

FRONT RANGE DIRT

Connecting the Front Range trail community through independent voices and collaboration.



\$0.00 ©
Winter 2026

A Golden Endurance Publication
Copyright 2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

04

Ins and Outs

Rethinking what's In and Out in running and life for 2026.

09

Finding Grace in the Cold

Strength shows differently when you let yourself pause and breathe.

11

Trail Highlight: Basalt Cap Loop

A humble South Table loop where consistency and connection quietly build.

12

Becoming a Non-Ultrarunner

Discovering stillness and joy beyond the trail, one mindful step at a time.

15

In Defense of Fun

A reflection on reclaiming play, presence, and silliness in ultrarunning's goal-obsessed culture.

18

Ask the South Table Jogger

Baby on board? Walk, wobble, or run - it's all personal bests now.

20

Finding Strength in Community

How Colorado trails helped Strong Runner Chicks grow into belonging.

25

Peter Downing: Give Your All, and Give Back

An ultrarunning pioneer shares decades of running, community, service, and environmental stewardship.

30

Group Runs

See a schedule of local group runs in the Denver/Boulder area.

31

Chase-ing a Dream Across Texas

One runner crosses Texas on foot, discovering endurance and resolve mile by mile.

FRD MAGAZINE

WWW.GOLDEN-ENDURANCE.COM/FRD

Editor-in-Chief

Gabe Dorn

Ultra trail runner, physical therapist, and co-owner of Golden Endurance.

Managing Editor

Mark Marzen

Ultra trail runner, coach, and co-owner of Golden Endurance.

Editor

Dru Falco

Ultra trail runner, Goldenite, mother of a one-eyed cat.

Cover Photo

Phil Snyder

BPRunCo Manager

FROM THE EDITOR



Winter has a way of asking different questions of us as runners. With shorter days and quieter trails, the usual metrics of progress become harder to lean on. Mileage often drops. Races feel farther away. And many of us feel the loss of summer's easy momentum.

The pieces in this issue explore that question from many angles. You'll read about learning to rest without guilt, about stepping away from the identity of "ultrarunner," and about finding grace in colder, slower seasons. There are stories of grief carried on the trail, belief rebuilt after failure, and the quiet strength that comes from community, whether that's circling a familiar loop, showing up for one another, or choosing fun when striving no longer serves. Together, these voices remind us that endurance is not only about pushing forward, but also about knowing when to soften, pause, and listen.

Front Range Dirt exists because of this community and its willingness to tell honest, lived-in stories. We hope this winter edition meets you where you are, whether that's rebuilding, resting, questioning, or simply finding joy in the everyday miles. Thanks for being part of it.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Marzen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mark Marzen
Managing Editor

INS AND OUTS

BY CHRIS HARRINGTON

Welcome to 2026. In front of you is a brand new 12-month calendar paved in the gold of those yet-to-be-realized hopes and dreams - nothing but possibility ahead. As we reflect on what worked last year, what didn't, and what made us wonder if we had lost what little remains of our sanity, I offer a humble list of "Ins and Outs."* This list is not exhaustive. Rather, it is intended as both entertainment and a starting point for your own reflections. May it help you determine what to carry into the new year, and what can be discarded in the burning garbage heap of 2025.



Out: Strava.

The grotesque progression of social media has sadly come for what was once the cornerstone of my digital life. All I want to do is aggregate my training data and digitally support the people I have actually trained with in the real physical world. I can't even curate my feed to only this specific group of people because elitist developers intentionally abuse mindless addictive tendencies. It's offensive. Please stop feeding me Argentinian run-fluencers with thirst trap profile photos. Also, bots. Strava devolved from a simple, practical, and fun way to connect to an AI/algorithm-driven, paywalled scroll hole. No social media platform is sacred anymore.

In: Revenge on that Race that Physically and Psychologically Embarrassed You.

You know that race you did that absolutely demoralized you? Yeah, the one that you ran significantly slower than your estimated times, leaving your crew wondering if you had died as they waited impatiently in the cold at that aid station for hours? Let's go back and do it again! Sure, you could go to a different race, but you're just avoiding the problem. You can't go back in time, but you CAN go back to Big Bear, California...or wherever...

**Shout out to my sister-in-law, Hannah Dobbs for introducing this annual tradition to the Harrington household.*





In: Sharing Mountain Sports with my Family.

If my daughter sounds psyched about a trail run/rock collection excursion, I am in, and I will be patient when she hands me the eighth "crystal" to hold onto. I will even put my son in a child-carrying backpack and huff him up a hill. Bikes? Okay, let's ride and menace the tourists on the Clear Creek path. This year I will happily belay my family members and cram two adults, two kids, and an 85-pound dog into a three-person tent to camp. Make no mistake, while this is partly for them, it is also for me, because I desperately need to recapture the childlike joy which left me many years ago as part of my devolution into a bitter old man working in soulless corporate America.

Out: Instagram Race Recaps.

Shortform recaps (e.g. "More to come later" beneath your emotional finish photo) are no longer socially acceptable. Everyone better brush up on their longform blog race recaps from the late 2000s and early 2010s, because they are BACK, BABY...but on some site called Substack! The world wants to read about your heart rate at mile 82, the shrew you saw scamper across the trail at 2am, your crushing self-doubt, and all the ways the wheels fell off, and we want the story to be way, WAY too long to be reasonable to finish reading. Time is a flat circle.



In: South Table Mountain.

Always in style, especially now that Nike has immortalized the Lava Loop Trail by giving South Table its own trail shoe colorway. A new trail (T-Rex Tooth) coming this spring will add some variation to the Quarry Trail dog bone. Sleek. Sexy. Not to be confused with its disgustingly bulbous neighbor to the north. Yeah, you read that right.

Out: Three-Inch Split Shorts.

I'm aware that I have shockingly pale, yet objectively attractive toned upper thighs for a 42-year-old man, but all I want to do now is securely carry my phone and a couple of gels on a run without having to wear a supplemental storage solution. This now makes me a 42-year-old man in Nike Lava Loop half-tights which is likely violative of Golden's municipal code.



© Allison Dobbs
© Allisondobbsphotography



In: The Squad.

The squad is always "in."

In: Honorable Mention

RW Knudsen Tart Cherry Juice with Chamomile. There is nothing like finishing an easy run and pretending you just finished a stage of the Tour de France where you were handed a nondescript box from your coach to immediately drink. Basically an adult juice box. ▲

Chris Harrington is a Golden-based dad, husband, and runner, and something of a South Table regular. A longtime member of the Front Range ultrarunning community, he has a particular talent for turning big goals into thoughtful, lived-in resolutions.



VOLUNTEER WITH JEFFCO OPEN SPACE



📷 Jacob Cordell
📱 @trailrunnersvolunteers

Give back to your local community! Sign up for trail work and support the trails you use. Use the QR code to access JeffCo's Online Portal, Offero. Once on Offero, create an account and sign up for trail building and maintenance projects in the Jefferson County area.





FINDING GRACE IN THE COLD

BY MAX HANCOCK

As runners here on the Front Range, most of us have probably beaten ourselves up at some point for lowering our volume during the winter months. Whether we're forcing ourselves out the door after dark or bargaining with the morning frost, it's easy to start questioning our choices before we've even finished our warmup. Comparing ourselves to summer, or to a better year we once had, it's sometimes hard to tell if we're losing our fitness or our minds.

As trail runners, many of us have romanticized the grind: the Jack Kerouac roads, the Jon Krakauer sufferfests, the idea that toughness is measured by how much discomfort we can endure. But maybe there's something to learn from John Muir instead: "Come to the woods, for here is rest." At times, that rest isn't just poetic, it's necessary. From a training standpoint, this might feel like weakness. Maybe it's periodization. Maybe I'm just not as strong-willed as the rest of you. Every strong season is built in phases: build, peak, and recover. Winter naturally becomes a downshift. Hormones stabilize, connective tissue heals, and motivation gets a chance to refill and redirect. You're not losing fitness in a few quieter weeks, you're protecting the version of yourself that shows up in June.

With the warm weather we've had so far this winter, it's been harder than ever to find "excuses." But as many of us may be afraid to admit, we get burnt out. Yes, it's important to maintain a base year-round and have something solid to build from, especially since we all strive for our own version of greatness. But with all the damn hustle and hyperfixation in our lives, maybe it's time to rest. To make more space for family and friends. To just take some time.

We'll still have our moments: throwing on a sweater to get a few laps on South Table at night, for example (this may be frowned upon, but give me a break, it's too fun). Those are special moments. They don't disappear just because we're doing less overall.

As for myself, just to make others feel less alone, I've cut my mileage by nearly 60%. And honestly, I've had moments of doubt. Wondering if I'll be my strongest self this coming season. Wondering if I'll get anywhere close to where I once was. But after everything I've experienced, seen, and felt this past year, I know I'm as strong as I've ever been, just in a different way.

As we come down from this holiday fever dream, let's be as patient with ourselves as we are with others. Let's allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to grow mentally, and to fill our minds with what's to come. And let's keep a little excitement sitting in our chests for when it's time to ramp things back up and throw our legs around faster than we ever have before.

From one friend to another: you're doing great.



Max Hancock grew up in Broomfield and has always found his way back to the Front Range. A climber, skier, everyday runner, musician, and all-around jackass, Max sees running in the mountains as one of his favorite ways to express himself.



TRAIL HIGHLIGHT: BASALT CAP LOOP

Distance

1.40mi

Difficulty

1/5

Vertical Gain

40ft

Seasons

Year Round

BY KAT PRITTS

The Basalt Cap Loop (BCL) on South Table Mountain is an unlikely favorite. Those who frequent it don't do it for its technical terrain or interesting features. Instead, it offers a welcoming, populated circuit where you can consistently churn out some miles on dirt. And yet, while not a traditionally exciting run, it becomes a hub on which so many things revolve.

BCL is pretty contained. At the time I'm writing this, there's only one trail connecting the loop to the western side of South Table, with another rumored to open in Spring 2026, and several ways to ascend from the southern and eastern neighborhoods below to meet it.

It's not a long loop. It's quite bite-sized. Which makes it great for incremental miles, custom workouts, or endless circling. For those days when running feels like a chore but also maybe the antidote for a sour mood, BCL is there with just enough to lift your spirits.

It's also pretty flat, offering uninterrupted views of the mountains and sky, and on a clear day, even Denver looks pretty nice. Like much of Golden, you'll easily spot deer, coyotes, snakes, and the occasional cop car from a distance on the police's South Table training road.

Because of these qualities, I love BCL like I love a stop at Café 13. Each morning, you'll easily bump into someone you know, share a hello or quick chat. Maybe you'll run together there next week. You'll hike up with your roommate and her dog after a long day just for a hopeful glimpse of the sunset. You'll start diligently tracking the number of rattlers you see throughout the season and report back on Strava. You'll look forward to your friends' posts with snake updates.

Basalt Cap Loop is an unexpected community center for those who find pleasure in the mundane and for those who know how simple and joyful it is to just be out there — a warm smile of a trail. ▲

Kat Pritts is a Golden trail runner with a love for South Table Mountain and frolics with friends. She is spending her winter realizing that you don't have to go far to feel something big.



BECOMING A NON- ULTRARUNNER

BY KELLY DONNELLY

Newcomers to Golden Mountain Runners hear the phrase, “If you haven’t run an ultra yet, stay in this group long enough and you will.” I did.

I experienced my fair share of mountain and trail running adventures living the best part of my twenties in Alaska. The Last Frontier unearthed parts of myself I hadn’t known existed, along with people who nurtured that self through generosity, experience, exuberance, and a lot of loaned gear.

Hiking turned into trail running. Six-mile routes became 12-mile routes because trail apps did not exist and we were too naive to seek out information. Elevation gain happened in a single line from bottom to top. No switchbacks: just the sheer power of your quads and will.

Most adventures included mishaps involving real risk: not enough fuel; horrible weather and improper gear; river crossings that could turn you into driftwood; moose and bears that stood their ground, forcing you to trudge through uncharted terrain. My older and wiser roommate would often exclaim, “Kelly had another ‘EPIC!’” While my sister encouraged me to live by the mantra, “Caution is not a sign of weakness.”

Despite the trials of the trails, each moment taught me that I could do hard things with joy, plus a lesson or two in how to be more prepared next time.

I grew up with a father who was “made of steel” and believed in being tough. I was nurtured to do hard things. “Carry this 50-lb bag of cement. Keep running – your legs won’t fall off. You don’t need water. Walk it off; you’ll be fine,” he’d say after every one of my hundred sprained ankles. “You’re tough.” Self-belief in my capacity to suffer was in my blood.

A year after moving to Colorado, a friend asked if I wanted to ski the 40-mile Grand Traverse race from Crested Butte to Aspen. Without knowing the route or what ski mountaineering even was (and not yet having any of the gear), naturally I accepted. Later that same year, I also completed The Dirty 30 50K trail race. Both events grew my commitment to suffering joyfully.

Because of this self-belief in showing up to accomplish hard things in the name of nature and fun, when my name got drawn in the volunteer raffle for an entry to High Lonesome 100, *of course* I said yes!

One ruffle in the plan was that I had also committed to becoming a foster parent that year. I knew the experience of being the sole caretaker of a 16-year-old would be difficult, but I had *no idea* the toll it would take on my mental well-being. The attempt to keep that precious child safe and grounded was harder than anything I had ever done. So much harder, in fact, that I had to end that chapter of my life sooner than expected in order to rebalance.

My training suffered. Every day was a struggle. Despite my coach's best efforts, injuries were creeping in. By the time I got to the start line, I knew one thing to be true: *this won't be the hardest thing I do this year*. My heart suffered the consequences of giving up on a child.

The joke became that my "why" was that my name got called in the lottery. The grittier truth? I wanted to prove to myself that I wouldn't "fail" twice that year.

In addition to the uplifting community and serene beauty of the Sawatch, there were plenty of grueling and painful moments on the trail. My level eight knee pain had me hobbling by mile 50. When my pacer gently shared that my jogging and hiking speeds were basically the same, I committed to walking the remaining 50 miles. My spirits were so low and my speed so slow coming into the last aid station that my coach thought I might consider calling it quits. She relayed that I had time to make it to the finish line as long as I stayed at this pace. Little did she know I had no intention of quitting no matter how broken I felt. Why? Because "this isn't the hardest thing I've done this year."



Why elaborate with all this backstory if the intention is to explain how I became a non-ultrarunner? Because all the experiences that taught me to "do hard things" led me to *choose* to take a rest.

My identity was no longer wrapped up in being an athlete or a runner or an ultrarunner. The process of completing a 100-mile race taught me that I no longer needed running for my mental wellness.

My life was already full and became fuller. I put more attention into my students as an educator. I put more intention into my hobbies of beekeeping and gardening. I took time to sit. Rest.

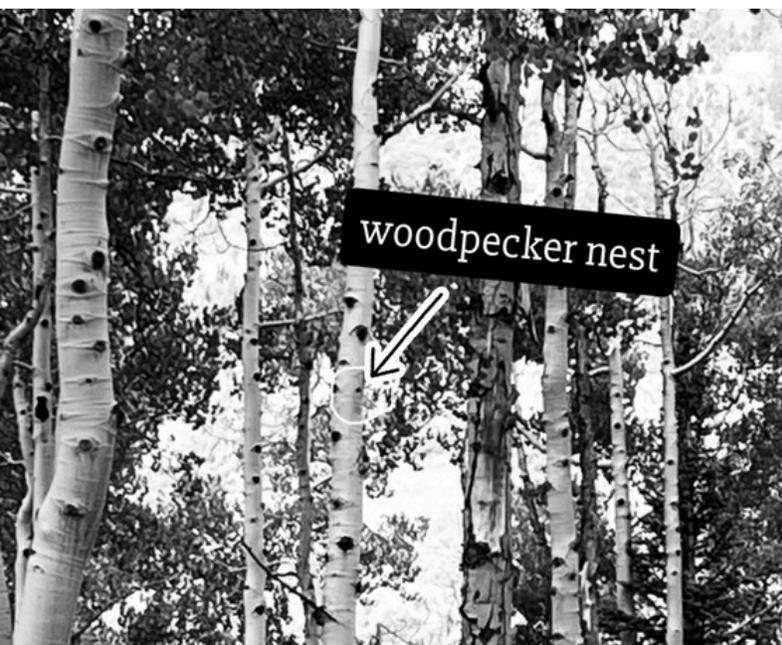
Have you heard of that? The kind of rest that is not built into your training plan. Rather, the kind of rest that greets you with a warm cup of tea, a view of the mountains, the buzz of a thousand bees, the hum of a hummingbird, and the whimsy of a rabbit. Where a 10-minute daily meditation takes the place of a 60-minute run. Where home becomes a sanctuary. Where time on the trail becomes hikes.



Last summer, my partner and I were so committed to becoming non-ultrarunners that we spent three days in Crested Butte and accidentally did not run one trail. We identified wildflowers, stood in a field of hummingbirds whizzing by, and watched bees sleeping in flowers. We hiked 1.5 miles to a lake to take naps, journal, and paint watercolors. We discovered the elusive dragon-eel-frog in an alpine lake, also known as the Western Tiger Salamander in paedomorphic form: my highlight of the year.



One early morning, I set out with the intention of running for two hours. A curious deer appeared at the start, causing me to pause. The pause led her to walk within three feet of me and turned my run into a meander. My heart carried me so slowly on this two-hour journey that I finished with a pace of one mile per hour.



During that time, I spotted a dusky grouse, witnessing her call and dance routine to keep her chicks safe from my perceived harm. I heard the sound of hungry baby birds and visually scoured the aspen grove to find a woodpecker delivering food to an otherwise nearly unnoticeable nest hole in a faraway tree. I smelled the forest wake up as the sun slowly came to life and warmed my skin.

These moments only happen when we take time to move slowly. They happen when running becomes less of a priority.

Becoming an ultrarunner was hard. Becoming someone who rests has been arguably harder. I am still learning to slow down; to value the importance of stillness; to listen, observe, and *be* rather than do. And just like I found a piece of myself when I first started moving in the mountains, I'm learning new parts of myself in stillness.

Rest comes highly rated.▲

Kelly Donnelly (@runnerbeejoyful) is a local beekeeper, gardener, and will-be farmer (for anyone with land to offer). She spends her time teaching little people big skills and finding joy in simple pleasures, like recreating on the Golden trails just outside her front door.



IN DEFENSE OF FUN

BY MARK MARZEN

January has a way of pulling us toward goals. Training goals. Racing goals. Some marker of progress or achievement we can point to and say, there, that's what I'm working toward.

And yet, in the midst of all this goal formation, a curious ultrarunning event has been unfolding this year. Something called the "Burrito League," a free, community-based January challenge where runners rack up laps on short stretches of sidewalk, chasing nothing more than bragging rights, local burritos, and a shared sense of ridiculous fun. Yes, there are leaderboards and prizes and podiums. But the essence of the endeavor is, quite honestly, silly. Dumb. Fun.

It paused me. It brought me back to the idea of fun and play in this endeavor of ultrarunning.

Many of us come to ultrarunning looking for grounding or renewal. People enter the sport after a breakup; while choosing sobriety; following a divorce, a relocation, a job loss; or simply during an existential yearning for a little more depth and adventure in life. Running is beautiful in this way. Its simplicity offers a kind of peace. That same simplicity also gives us a clear sense of progress toward ambitious, often seemingly insane goals. Goals that once felt unattainable. And after enough days of quiet pursuit, something shifts. We become something new. We become ultrarunners.

And yet, within that depth, there is room to weave presence and fun into our ultrarunning lives. Many of us measure success as runners in terms of race results or standard markers of achievement. But why not also measure success in the metric of fun and presence?

You do not need to enter a race or spend years in pursuit of a finish line to experience success in presence and fun. When we get into running, there is often some first goal we aim toward. Eventually, that goal comes and goes. Then comes the next one. And the next. Running offers a simple structure for growth and identity, but it also invites a quiet rebellion against the idea that fulfillment must always wait for the next marker of achievement. Presence is available right now, if you choose to step into it.

As adults, fun and presence are often treated as afterthoughts. Something reserved for when responsibilities are handled and boxes are checked. But fun can exist alongside working hard. It can be part of the strain we place on our bodies and minds. The beauty of fun is that we get to decide what fun is.



© Matt Hunsucker
© matthun26.2



© Matt Hunsucker
© matthun26.2



📷 Sadie May
📸 Sadiemayruns

Often, fun carries a sense of optimism and a lack of industriousness. We want to believe that all the running we do is for something. That it leads to a greater goal or produces something of value. And most likely, it does. But embedded within that continual striving can live a simple core of fun.

Fun is silly. Fun is pointless, except for the presence it provides. And perhaps that is not so pointless after all. Perhaps that is the point.

So the next time you question why you feel pulled toward something that excites you, makes you smile, or lightens you up, consider that as a cue. Maybe it is time to bring fun back into your running. Even if that means running back and forth on a few hundred meters of sidewalk for an entire month for your love of community and burritos.

Fun breathes life and depth into the simplest moments, reminding us that presence may be the most honest thing running has to offer. 🏔️

Mark Marzen is the managing editor of Front Range Dirt and a Golden Endurance run coach. While the 100-miler may be his favorite distance, he's most drawn to the inherent joy, presence, strain of pursuit, and kookiness of the everyday miles.

ASK THE SOUTH

Question:

Dear South Table Jogger, I just found out I am pregnant! What should I keep in mind so I can continue running over the next nine months and beyond?

Answer:

Congratulations! Note that the South Table Jogger has neither been pregnant nor a medical professional, and these are mostly vibe-based tips.* However, I did ask a medical professional (thank you Dr. Sammie Lewis) to proof read this. Always check in with your doctor, but generally, you can continue to do the same activities you participated in pre-pregnancy as you feel up to them (maybe with some added snacks). Continuing to exercise is not only a great way to feel more emotionally normal during this time of change, but it's also a way to prepare your body for the most impressive ultra endurance challenge out there: birth and post-partum recovery.

- **Take it one day, one run at a time.** You will be tired. Rumor has it that growing a baby is like running a marathon a day, plus or minus a couple aid stations. You're allowed to take a break. Your pace will slow down, your weekly volume will drop, and you will take more walking breaks. You might be vomiting 24/7 for weeks. Listen to your body, and don't force yourself to run if you don't feel like it. On the other hand, you might surprise yourself by running farther into your pregnancy than you originally thought, or by jumping into a race just for a little fun.
- **Fuel properly.** If you're not doing so already, make sure you're adequately eating and drinking on your runs. You don't need to change your diet much in the first trimester, but you might lose nutrition through getting sick or food aversions. If you're not able to eat enough, light activities such as walking or yoga are more appropriate activities to stay moving. No fueling, no running. In the second and third trimesters, you'll need to start eating more each day to ensure you gain enough weight to grow that lil baby! Eat and hydrate enough, or more than enough, and speak to a doctor or a dietician if you need extra support.
- **Regulate your temperature.** Your core temperature has officially entered "do not mess with this" territory. Unfortunately, no saunas or hot yoga for you. Embrace those cool winter temperatures!
- **Welcome cross-training.** If running is depleting all your energy or you need a different outlet, consider what else can make your body feel good. Some days call for a long walk in the sunshine. Weight lifting can generally continue until your form is affected due to your changing body. Yoga can help your mental health and prepare you for delivery. Proactive pelvic floor therapy can similarly help support a smooth delivery as well as postpartum recovery. Many pregnant women have skied throughout pregnancy - but everyone's risk tolerance is different. Cross-training might also include new

TABLE JOGGER

hobbies like sitting on the couch, reading, baking cookies, and watching the Olympics. Mixing in non-running activities can help you continue to run throughout your pregnancy, and make you feel more energetic while you do.

- **Get one of those little waist belts.** I've heard that can help, and runners love finding an excuse to buy gear that feels like it's doing something.

- **Monitor how you're feeling during exercise.** Our medical professional told us to add this part. The big things to monitor are:

- Braxton-Hicks contractions (cramping/pain in the abdomen)
- Temperature
- Pelvic floor symptoms (leaking or heaviness)
- Supine hypotension (getting dizzy or feeling unwell when on your back - so more appropriate for talking about yoga, etc.)

- **Check in with your doctor.** If you're not sure if you should be doing something, ask. Symptoms like bleeding or dizziness are worth a phone call, if not a trip to the emergency room.

Any way you slice it, you're growing a little human, and that is amazing. Any running you do over the next nine-ish months deserves all the Strava kudos, claps, and fire emojis.

*Two pregnant women were consulted in the making of this article. Thank you Charis Servera and Dru Falco for your tips!



FINDING STRENGTH IN COMMUNITY:

How the Front Range Became Home for Strong Runner Chicks

BY MEGAN FLANAGAN

I didn't plan to become a trail runner, or move to Colorado, or build a women's running community that would span a decade and counting.

But here's what I've learned: the best things rarely go according to plan.

In 2015, I was a Division I collegiate runner watching teammates battle eating disorders and mental health struggles in silence. The culture of women's distance running felt suffocating, with an unspoken expectation of what a "real" runner should look like, eat like, train like. If you didn't fit the mold, you kept quiet about it.

So I started a blog. I called it Strong Runner Chicks, and I asked my teammates to share their stories. To my surprise, they did. And then runners from other schools started reaching out. And recreational runners. And women who'd quit the sport because they'd lost themselves in it.

What started as a small act of defiance became something much bigger: a community.

From Tracks to Trails

When I moved to the Front Range after college, everything shifted. The competitive intensity that had defined my running life gave way to something else entirely: curiosity, adventure, play. I discovered trail running not as a way to prove myself, but as a way to find myself.

The trails here demand a different kind of strength. It's not just about pace or splits or hitting specific workouts. It's about navigating technical terrain, respecting altitude, reading the weather, and trusting your body's wisdom. It's about the runner next to you who stops to point out a marmot, or the trail angel who stashes water at a remote trailhead, or the post-run coffee where someone shares the story they've been holding onto for years.

The Front Range taught me that running could be about connection instead of comparison. And that lesson transformed Strong Runner Chicks entirely.

Building Brave Spaces

Over the past decade, SRC has evolved from a blog into a full community platform: a podcast, social media, educational resources, and in-person retreats. We've pressed pause, pivoted, and come back stronger (pun intended). Through it all, our mission has remained the same: educate, empower, and connect female and nonbinary distance runners by proving there's no one-size-fits-all approach to this sport.

But here's what I didn't expect: some of my closest friendships would come from this community I built. Women I've met through SRC have paced me through ultras, talked me through career changes, celebrated my wins, and sat with me through losses. They've shown me what it means to take up space, not apologetically, but boldly.

That's the magic of women's running communities, especially here in Colorado. We're not just training partners. We're sisters in sport, witnesses to each other's transformations, believers in each other's potential even when we can't see it ourselves.



Coming Home to the Mountains

This May, we're bringing the SRC Retreat back to Colorado to Leadville and Twin Lakes, with a field trip to Buena Vista. We're calling it "Be BOLD: Embrace Your Best Life, On & Off the Trails."

It feels full circle. The Front Range gave me permission to redefine what it means to be a strong runner. Now we're inviting 20 women to do the same, right here in the mountains that changed everything for me.

We're honored to have Courtney Dauwalter joining us for a run and conversation, alongside others. If anyone embodies boldness through authenticity rather than pressure, it's Courtney. We'll also have physical therapists, registered dietitians, coaches, and athletes like Addie Bracy and Amelia Boone, leading workshops on everything from trail prep to mindset to longevity in sport, all of whom represent the Front Range's running community in their own unique way.

But the real curriculum? Each other. The conversations that happen on sunrise trail runs. The vulnerability that emerges around the fire. The moment when someone realizes they're not alone in their struggle, or their strength.

The Power of Showing Up

I think about that college sophomore who started a blog because she was tired of the silence. She had no idea what she was doing. She just knew something needed to change.

A decade later, I'm still figuring it out. But I know this: when we create spaces where women can show up exactly as they are, messy, strong, uncertain, and brave, transformation happens. Not the kind that makes you smaller or quieter or more palatable. The kind that helps you remember who you've been all along.

The Front Range running community gets this. You see it in the trail sisterhood groups, the women's running clubs, the casual "want to meet for a Saturday long run?" texts that turn into lifelong friendships. You see it in how we celebrate each other's PRs and DNFs with equal enthusiasm, how we share beta on routes and babysitters and sports bras that actually work.

This is what Strong Runner Chicks has always been about. And this is why coming back to Colorado for our retreat feels like coming home.



Join Us

Whether you're a high school athlete, a collegiate runner navigating sport culture, a trail newbie, or a seasoned ultra runner: if you're looking for a community that celebrates who you are, not who you think you should be, we'd love to have you.

The Strong Runner Chicks Retreat (May 28-31, 2026) is limited to 20 participants to preserve an intimate experience. We're offering scholarships for BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and out-of-state athletes. Join our waitlist at www.strongrunchicks.org for first access to registration and early-bird pricing.

And if you can't make the retreat? Find us online (@strongrunchicks), join our Facebook community, or simply reach out. Because here's what I've learned after a decade of building this community: We don't need permission to take up space. We just need each other to remember we're allowed to. ▲

Megan Flanagan is the founder of Strong Runner Chicks, and her passion is rooted in the Front Range running community, whose support and influence have shaped her organization and commitment to giving back.



BECOME A CONTRIBUTOR

We need you to keep this going!

Please consider writing an article for this publication. The cost is free and your work will be dispersed across the Denver area. Topics to write about include, but are not limited to, running stories, training, featured athletes, local routes, community organizations, opinions, race reports, photos, and photo essays.

To submit articles and photos, go to www.golden-endurance.com/frd



Rather contribute a couple dollars?

This is a community-funded paper. Golden Endurance prints a small batch for each edition. If you enjoy the writing, and would like to see more of these editions in print, consider making a contribution. A \$10 contribution prints three more future issues. Please Venmo [@frdirt](https://www.venmo.com/frdirt) Last four digits 2772. Or visit our website www.golden-endurance.com/frd



**PETER DOWNING:
GIVE YOUR ALL, AND
GIVE BACK.**

BY GABE DORN



"I got into ultrarunning in the seventies when I was in the Peace Corps. I was in a small town in Ghana, and I lived with two fascinating English guys who were doing the British equivalent of the Peace Corps. One of whom is still one of my best friends. He was a runner, so we just started running what we called 'the bush' around our little village. We would run these little crazy trails through essentially the jungle, right? It was hilarious. Most of the time, we had no idea where we were. I used to love it because there were all these little connector trails between the really tiny villages."

Peter Downing wore a soft smile, a beanie, and a peace symbol earring. Years of ultrarunning had treated him well. He was in his early seventies, but looked as though he could easily be in his fifties.

We were sitting in the Town Hall Collaborative off Santa Fe in Denver. The space was a long, rectangular warehouse, with a small coffee shop and bar tucked into the corner. Local artists were highlighted on the walls, while tables and furniture spread across the open space. Peter told me that before this was a coffee shop and bar, it had been a collective, where like-minded businesses in the outdoor industry shared space. Not a coworking space where people paid to sit in silence with premium coffee and premium internet, but an actual collective: where people with shared values gathered to work, trade ideas, and build things. It was here that Peter spent most of his time working on Suffer Better and Running Up For Air. I got the impression that it worked fine as a coffee shop, but was better as a collective.

Peter went on to tell a story about how his English friend looked, "exactly like an English boxer," Peter continued, "who got the shit beat out of him by a Ghanaian boxer named DK Poison." He smiled, "So we would run through these little villages and we would be chased by like fifty little kids, shouting at him, 'DK! DK!'. Just to remind him that he had gotten his butt kicked by this African boxer."

Peter was first exposed to the idea of trail ultras at a shorter race outside of Como, Colorado. At the start, there was a guy wearing a waist belt.

"This was like, the early eighties," Peter said. "I met this guy who had a two-bottle water thing. I'd never even seen one of those before, right? Because this was the early eighties. Nobody had that shit. And I said to him, 'What's with that?' And he started telling me about this race in Glenwood called the Doc Holliday."

Doc Holliday, a 35-mile race outside of Glenwood Springs, was Peter's first trail ultra. The race was named after the dentist turned gambler slash gunslinger John Henry Holliday. Holliday died in Glenwood Springs, and as part of the race, runners had to carry a flower for a portion of the course and place it in a bucket next to his grave.

Peter finished third at the Doc Holliday. Second was Skip Hamilton. First was Tom Sobel. Skip had dominated Leadville 100 in the eighties and convinced Peter to sign up. "I just started picking his brain, and he sort of told me what it would take to run a hundred and all that kind of stuff. And I was so fascinated by it. And so that really got me going, a desire to do that," Peter recalled.

The next year, Peter raced and won his first 50 miler, Collegiate Peaks, outside of Buena Vista. "I had no idea what I was getting into, but I actually won it. And I was like, okay, I can do this." He went on, "Over the first six years of that race, only me and another guy won it. And I only won it when he wasn't there. And he won it when I wasn't there. So that was funny." Collegiate Peaks was a big step up in distance for him and served as a bridge toward attempting Leadville the following year.

In 1991, Peter ran Leadville for the first time, finishing fourth. The following year, he returned and finished second.

"Leadville was my first exposure to the bonk-y thing. The guy who won was Rick Spady. Coming up the backside of Hope Pass out of Winfield, he was probably a hundred yards ahead of me - I could throw a rock at him. And then my wheels fell off. When I got back to the Fish Hatchery, I was in trouble. I lost a bunch of places. But somehow it was this mental thing I'd never experienced before, where you bounce back a little bit. Suddenly, I slowed it down, got my pacer, and started clicking people off again. I got as close as I could."

"Both years I did Leadville, members of the Tarahumara tribe of Mexico were there. And that was crazy stuff. I ran with one of those guys the first year. My Spanish isn't great. His English was probably worse, but we hung out for, like, twenty miles. He was wearing these Converse high-tops they'd given them. That year, not one of them finished. They just weren't used to that style of racing. They'd never had an aid station before, so they didn't know what to do. Half of them didn't eat." By the following year, Peter said, the Tarahumara had figured out the aid stations and the altitude. Several placed in the top ten.

Peter's Leadville experience was very different from today. In the nineties, Leadville had around three hundred participants; winning times ranged from eighteen to twenty hours; and the event was largely grassroots. Peter acknowledges that Lifetime has changed Leadville, but for him, as with many others, it remains iconic. "When you're up at the top of Hope Pass, you don't really give a shit about some corporate organizer, right? Even the roads on that course are pretty," he said.



"Correct me if I'm wrong, but you co-own Suffer Better with Bob?" I asked.

"Those are the two things that keep me out of trouble," Peter said.

Peter met Bob Africa, the cofounder of Suffer Better, at an underground marathon in Boulder.

"It's just this thing where somebody kind of says 'go,' you've got a course, and you meet back at his house and everybody brings food. It was super fun. That's where I met Bob, and we started running together," Peter said. Bob and Peter became good friends and shared countless miles.

Sitting in the coffee shop, Peter lit up talking about the origin of Suffer Better. He tells it like this:

"In 2013, Bob competed in one of the Leadville races and had a great finish—passing a bunch of runners in the final miles. Afterward, another runner comes up to Bob and says, 'Whoa, dude. That was impressive.' Bob replies something like, 'Well, you might be younger, stronger, and have a bigger engine, but I'll always suffer better.' And it just kinda came out. And he called me and he goes, Pete, I have an idea..."



For a while, Suffer Better remained just an idea. They made black-and-white shirts, started spreading the word, and got runners like Dave Mackey to wear the merch. They understood what it meant to suffer better, but they didn't yet have a framework or vision for Suffer Better. "It took us a while to figure out what to do with it," Peter said. They knew they wanted it to be more than just suffering. They wanted it to be a medium to support communities and do good things. "The 'suffer' part was easy... what we wanted was for it to become a way for runners to do good by being runners." Eventually, their tagline became, "Suffer Better, give your all, and give back." By then, Peter and Bob had started donating a portion of merch proceeds to nonprofits and had settled on putting on a race.

The first Suffer Better race took place in 2015 on land outside of Evergreen that Peter's grandfather had purchased over a century ago. They started with a 10K. "But wait," Peter said, "we don't have any trails up here. So we built trails. And it was hilarious. It was so fun, honestly. We had like 25 people show up, which for us was like, 'Wow. What are you all doing here?'"

A couple of years later, Peter read an article in Patagonia's catalogue by Luke Nelson about Running Up for Air (RUFA), a nonprofit startup out of Salt Lake City led by Jared Campbell. "I was just so fascinated by it, because we have shitty air. So I called Jared. I didn't know Jared. I just called him and said, 'You don't know me, but here's the deal. We have lousy air, and we'd like to do a RUFA over here.'" Jared, unexpectedly, told Peter to run with it.

The first Colorado RUFA took place on Peter's family's land in 2017, marking the first RUFA outside of Utah. Patagonia was monumental in helping fund the growth of RUFA to what it is today. There are now nine RUFA races across four states, along with a virtual event in Europe.

The inaugural Colorado RUFA featured three, six, and twelve hour races on the 10K course. Peter was blown away by the turnout. Runners like Joe Grant, Kyle Richardson, and Courtney Dauwalter all showed up. Peter laughed as he remembered, "All these amazing people came out... and Courtney, Courtney was awesome. Every time she got to the top of the climb, she wanted to hear an animal-in-a-bar joke. So whoever was up there had to scroll their phone all day to come up with some stupid joke for Courtney. It was hilarious."

Peter's chapter of RUFA is closely affiliated with Conservation Colorado and the Colorado Outdoor Business Alliance. Both work to promote environmental policy through lobbying and public awareness. Recently, Conservation Colorado pushed for stricter air-quality controls on manufacturing plants across the state.

As RUFA grew, the Colorado event moved to Staunton State Park, where it's now held each February. The course is a 7.1-mile loop with over 1,600 feet of climbing, and is consistently cold, snowpacked, and unforgiving. "One of the first years we did it at Staunton, we had these four women, all Latinas, who did the 24-hour team event," Peter said. "Most of them had never done anything remotely like that. Never anything that long, especially in winter. And we kept having to go find them. It'd be like, 'We haven't seen her in a really long time. Where do you think she is?' So we'd send someone out, and she'd inevitably taken a wrong turn. But they were also the funnest group. They stayed up all night. They cheered for each other. They were funny. That's the spirit of the event."

Peter and I had been at the coffee shop for over an hour, but it felt as though behind every one of his stories was another. Each rooted in the potential he sees in the sport, the communities it creates, and the value it adds. As we wrapped up, Peter left me with this:

"The thing that I wish more than anything is that trail runners really appreciated what a gift our natural resources are, and really did more to protect them. Because that's all we got. And every time you go on a trail run, you think, 'Holy shit, this is pretty spectacular.' And if we don't keep fighting for trails, they go away. Especially under this administration. So that's my big thing: let's do this." ▲

Gabe Dorn is Editor in Chief at Front Range Dirt and co-owner of Golden Endurance. When he's not out playing in the mountains, he's trying to find ways to be a bit more like Peter, by giving back to his community.



LOCAL GROUP RUNS

MONDAY

- Golden Mountain Runners
- Rocky Mountain Runners

TUESDAY

- Golden Mountain Runners
- Golden Trail Runners
- Foothills Running and Cycling Club
- Fleet Feet Littleton

WEDNESDAY

- Rocky Mountain Runners
- Runners Roost Boulder

THURSDAY

- BPRunCo
- Denver Trail Runners
- Trail Sisters Golden
- Runners Roost Golden/Lakewood

FRIDAY

- Rocky Mountain Runners

SATURDAY

- Citius
- Fleet Feet Littleton

SUNDAY

- Parent Run Club

CHASE—ING A DREAM ACROSS TEXAS

BY CHASE JUNELL

It's 5:45 in the morning in downtown El Paso, on the western edge of Texas. I'm shivering from the cold and from anticipation. In 15 minutes, I'll set out on my most ambitious adventure yet: an 836-mile run across the state of Texas. There's no rush to get started. I plan to run 45 miles every day, for the next 18 to 20 days. But it seems like a lifetime of running has built up to this moment, and I'm restless to go.

At 6 A.M. sharp, I take off into the dark, empty streets headed to Galveston. The cheers of my father and my sister soon fade behind me and I'm alone with my thoughts, an overwhelming mixture of excitement and nervousness. I've been preparing for nearly a year for this effort and dreaming of it since I was a kid. I'm no stranger to feats of endurance or even to running across states; I've run across Rhode Island and Massachusetts. However, this will be my longest run by more than 700 miles. There's a lot that can go wrong when you spend 11 hours a day running alongside highways and unmarked dirt roads, not to mention the harsh weather I'd encounter. The first week would be freezing; the next would be in the 80s, with daily temperature swings of up to 60 degrees. But I never expected the journey to be easy.

I've always been passionate about running. Growing up in Texas, I ran everywhere. I competed in races and created my own personal challenges. As I got more into endurance running, I began running across my hometown, eventually working up to 20 miles from my home in the country to school in town. It was only a matter of time before I wondered if it was possible to cross the state on foot.

Today, I still love running and endurance adventures. It's the reason I moved to Colorado and pursued my dream job as a manager at the Denver Flagship REI, which has not only saved me a ton of money on gear, but also given me the time and space to go outdoors and push my limits in the mountains. Later, as I navigate the everyday difficulties of life, I find it helpful to look back on moments in which I've faced challenges or uncertainty and prevailed. Frankly, I'm also just not interested in living a boring life.

The first three days out of El Paso were a blur. I overflowed with adrenaline and felt invincible. I covered 140 miles, including the Guadalupe Mountains, the highest point on the route. It was





smooth sailing, other than a few mechanical issues with the camper that followed me as a support vehicle.

Starting on day four, the difficulties of running across Texas set in. I was in oil country. Trucks and 18-wheeled tankers flew past me every 30 seconds, swirling up dust and smacking me with walls of wind. When I stepped off the road to avoid the 70-mile-an-hour traffic, I was likely to impale my feet on the spikes of thorny bushes. The roads of West Texas offered little scenery, as I often ran on straight, desolate stretches of highway up to 40 miles long. Faced with these challenges, I drew on my endurance experience and found moments of humor and appreciation where I could. I would encourage truck drivers to honk as they passed, which I called "trucker power-ups," or remind myself that I was having a better day than the roadkill I often passed.

My favorite part of the day soon became recovering. My father pulled the camper along the route for me, and at the end of each day, we'd find a flat spot to set up for the night. I spent three hours each evening dedicated to recovery: stretching, taking warm showers, rolling out sore muscles, wearing compression boots, and icing everything from the waist down. And every day, I ate a ridiculous amount of food that added up to over 5,000 calories. Beer and cookies'n'creme ice cream were favorites.

After the first week, my dad and I found a good rhythm. We woke at 5:30 each morning, ate, and were on the road shortly after 6. He met me every 30 to 60 minutes to restock my water and snacks. We were leaving West Texas and freezing temperatures behind, which boosted morale. But despite all my recuperation strategies, my legs hurt more with each passing day.

By the 12th morning, I had put 460 miles behind me. My hometown, Fredericksburg, lay one day's run in front of me. The newspaper had a story about me on the front page and I was expecting a lot of support. However, when I took my first steps that morning I was in debilitating pain. My right shin had been swollen for a few days, and my knees felt like I had a cheese grater wedged in each of them. I was at my lowest point. Dark thoughts spiraled through my head: How would I make it through the day, never mind another 380 miles?

With encouragement from my family and great effort, I cleared my mind of all thoughts that didn't involve forward movement. That day, while covering the hardest 35 miles of my life, I learned what it really means to endure. I had never hurt so much from running, but I was still moving slowly. Even if it meant I had to walk for 14 hours, I was ready to do anything to reach my hometown because I knew the milestone would kickstart a much brighter perspective.



As I approached city limits the next day, old friends from the Fredericksburg Run Club met me, along with a few folks from the newspaper and my grandparents, who had driven from San Antonio. My convoy made its way through town past several groups of people who had come out to cheer me on. I felt incredibly proud and I wished I could stay on the familiar streets of home. But at this point, I realized just how many people were supporting me and I was more determined than ever to give my best effort.

After 600 miles of running, I cleared the Austin city limits. I ran slower now, but I felt battle-hardened. I progressed at a steady pace, ticking off 40 miles a day. I outran several packs of angry dogs. I powered through a rainstorm as the route approached Houston. There was no longer any doubt in my mind that I'd finish my trek across Texas. The only question was, how fast?

Chase Junell is an accomplished ultrarunner who grew up in Texas and now calls Golden, Colorado home. For nearly two decades, he has competed at an elite level while taking on self-driven projects that explores the edges of what's possible.

On the 19th day, I stood at the entrance ramp to the Galveston Bay Causeway, a 2.5-mile, construction-riddled highway bridge into Galveston—a bridge never made with runners in mind. This was the final hurdle on my 836-mile journey. I was spent. Adrenaline and fumes powered me over the bridge and into downtown. As I approached the historical pier, I couldn't stop smiling. I thought about the last few weeks: the time with my family. The encouragement of so many people. The 1.5 million steps that got me to this point.

The final traffic signal between the water and me was the longest red light in the world. My family had joined me at the end, and when the light turned green, we sprinted across the beach next to the pier. Perhaps the greatest relief I've ever felt was the cold waves washing over my swollen, sunburnt legs. I had chased a dream and it was exactly the experience I was hoping for. 🏔️



GOLDEN
ENDURANCE
Physical Therapy & Performance