without. Right now, I didn't have much. And it was feeling pretty good. A pair of shoes, some running gear, and an open highway—that's all a runner needs. Onward ho!

Heading west, however, wasn't always easy. There were plenty of obstacles along the way: impassable sections that required massive detours, confusing matrixes of roadways that headed off in every imaginable direction, dead ends that required retracing previously covered terrain. Deciphering the landscape was tricky, especially while cars and trucks whizzed by inches away from me. Now, I was lost again. My desire was to cross the Delaware River, though I wasn't sure whether I was going in the right direction.

► Getting lost is a surefire way to find yourself. Dean crossing the border of West Virginia to Ohio.



Up ahead was a gas station. It was just a small, local business, somewhat outdated, a seeming relic compared with the modern-day super station. But the pumps were surprisingly well preserved in their antiquity. Each looked freshly painted, gleaming in the sunlight. The building itself was strikingly vibrant, as though time had stood still for this little piece of history to remain youthful. Old gas station logos and placards graced the entranceway, each in remarkably pristine condition.

Making my way up the driveway, I was struck by how peaceful the station appeared. The air was astoundingly crisp, and an old Chuck Berry tune was playing on the outside speakers. There were no cars anywhere to be seen. The cement around the gas pumps was surprisingly clean—completely devoid of oil stains, sparkling brilliantly in the sunshine. It seemed like such an improbable setting here on the west side of New Jersey.

As I entered the building, there didn't appear to be anyone inside. I started looking around for a street map, when a voice behind the counter startled me, "Can I help you?"

I looked but couldn't see anyone. I started to reply, "Ah, yes," while walking around the corner to make eye contact with this person. "I'm not sure where I'm going."

"Well, that's a fine way to end up someplace new," came the response.

*Interesting*, I thought. Sitting on a stool, staring at me, was a rotund man with dark skin and somewhat pointy ears. "What are you looking for?" he asked.

"I'm trying to find Highway 1."

"Are you sure that's what you're *really* looking for?"

## HE POSED A VERY GOOD QUESTION

His response struck me. I thought that's what I was looking for, but maybe I was searching for something else, something deeper. I had been out here running for days on my own; perhaps I was trying to find something more than the nearest freeway overpass.

"Would you like to let your child in?" he asked, looking at my jog stroller outside.

"Oh, there's no child inside."

"There's always a child inside," I thought he responded.

"What's that?" I said, mystified.

He just smiled at me. I wandered down the aisle, thinking about what he had said, or at least what I thought he had said. It *was* rather foretelling that I was pushing a jog stroller. Maybe there was more than just a gear bag inside; maybe I had brought my inner child along for a ride. This guy wasn't a service station attendant, he was Master Yoda.

Who would ever think that at some random gas station on the Jersey/Philly border I'd meet the great one?

"About those directions," I cleared my throat, "is there an alternate path I should be following?"

"Indeed," he said, "I believe you're on it."

"Care to enlighten me further?"

"Certainly. The way is *simple*. Pedestrians aren't allowed on Highway 1; you'll need to take the footbridge to the north. Just keep following this street you're on; it will lead you right to it."

"Good advice. Thank you," I said, trying to inspect him more closely without seeming obvious. He just sat there on that stool, staring back at me with this childish grin on his face as I made my exit. I kept waiting for him to whip out a light saber, or wiggle his ears or something. But nothing. Just that impish smirk tracking me as I pushed the jog stroller out of the lot, off into the distance.

## STARBUCKED

The difference between a runner and a jogger is that a jogger still has control of his life. Spontaneously running across the country is probably not a notion that enters many joggers' minds. Yet, what runner hasn't dreamed about running across the country? Many have, though probably few have done so on a whim. They likely



▲ The search and rescue squad found Dean and started running with him.

planned and prepared, mapped and studied the route, analyzing the best way to go about it. I did none of these things, which was both liberating and ludicrous. Already, I had learned some tough, though clearly obvious, lessons.

Running across the country from east to west is ill advised, not that anything in my approach was necessarily intelligent. There has been a persistent, menacing head wind tormenting me daily. With winter quickly approaching, the prevailing weather systems provide this daily atmospheric impediment. Of course, it doesn't make much sense to begin a cross-country trek at the onset of winter in the first place. Days are short, storms are frequent, and highways are treacherous.

On the road, thus far, there have been glorious moments, harrowing moments, and laughable moments. I consider what happened while running through the countryside of Maryland one of the laughable.

It was raining that day, not one of those hard, cleansing types of rain, but rather a dreary mist that was just hard enough to dampen you thoroughly and leave you grimy, but not enough to get the job done. The contents of my worldly possessions, in the jogger before me, were now thoroughly drenched. It was already midmorning, yet the sun was entirely hidden behind a thick layer of clouds and the dull precipitation that fell gracelessly from the sky.

I was running through horse country—more accurately, equestrian country. The landscape was green and perfectly manicured. Elegantly constructed fences lined the roads, and huge mansions were set back from the highway with exquisite gated driveways leading up to sprawling properties. And here I was, running along, soaking wet, grimy, pushing a jog stroller.

While I was navigating my way up a particularly twisty and hilly section of roadway, a car pulled up alongside me. It is a nice car, a luxury SUV, driven by a fashionably dressed woman talking on a cell phone. She was wearing jodhpurs; in the back seat was a soccer ball. I watched as she put down the cell phone and pushed a button on the console to roll down the passenger-side window.

Now, I see a Starbucks latte resting in the cup holder. There is lipstick on the lid, and a small drift of steam is rising from the drinking aperture. I am like a soaked dog, cold and woolly smelling. The window is now all the way down and she is looking at me. The leather seats appear heated, and I'm thinking that the greatest outpouring of human compassion is about to unfold.

Instead, she reads me the riot act.

"You have no right to be pushing that child out here in these conditions!"

"No, no," I tried to explain.

## WHAT KIND OF A FATHER ARE YOU?

"You are the most irresponsible father on earth!" she lays into me. "You're going to kill the both of you."

"Please, let me explain," I plead. "There's no child in the jogger."

“What? There’s no child inside?”

“No,” I retort, “it’s just my gear. I’m pushing my gear.”

She looks perplexed. I wipe the water from my eyes with the back of my hand and smile my most winning smile. Here comes the outpouring of human compassion, I’m thinking.

“It’s just you?” she asks.

I nod my head in affirmation.

“Fine,” she puffs, “then go kill yourself!”

Rolling up the window, she starts to drive off. I’m considering leaping through the window and grabbing that latte. In my mind’s eye, I can see my upper torso wedged through the window, my legs dangling outside the car as she drives down the road, beating me senseless with her Prada handbag.

But she is too quick. Instead, I’m left stranded on the roadside, sucking in the fumes from the car’s exhaust. Where is the love? I am depressed, feeling completely dejected, but mostly, I am craving a warm latte. I want to cry, but instead, I start laughing my ass off. It was the perfect moment, one that is similar to what most every runner has experienced during his lifetime. I am standing on the roadside, by myself, in the middle of nowhere. Instead of feeling isolated, I feel connected.

Slowly, I find myself getting back to the roots of running, to the soul of what I love. Step by step, I am finding what I am looking for.

## A COUPLE OF WEEKS LATER

The skies have parted, and the tempest has been unleashed. Sheets of driving rain tear across the landscape in a wind-driven fury, lashing out against anything that stands in the way. A shrill whistle resonates chaotically in the air, the pitch sharp and unpredictable as nearby trees are ripped sideways by the ferocious gusts, sending massive spirals of leaves flying across the roadway. It is dark, so very dark. There is no light; even though it is early afternoon, there is darkness. The storm is upon me.

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▲ The Running Brotherhood. Many came out to join Dean along the way as he headed back home. Williamsburg, Ohio, a thousand miles after leaving New York City.

The West Virginia terrain is mountainous. When I can get a fleeting glimpse of the horizon, it is obstructed with the shadowy outline of enormous peaks. Water pelts my eyes, forcing me to once again turn my gaze downward toward the remorseful sight of my shuffling, freezing wet feet. *Why?*

*Why is this happening? Why am I here? Why do I feel compelled to do battle with this horrific cold front that is sweeping across our nation like an enraged giant?* I turn my gaze skyward and yell at the top of my lungs, “Ahhh!” I scream, because I am angry. A blast of air hits me headlong, my forward progress all but halted. “Arrr!” I shriek, because I am at war with the elements and with myself. Pellets of water slam into my body. “You can’t stop me!” I holler into the sky, because I am alone, running, in the heart of the storm, and the nearer I get to the core, the more alive it makes me feel.

It has long been my contention that there is a fundamental difference between a “racer” and a “runner.” I like to race, to run marathons to see how fast I can go, to compete against others, to watch the clock in hopes of beating my previous best time. But in racing, there is a finish line. I don’t like finish lines. It is the journey I cherish, not crossing the finish line. In racing, there are boundaries, preset courses, rules that must be abided by. Racing is a construct of man.

Running, to me, is the purest expression of absolute freedom. There are no boundaries; there are no finish lines; nothing is contrived. There is only never-

ending liberty to go as you please, to savor and explore, to immerse yourself wholeheartedly in the experience of being completely alive for this fleeting moment in which we inhabit the universe.

Remorselessly, I continue plodding onward. Temperatures drop quickly as nightfall closes in. Now the mercury is near freezing. Snot pours out of my nose, but my brutalized fingers are too numb to deal with it. My instinct is to curl up into a ball alongside the roadway, attempting to stave off the ravages of the cold and impending hypothermia.

I miss my family tremendously. It is illogical that I am out here. Illogical, and very, very dangerous. I don't profess to understand why I am doing this; all I know is that it is what I need to do.

## SEVERAL WEEKS LATER

The going continues to be rough, with persistent head winds and cold temperatures. Crossing into Ohio along Highway 50, I find myself running along a stretch of roadway that transforms into freeway. Abruptly, there are cars and trucks whizzing by at high speeds. I'm running against traffic, on an interstate freeway, trying to decide what to do next.

Up ahead, a long, sweeping right-hand curve in the road stretches off into the distance. I'm on the left-hand side of this curve, on the very outer perimeter of the bend. My runner's mind kicks into gear. When the traffic eases, I dash over to the center divide, ultimately intending to get to the shoulder on the other side of the road. Cars and trucks speed by as I straddle the roadway in the median, waiting for another lull in the traffic so that I can make my way to the inside lane.

Suddenly, a voice booms out behind me, "*What are you doing?*"

My heart skips a beat as I whirl around to see a police car following me. Inside sit two state troopers dressed in heavy drab jackets and wearing beige Stetson hats. They are staring at me, dumbfounded. I am in brightly colored running gear,

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Aviston Elementary School

▲ The township of Aviston, Illinois, offered a warm reception as Dean runs to the local elementary school to give a brief talk along the road westward.

wearing a hydration pack with a cell phone and GPS dangling from it. They look at me as if I'm from another planet.

Pulling up alongside me, the driver rolls down his window and asks, "What are you doing crossing a freeway?"

Shaken, I say the first thing that pops into my mind, "I'm trying to get on the tangent."

At least my reply was truthful. I smile. They have no idea what I am talking about.

"You need to get off this freeway immediately," he responds, then rolls the window back up. They don't appear to want much to do with me. When a break in the traffic occurs, they speed off down the road. I watch them drive into the distance.

When the next break in the traffic occurs, I head for the tangent.

## ONE MONTH LATER

The moon is full. Below me, a muddy brown river swirls in the bright moonlight. The bridge I am on is long and narrow, rustic and resolute. In the distance, the glow of city lights illuminates the skyline. I have been averaging 46 miles a day, sometimes into the night, which always comes too early this time of the year. Some

days I have run over 60 miles, other days, during snow and ice storms, I have run fewer than 30 miles. Running and running, and now I am crossing a bridge.

Slowly, step by step slowly, over the past 1,200 miles, I have been reclaiming my soul. I've gone back to the roots of what I love, and it has brought me liberation. I am feeling whole again. As I near the end of the bridge, the world appears fresh once more. Since I left New York City more than a month ago, the raging torrent inside has melded into the whirling waters below my feet. Tonight, I crossed the Mississippi.

The next morning, I am up and running early. St. Louis has a remarkably vibrant running community, and I am flanked by other athletes as we weave ourselves through town. We are all laughing, spinning tales, and enjoying a universal spirit we runners share. Several of the runners have their families along with them, and I am touched, though reminded of how badly I miss my own family.

In the early afternoon, we enter a footpath. The path winds along serenely through the outskirts of town. I recognize this place; the surroundings seem familiar. As I round a curve in the path, it hits me. The memories spontaneously come flooding in.

Ninety days, and a lifetime of experiences ago, I had stood at this very spot. We were at the starting line of the Lewis & Clark Marathon, the first marathon of the 50-marathon odyssey. It struck me that I had run from the finish line of the last of the 50 marathons in New York City to the start of the first marathon in St. Charles, Missouri. In a strange way, the circle now seemed complete. San Francisco was still miles away, but standing at this spot in Missouri, I had an overriding feeling of contentment.

In a weird, Forrest Gumpesque moment, I stopped, turned to the group of runners who surrounded me, and said, "I miss my family; I think I should go home now."

At first, there were only confused stares. Then someone spoke, "That sounds like a good idea to me."

More chimed in, and soon there was a chorus of approval. Yes, they were right, going home to my family was indeed a good idea. I thanked them for running with me and also for their support and wisdom. We exchanged hugs and high fives, and just like that, I packed it up for the airport.

The exploration across the country had had the desired effect. The unstructured foray into the unknown left me with a fresh perspective; the world appeared new again. With a smile on my face, I thanked the others, waved good-bye, and called it a run.

*"We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."*

—T. S. Eliot

