

MENTAL TOUGHNESS

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Photo Courtesy Of Grand To Grand Ultra

170 miles. 7 days. 6 stages. **Self-supported. Grand Canyon to Grand Staircase.**

The Grand to Grand Ultra. One of the most challenging foot races out there. There are many aspects that draw athletes from around the world to events like this. There is something so enticing that hooks us in to see just how far we can push ourselves mentally, physically, and emotionally in endurance events. We are drawn to the challenge, the thrill of the unknown, the adventure. We are drawn to the people. When we surround ourselves with like-minded, driven individuals, it is a powerful force. And I can tell you first hand, being surrounded by 119 of the most incredible, authentic, badass, competitors from around the world and

going through this experience together is something I will always cherish, as this event and the relationships developed are truly life-changing.

We are drawn to events like this in some of the most remote places in the world, with some of the most beautiful, treacherous, unforgiving terrain out there. We are drawn to the fact that we will be able to see this landscape up close and personal, in a way many others can only dream of. We are drawn to nature and the beauty in the intricate simplicity and the connectedness we feel with ourselves, our surroundings, and those around us. Nature reminds us that there are no mistakes, everything is just as

it should be, in perfect order, and harmony. We can get so caught up in the whirlwind of life, yet an event like this is so special because it forces you to slow down, to appreciate, to evaluate, and to be so present in each given moment. We reap the non monetary reward of an experience of a lifetime and unforgettable memories to add to life's journey.

Races such as this become symbolic and metaphoric to our lives- the highs the lows through peaks and valleys, the grief the pain, the joy and tribulation coming out on the other side. The risk, the sacrifice, embracing the unknown, not with fear, but rather excitement to propel us forward. It becomes a way of life. From the outside looking in, it may seem like all of us

adrenaline junkies are just chasing after the next race or adventure, which to a certain extent we are. However, it doesn't just affect us in tackling epic adventures, but it becomes instilled in us that you really can do anything that you set your mind to. We begin to understand the powerful mind/body connection, and that it is our minds that can create either the blockage or the pathway to success. We acknowledge that it isn't always going to be a smooth path, but hold tight to the overall vision and having the patience and persistence to see it through. Whether it be a race, a relationship, a new job, really anything that comes our way.

We can research and find many articles addressing the

tangible aspects of endurance events... training plans, nutrition plans, the perfect gear to buy, etc. But what about the element that is not so tangible? What does it take mentally to complete an event like this? We focus so much on training our bodies, but the mind is just as an important muscle to train as the body... and here is my experience...

Training for Mental Toughness and the Grand to Grand

“You have to make it fun and enjoyable in your own mind to get up and do the hard things.”

Don't overcomplicate it. Keep it simple: Just do it... I would wake up every day and say “feet on the ground, just do it, get out the door.” Take it day by day and not focus on the magnitude of what was ahead. The thought of back to back long runs with added weight seemed unbearable. The thought of

putting in 70- 85 mile training weeks seemed so far-fetched. I knew going into an event like this, it was going to push me to both physical and mental limits that I had not yet experienced. I focused not only on building a strong body through running and strength training and proper nutrition, but I also knew I had to focus on building a strong mind and there is no “training plan” for that. As hard as it was some days to get out the door, I visualized and imagined what was ahead and that energized me. I thought of the people I had yet to meet from around the world who were also out there training and the future relationships we would build from going through a unique experience like this together. I thought of the beautiful landscape we would experience up close and personal that is so remote and many can only dream of seeing it. I thought of the freedom of being cut off from civilization. I thought of the joy of crossing the finish line

each stage after enduring each day. I acknowledged that hard times were going to come and exist, but that they would pass, and there would be “joy in the morning” each new day I woke up. I thought of the charity I was raising funds and awareness for (The Alexis Miranda Foundation helping children with autism in Ghana). I thought of the people supporting me across the globe in Ghana and how grateful they were for me to be representing them in a global event like this and what an honor for me. I thought of my support system, friends and family who continuously support me in all of these crazy endeavors. I thought of the personal events in my own life that lead me to this moment.... Building blocks throughout the years and truly embracing the though... “if you believe it, you can achieve it.” Dreams to Reality, setting a goal, making a plan, executing, and making it happen! I thought about what a gift it

was to be able to train for and eventually participate in a one of a kind event like this. In my mind, I had already seen myself finishing the race.

In addition to the visualization, I knew I had to continue to push beyond perceived limits and do things differently than before when training for marathons. To break through some mental barriers, I would finish the training I set out to do for the day- thinking in my mind I was “done”... reach home... and then turn back around and go out for more miles... The internal dialogue went something like this- “It hurts... keep going... now dig deep and reach new levels.” Over the summer, I did a 50K mountain race peaking 4 mountain summits in Colorado. The race ended up being about 32 miles, and it took me over ten and a half hours to complete. When I finished, I didn't think I had anything left in the tank and that was my cue that it was time to re-lace my shoes and go out the door for more. I ended up reaching a total of 44 miles for the day, the longest I had ever run in one day and that was empowering for an average athlete like myself... The pace did not matter, it wasn't about the time on the watch. It was about keeping my fatigued legs moving, while simultaneously stretching what I thought was possible, continuing to push beyond those perceived limits, finding joy in the moment... and waking up and doing it all over again the next day...

I did quite a bit of journaling, collaging, and reflection throughout the training



Photo Courtesy Of Grand To Grand Ultra

Race Report

process, again focusing on the positive and inspirational quotes I came across along the way. I wrote down before I left “quitting is not an option” (unless medically unable to go on) because once you give yourself the option to quit, it is too easy to throw in the towel. It truly became a battle of mind over matter out there. And your mind will give up far before your body does. The easy thing to do would have been to quit. This fleeting thought crossed my mind multiple times. The heat, the weight of the pack, the blisters, the exhaustion and the unknown of what lies ahead will certainly grab a hold of your mind, and the negativity will spiral if you allow it. At times fleeting thoughts came of “what the hell am I doing this for? Why, Why, Why?” “This is unbearable and so much harder than I thought...this is for those super intense athletes and I am in over my head...this is crazy... I can’t... I’m want to stop” and IMMEDIATELY I had to shut those thoughts down, flip the mental switch, and replace them with “I can, I will, and what I “want” to do is different than what I am GOING TO DO. “ I am going to finish this, damn it!” Then either sing a song, let out a scream, a whole body shakeout, give an uneasy laugh or half ass smile, a high five or pat on the back if someone was near me or a simple one liner pick up... basically anything besides entertaining negative thoughts.

Funny thing because so many people think you have

all these big deep thoughts when you are out there BUT when you are in the thick of it, I tell people the thoughts are actually very simple - because you are so hyper focused on the task at hand and using every ounce of energy to just move your body forward and that is something I have never experienced and could not prepare myself for in training.

Before I left Kanab, Utah for the race, a man who completed the race last year shook my shoulders and said “whatever you do, don’t stop, don’t quit, don’t stop, don’t quit. You are going to want to give up so badly but you will regret it for the rest of your life.” Again, so simple, but when times got hard, I pictured Vince saying this to me and could actually bring back that feeling for an instant that I felt when he told me this of anxious anticipation and excitement and suddenly the pain I was currently feeling in my body ceased to exist for a moment (mind over matter).

The long stage (day 3) was where I started to fall apart. We had already logged 58 miles in two days, and we had a long haul ahead of us. At the first checkpoint, I saw four people that I had been with during the race drop out. The race director told us before our journey began that there was a 20% DNF rate each year, and I was



Photo Courtesy Of Grand To Grand Ultra

starting to see it unfold. We reached checkpoint 2 and four more people I was around dropped out. It was then that the magnitude of what was ahead hit me like a tidal wave, the tears started flowing and the self doubt crept in. The thought of being on my feet, in constant motion, completing 52 miles (75% of it loose sand, including a section with 30+ sand dunes) which could take upwards of 34 hours, suddenly totally overwhelmed me. My tears of uncertainty quickly turned to tears of joy, as the people surrounding me at that moment believed in me more than I believed in myself. There is such beauty in the camaraderie in this event, and I truly began to feel what it meant to be a part of the Grand to Grand family. These people were not going to let me fail. We were all in this together and the pain, agony, the urge to want to give up at any given moment that I was feeling, nearly everyone was feeling, and we needed to lean on each other to make it through. Leaving checkpoint

two, the tears streaming down my face were tears of gratitude for how thankful I was to be here in this moment, with these good hearted souls from around the world, united for a common purpose. People who were strangers just a few days ago, taking such a heartfelt interest in my well being and ultimate outcome in this race was so touching.

I would love to say that it was “smooth sailing” after checkpoint two, but we had only just begun. Another man, Joe, and I made a pact to stick together the entire long stage, no matter what. Hours upon hours of trudging through relentless loose sand. It felt as if it was never ending and we were going nowhere fast. I reminded myself I had to take this (literally) step by step rather than think about the magnitude of what was ahead. Bring it back to the basics. Keep it simple. I had to break it down into manageable chunks... Steps lead to flags, flags lead to checkpoints, checkpoints lead

to miles, miles lead to stages completed, and all that will ultimately cumulate to get me to the glorious finish line.

At one point during the long stage, it was freezing in the middle of the desert at an ungodly hour of the morning. We were the definition of sleep walking zombies. I have never been so exhausted and probably will never reach such a deep level of fatigue again. I did not know how I would carry on. My pack felt like it weighed 1,000 pounds, every inch of my body hurt, my feet were screaming in pain, my mind and body were shutting down. There was not a whole lot of conversation at this point, but a mutual understanding we were going to do whatever it takes, along with a whole lot of swearing from me. God bless Joe's soul for putting up with it all. All I could do was focus on Joe's feet and follow his footsteps and he began weaving in and out, as the exhaustion set in and we could not even walk in a straight line anymore. I wanted nothing more than to curl up in my sleeping bag right then and there and have someone come and pick me up. I was convinced the next checkpoint was NEVER coming and I WAS DONE. Then it hit me.... "The only thing in the ENTIRE world I have to worry about right now is putting one foot in front of the other... THAT'S IT!" We were cut off from the outside world for the entire week, and my only "job" was to keep moving. Inner thoughts "JUST DO IT!... flip the switch. You have no choice but to keep moving forward... otherwise, these coyotes howling in the distance are

coming for you.... and how lucky are you that you get this 'freedom' to only worry about ONE thing!" My cursing continued but internally, I kept repeating a very simple phrase.... "Forward. Forward. 1-2-3- forward" another simple phrase repeated over and over and over. "You can do this" "You're doing it" "You are turning a dream into reality" At each checkpoint there were also inspirational quotes on the board. Two that resonated with me were "You don't realize how strong you are until strong is the only choice you have" and "It is going to be hard, but hard is not impossible." I must have repeated these phrases thousands of times.

I had to remember why I started. I pulled strength from the charity, knowing I was a part of a much bigger story and purpose. There were people around the world following this journey I was on, and that in and of itself was humbling. I thought of a future trip to Ghana to meet these children and families. I thought of the struggles many families go through daily raising children with autism or various disabilities. On the flipside, I thought of the joy in the breakthroughs with these children and celebrating each new milestone that is achieved. I thought of the children I have worked with over the years with autism who have changed my life and taught me so much more than I could teach them. I thought of the families and children I had yet to meet in the years to come. I pulled strength recalling words of encouragement from loved

ones before the race and even during the race from printed emails that were delivered to camp each day. I was brought back to the visualization in my training. I pulled strength from seeing those previous visualizations turn to a reality. Those "strangers" that I had visualized were now friends by my side, and a group of six of us battled it out and completed the long stage hand in hand in 29 hours, 35 minutes, and 19 seconds. I have never been so happy to cross a finish line that day and the ultimate finish line at the end of the seven day journey. My total time spent on my feet throughout the week was 66 hours, 27 minutes, and 39 seconds. I learned so much about myself and others along the way. I firmly grasped the power that we possess with our thoughts and how those thoughts affect our actions. I learned when you want to give up, you have to dig a little deeper, and that we always have just a little bit more to give, and that we are "better together." The competitors of the 2017 Grand to Grand Ultra left our unique mark out there on the course. 119 of us started and 92 finished. We are forever united in the G2G experience that is so hard to explain to others, but we don't have to... we know, and we

will forever cherish that week spent together.

Bottom line: Follow your passion. Align your vision. Make a plan. Chase after it. Know no limits. Be flexible. It is going to be hard. It is going to hurt. Tough times don't last. It is only temporary. Endure the pain. Be comfortable being uncomfortable. Choose joy. Be present. Focus. Control Your Thoughts. Be patient. Trust the process. Dig deep. Reach new levels. Your mind will give up far before your body. What the mind believes, the body achieves. You can't do it alone. Unify. Take care of yourself and others. Hold on strong. If God brings you to it, He will bring you through it. Cling to the positive and build momentum with those thoughts and actions. Maintain a light, joyful, grateful heart and attitude that radiates and is infectious to those around you. Imagine the possibilities. Empower. Bring out the bold and just keep moving... forward. Break on through to the other side. There are far greater things ahead than what we leave behind. The best is yet to come... onward.
www.g2gultra.com

