

cactus spines skewering you.

So at the end of Day One my primary concern was that the remaining spines still encoiled in my leg were taken out. The next day's 45 km stage would not be possible otherwise.

The line-up at the Grand to Grand is a brutal one by any multiday measure. Each of the first five stages are technically 'ultra' distances - greater than a marathon. If you make it through them all, the final sixth stage is a seemingly innocuous on-paper 12 kilometres straight up a mountain goat track. The reward being the most stunning view of the famous Golden Staircase, an immense sequence of sedimentary rock layers that stretch south from Bryce Canyon National Park through Zion National Park and into the Grand Canyon proper.

I was a long way from relishing that view. First, I had to stop thoughts questioning my ability to finish this race. Instead, I needed to focus on why I do these races, to challenge not just the physical but also the boundaries of my mind. And I had to bring the focus back from the days ahead, to concentrate on one day at a time, or better one hour, or even one minute at a time.

The tough talk paid full cactus spine extraction worked. I did bounce back the next day. I stuck to my hydration and food plan and pushed the body hard. Other than grabbing water at checkpoints I didn't stop but thoughts of stopping completely creep in. Indeed, the more I hurt the more I found I wanted to push, but this is the strange thing about stage races - there comes a point where you have to tell yourself to back off or you are not going to recover enough to push again the next day and tomorrow's stage - the third and longest - was a whopping 14 km.

Stage races are not about a day but days of running and pushing the boundaries only far enough to where you can still back up the next day. The other thing is the need to control - or recognise and manage - your emotions which magnify intensely at times. My first day had been slower than expected and I was angry about it. I needed a good day today to banish the 'woe is me' thoughts. I gained sixty minutes on the female leader and was only 10 minutes adrift. The challenge was put before me, not to win but just to stay somewhere close to the female race favourite, a Finnish lady who had won Marathon de Sables multiple times.

At some point, someone asked me what my overall race strategy was. Being honest, I wasn't

sure I had one other than just getting through each day and rking out every bit of strength I could muster at each moment until the end.

Every day brings new challenges so at the end of a stage I would think about how the day went and then re-assess if I needed to change something for the following stage. I took care of the physical, dealt with any blisters or cuts, got some food in and - most importantly - got some rest. Note that is rest not sleep, as my mattress was thin and I was sharing a tent with eight other competitors. It's amusing, though, how even without much sleep the body can keep going day in, day out. And living and running like this you build bonds with many other competitors as well as the volunteers, medics and event staff. They are all there to wipe a tear away or share in the excitement of you finishing each stage.

Another critical strategy is packing. This was a self-supported race, meaning you carry everything you need on your back through the course of the event. The only things you are given are water and a spot in a tent each night. Oh yes, and as if running the equivalent total of six and a half marathons across thick sand, ankle busting dry rocky creek beds, scrambling up and down mountains, through slot canyons, descending gravelly vertical drops on my butt, bush bashing, cutting up my legs, dodging thunderstorms, crossing rivers and climbing on all fours up massive sand dunes, then stumbling down the other side to just do it all over again each and every day was not enough, why not make it a little tougher and carry a fully loaded pack? This is not simply trail running, nor just an ultra. It's pure adventure running, being that you really are never sure of the outcome each day.

You soon discover that your pack is far too heavy. You sweat, then tuck out every little luxury. Then the real obsession over each and every gram begins. Do I go hungry and have just the minimum calories physically required or do I want comfort food which helps get through the mentally tough patches? You start trading off one thing for another in the hope of having a lighter pack. The obsession grows as it seems others have packs lighter than yours. How did they get their pack so light? These thoughts go round in circles over and over again... and again... and again... until the race starts and you get pack rash and aching shoulders and back. Why do we do this again?

The night before Stage Three we were told the top 10 runners were going to leave two hours



▶ Grand to Grand Ultra 2016, James

