

Training 2 Miles to Run 100

In the name of science, a dedicated CrossFit lab rat pushes the limits.
Will he be a runaway success—or run out of gas?

Greg Amundson



The thought of running 100 miles never occurred to me before I met Melissa Mackenzie, an expert in endurance running and training. During a CrossFit Level 1 Certification in San Diego last November, Melissa, the co-owner of CrossFit Newport Beach, challenged me to run 100 miles in 24 hours. After all, CrossFit has always made the claim that short-distance anaerobic workouts transfer to long, slow-distance aerobic events. This has been proven by athletes such as world-renowned rock climbing expert Rob Miller, who routinely breaks mountain climbing records on CrossFit training alone. Attempting to run 100 miles on CrossFit training alone seemed like the kind of challenge I could sink my teeth into.

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I had one month to prepare myself for the event. Melissa and I agreed I would only follow the CrossFit main site WOD (Workout of the Day) and that I would do no additional long-distance running. Between the day I agreed to do the run and the day of the event, my CrossFit journal had me running just twice: I did Helen (400-meter run, 21 kettlebell swings, 12 pull-ups) and Nancy (5 rounds of 400-meter run, 15 OHD squats with 95 pounds.)

That is exactly two miles of running.

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Another challenge I added was to run the entire distance on Zone food alone. No supplements or other weird energy-type drinks. I wanted to prove that CrossFit training and the Zone diet can truly create a “ready state” from which an athlete can do just about anything.

Besides doing the 100-mile challenge for scientific reasons, there was an altruistic side. I’d had a discussion with my good friend Jimi Letchford, also at the San Diego Cert, about the potential of using the run as a means to increase the awareness of Operation Phoenix, the CrossFit initiative to raise funds to equip the entire U.S. Marine Corps with functional fitness equipment to help increase combat preparedness, reduce injury, and strengthen unit cohesion. We agreed upon a plan in which the run would start and finish at CrossFit Camp Pendleton (A.K.A. “The Warehouse”), and that any media gained from the event would be used to encourage people to visit the CrossFit link to Operation Phoenix with the hope of a donation.

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It Takes a Village

I knew that in order to make the event a success, I would need the support of people in the CrossFit community. Michele Vieux of [MmmmGood Meals](#) graciously agreed to provide Zone-proportioned food for me during the run. Because I did not want to make any drastic changes from my diet during the event, Michele created a menu with some of my favorite “Tupperware” dishes, including fruit with cottage cheese, her world-famous pasta-less lasagna, and peanut butter stuffed apples. Although I normally 2x my fat intake, we decided during the run I would have 5x fat.

I also placed a phone call to my good friend Steve Serrano from CrossFit Marina. I wanted Steve to be available during the run in the event I had a medical problem that needed immediate attention. Steve is a long-time CrossFit athlete and expert in combat-related care as well as a fellow law enforcement officer. If I went down during the run, I definitely wanted Steve to pull me out.

On Friday, January 2, my wife Mallee and I drove from our house in Imperial Beach to CrossFit Camp Pendleton, where I parked in front and met with Melissa Mackenzie and Steve Serrano. I laid down in the back of Steve’s Jeep for a baseline medical evaluation, which showed my resting heart rate at 54 BPM and my blood-pressure at 123 / 72. After a warm-up at CrossFit Camp Pendleton consisting of overhead squats, GHD sit-ups, pull-ups, and dips (isn’t that how all distance runners warm-up?) I was ready to start the 100-mile adventure.

In the tradition of all CrossFit WODs, Steve Serrano started the official timer with a loud and clear, “3-2-1 GO!” and I was off. Start time 3:45 p.m. on Friday, January 2, 2009.

Starting-Off Like a Well-Oiled Machine

My original plan was to hold a 12-minute mile and take a 10-minute break every five miles. If I was able to keep true to this plan, I would finish the 100 miles before the 24-hour cutoff.

The first five miles took me through the beautiful and rolling hills of Camp Pendleton, then out the north gate and down a bike path to Pacific Coast Highway, which would be my home for the next day.

Training 2 Miles ... (continued)

As soon as I hit PCH, I was met by the first of many public safety officers who would provide an escort for me during the run. It was also during this time that the community and family of CrossFit really started to shine. Orange county firefighter and CrossFit affiliate owner Jeff Hughes had arranged for an Orange County fire engine and ambulance to escort me through the busy streets of San Clemente. It was a welcome addition to the run as the streets were busy and the sun was starting to set. I ran for approximately one mile with the fire engine before reaching my first checkpoint.

My crew consisted of my wife Mallee, Melissa McKenzie, and Denise Serrano. Jimi Letchford had rented a large Ford van to act as the mobile support vehicle. The van was in fact a rolling Zone cooler! Inside we had over 20 four-block meals consisting of whole foods (turkey rolls, peanut butter-stuffed apples, pasta-less lasagna, fruit salads) and enough Dr. Sears ZONE bars to supply a small army. The Dr. Sears ZONE Company had made a generous contribution to Operation Phoenix and had shipped me an assortment of Zone bars, fish oil capsules, and Zone shakes.

At the first 5-mile checkpoint, I ate my first Zone meal—four blocks of turkey rolls and peanut butter stuffed apples. My wife Mallee refilled my water bottle and after a few quick rotations I was back on the road. Given that the data in my CrossFit journal for my running events showed me averaging a 6-minute mile, initially sticking to the 12-minute mile was very difficult and required some real concentration. Instinctively, my body wanted to open up the throttle and go as hard and fast as I could. This event, however, would require me to hold a steady pace for a very long time. At first, it had the feel of attempting to do 5 pull-ups, 10 push-ups and 15 squats every minute, on the minute, for 30 minutes. In such workouts, you have to strike a critical balance between efficient movement and periods of rest.

In the original plan, we had the support vehicle and my crew drive five miles ahead of me and wait for my arrival. We stuck to this plan for the first 15 miles before I realized it sucked. Without a clear mile-marker to judge my progress against, I had a difficult time pacing myself. At the third rest stop, I told the crew I needed them to drive in 1-mile increments. By the third rest stop, I also picked up the



first of many law enforcement support vehicles. The first agency to provide a uniformed escort and patrol vehicle was the Huntington Beach Police Department—and they set the gold standard. At least five marked vehicles and ten officers provided escort through the duration of their jurisdiction. In addition to the motivation that seeing my fellow “boys in blue” provided, it also gave me logistical support through Surf City’s busy Friday night streets.

Around 35 miles into the run, the weather took a turn for the worse. The temperature dropped into the low 40s and it started to rain. At about the same time, I started to develop some pain in my feet. I had taped my feet, including my heels and toes, prior to the run, so I was not too concerned with blisters. However, I was concerned about possible structural damage from the constant pounding of my feet against the pavement. I had started the run in a pair of Addis Adzero racing flats. I had selected the shoe for its incredible light weight, 8-3/4 ounces in a size 11. In addition, I felt confident that I would be able to maintain the Pose running method in the shoe. However, as we neared 40 miles, my ability to maintain the Pose had diminished and I had reverted to my regular heel-to-toe striking pattern. As a result, my feet and ankles started to take the brunt of my 205 pounds. At mile 45 I had had enough and changed to my back-up shoe, a heavier but a much more cushioned Asics Gel.

Through mile 50 I had been able to maintain my goal of holding a 12-minute mile, with one exception. After my break at the conclusion of five miles and a four-block Zone meal, I needed to walk my first mile out of the gate. Running after eating, although slow, was possible in the early stages of the run. But as the hours and miles tacked on, I felt that my digestive system was telling me to walk following the rest-area meals.

Halfway Home and Ahead of Schedule. But...

At 50 miles, it was time to turn around and return to Camp Pendleton. I had finished mile 50 after approximately 11 hours of consistent movement. I felt surprisingly good mentally and physically. Two additional medics, Tyler Scarborough and Parsh Armin, did a quick heart rate and blood pressure check before I started the return trip. Amazingly, to the credit of CrossFit and the Zone diet, my fitness level was so high that my resting heart-rate had risen to just 60 BPM and my blood pressure was largely



unchanged at 119 / 75 —after 11 hours of arduous movement. So my spirits were high as I began heading back to Pendleton with 13 hours left on the clock to go 50 more miles, confident I could make the full 100 in under 24 hours.

But my lower body had other plans.

Mile 50 to mile 55 was one of the hardest stretches of the entire run. My pace slowed and I started to develop intense pain in my ankles, soles of my feet, and my knees. It was a very unfamiliar feeling: I know what “muscle pain” feels like and am comfortable with the burning sensation that develops over a workout like Tabata This (20 seconds on/10 seconds off for 8 rounds of pull-ups, push-ups, sit-ups, and squats). However, the pain in my lower extremities had more to do with the bones and ligaments than it did with muscles. My ankles, feet, and knees started to swell and I lost a great deal of mobility in my ankles.

Interestingly, everything above my knees felt great. My hip flexors and hamstrings felt fine. At the rest stop at mile 55, my ankles were starting to go. I had completely exhausted the muscle that lifts my toes off the ground. I started mile 56 in a great deal of pain and at a very slow pace. As I neared mile 58, I found myself having to walk. I trudged forward for two more miles and then nearly collapsed at mile 60. I nearly doubled my scheduled 10-minute break as I desperately tried to stretch my calves and increase the mobility in my ankles.

As I neared mile 62, I got a much-welcomed visit from running expert Brian Mackenzie. He took one look at my running posture and technique and shook his head. I had totally lost the proficient running style associated with the Pose technique. I had resorted to lifting my toes and planting my foot forward of my center of gravity. Brian quickly corrected this, but much of the damage had already been done. The pain in my ankles and calves was immense.

Brian is a great coach and incredible motivator. We put a plan together that had me picking out objects approximately 200 meters ahead and running towards them in the Pose technique. I would run as fast as I could (which was pretty darn slow) to a light pole in the distance and then walk the same distance as recovery. I continued this with Brian for approximately six miles.

Miles 68 to 70 was pure survival. During my rest stop at mile 70, I discussed the state of my lower body with my wife Mallee. I can honestly say that I had never experienced such intense pain in my entire life. My ankles and calves were bright red and immensely swollen. I could not bend my ankle up or down or side to side. Despite all that, I was utterly fascinated with how calm, focused and rested I felt. My heart-rate was slow and controlled, breathing was normal, and I was not even remotely close to muscle exhaustion. Nevertheless, I could hardly walk on my own.

Mallee and I spoke about how unlikely it would be that I would be able to finish the remaining 30 miles in under 24 hours. We agreed that I would continue to rack up the miles until we ran out of time.

Mile 70 brought me back to familiar territory: Huntington and Newport Beaches. As I trudged along Pacific Coast Highway, Mallee began walking beside me and speaking words of encouragement, as she would until the end, and a motorcycle officer led from the front and a patrol vehicle covered me from the back. As I neared mile 72, I had an unexpected visit from my mom—all the way from Stockton, California! She walked one mile with me and then decided to stop. She was concerned about my health until she was calmed by Steve Serrano. Mile 75 to 80 was achieved on mental determination alone. It was taking me close to 30 minutes to walk one mile – and a very painful mile at that.

Cries of Anguish—and of Success

At mile 78, the most interesting part of the entire run started to unfold. As I walked along the side of the road adjacent to a long line of stopped vehicles at a red light, I started to cry uncontrollably. Cry is probably the wrong word to describe it; it was a sob. Although surrounded by friends, I asked to walk alone with my wife. I continued to sob as she put her arm around me and offered her support. Later she told me that I repeated over and over, “It hurts so much—it is so hard.” I remember thinking to myself, “gosh, I never thought walking would get to be so hard.”

We reached 80 miles at exactly 24 hours. It had taken me 13 hours to get the last 30 miles—2.3 mph. At that point, Steve had arranged to have a professional medical crew do a complete work-up on me. An Orange County paramedic tested my heart-rate, blood-pressure, blood-sugar levels and even did an EKG. The results were all well within the normal range and the entire medical crew was dumfounded and impressed at how far I had come with such a normal read.

Steve and I spoke privately about my physical state and how we might proceed. I had reached the established time limit but still wanted desperately to reach the 100-mile mark. Steve, always a true warrior, said he would stay with me to the end if that's what I wanted to do.

I explained to Mallee how much I wanted to succeed and complete the entire run. Although she was concerned about my body, she agreed to support me. After a 45-minute break that included a 5-block meal and a foot and ankle massage, I got out of the back of Steve's Jeep and continued to head south—but I didn't get far. With one arm around Steve and the other around Mallee, I somehow managed to travel .3 miles in approximately one hour. It was miserable, painful and started to border on being downright dangerous. 80.3 miles and 26 hours from the start time the run was concluded.

That night, Rachel Medina from CrossFit South San Clemente, her brother Adam, and longtime CrossFitter and good friend Terrance Gant brought a home-made dinner to our hotel room. While talking and laughing with them about the events of the previous day, I had a realization that I shared with Terrance: We needed to celebrate—because we had just achieved a great success.

First, we did raise money. Using the leverage from my run, Jimi got the Zone company to donate \$20,000 to Operation Phoenix. Secondly, on one month of preparation, CrossFit WOD training totaling two miles of running and a strict Zone diet, I had run 80 miles in 24 hours at a bodyweight of 205 pounds along a treacherous route.

Although our goal was ultimately to cover 100 miles in the same amount of time, and certainly could have benefited from more sport-specific training, I had achieved 80% of what I had set out to do. In the hopper model of fitness, where an athlete never knows the physical event they will be called upon to perform, the goal of CrossFit is to create a "ready state" where an athlete can perform at 80% in any physical event. In reflection, far from a failure, I see the run as a success for CrossFit, and living proof that CrossFit fitness is the best fitness program in the world.



About the Author

Greg Amundson, a federal law-enforcement official and well-known CrossFit certification trainer, is one of the original CrossFit warriors, the owner of numerous early WOD records, and the object of deep respect from CrossFitters worldwide.