

# Beyond **BOUNDARIES**



Perseverance, determination, good old-fashioned guts... these are standard mental attributes needed to compete in (and complete) endurance sports events. To make it home on the Salomon Skyrun though, you need to be endowed with something more, writes **JAZZ KUSCHKE**.

**The Salomon Skyrun is an ultra-**distance, high-altitude endurance run over an unmarked 100-odd-kilometre route through the highlands of the northern Eastern Cape. Athletes have to pass through nine checkpoints on their foot journey from Lady Grey, along the remote Herschel/Lesotho border fence to the finish at Wartrail Country Club. They need to be totally self-sufficient, navigate by map, compass and GPS unit. Most take more than 27 hours to complete the race.

The mountain elements are unpredictable at best and lethal at worst; the variables are many; the prize money is negligible (that's if you win). When these athletes go back to their daily lives after the race, there's really no way for them to make others understand just quite what they've achieved. Why then, would they put themselves through it? And, what makes for a good Skyrunner? >

**LEFT:** Runners have to carry their own food and water (at least three litres) as well as compulsory gear, including foul-weather clothing, a whistle, compass, space blanket, charged cellphone and headlight.



ABOVE: The race starts at 4 am in front of the Country View Inn in Lady Grey.

### KNOW THYSELF

"I had a full-on fight with myself coming down Balloch Wall (the most iconic obstacle in the race)," explains Matthew de Haast of his 2011 Skyrun experience. "It was a total little temper tantrum; I actually sat down and shouted at myself. Then I got up, put some music on my iPod and just pushed on."

He ran most of the race among the top 10 before a midnight navigational error sent him way off-course, seeing him eventually trudge into Wartrail in 18th place.

Matthew didn't run in the 2012 event at the beginning of November because of injury, but while his 2011 top-20 feat was phenomenal – he's asthmatic and was only 20 at the time – his tale of practical self-motivation and pushing through to the end is far from extraordinary.

"In order to finish Skyrun, runners need to overcome so many personal

perceptions and boundaries," remarks Race Director Adrian Saffy. This isn't some marketing spiel. Adrian is the sweeper on the race (he brings home the last group) and has lost count of how many he's completed (he knows the number is in double figures). During the last event, he spent 32 hours and 20 minutes on the course.

### Runners need to overcome so many personal perceptions and boundaries

"You have to draw on character and mental strength much more than physical fitness and ability. Where this becomes most clear," he says, quickly qualifying that he's not knocking any other sport or event, "is with road runners. We've had super-fit roadies, sub-seven-hour Comrades athletes,

tackle Skyrun and fail. Their minds are conditioned towards a seven or eight-hour effort and now they're suffering for 20-odd. Physically, they're fitter than most of the field, but their minds aren't tuned to the gravity of the task ahead."

### GOALS WITHIN A GOAL

"Trail running can be very frustrating," agrees Ryan Sandes, the 2012 Salomon Skyrun champion and arguably South Africa's most successful trail-runner.

"In an event like Skyrun, it can take two hours to run 10 kilometres. You can easily convince yourself that it should only have been 50 minutes. It starts to play on your mind."

Ryan, who has won high-profile races all over the world including the well-known Leadville 100-miler in the United States, used a fairly simple strategy to overcome this and smash the Skyrun record by more than two



1 2



3 4



5 6



7 8



1. Runners often stick together in groups for company and navigation purposes, but it is very easy to get isolated and then it's a long, hard slog alone.

2. The route is unmarked, but navigation equipment such as a GPS device, is compulsory. Of course you have to know how to operate it. 3. Managing blisters and chafe is almost as important to ultra trail runners as proper nutrition and hydration. Almost.

4. Eventual winner Ryan Sandes at the halfway mark at Balloch Caves. Girlfriend Vanessa Haywood has supported Ryan at many of his international events and knows the change-over and restock drill. 5. Many of the back-markers view the race more as a high-speed hike than a trail run. There are cut-off times, however, so you have to carefully manage your pace. 6. Ryan Sandes showing the form that took him to a record time of 12:36, some two hours faster than the previous time.

7. The imposing Balloch Wall is end-point of the Skyrun Lite and arguably the toughest obstacle for the runners attempting the Skyrun. 8. The 2012 event saw radical weather changes, from intense heat, to sleet and thunderstorms.

hours in the 2012 event to win in 12 hours and 36 minutes.

"I set mini goals; I focused on getting from one checkpoint to the next," he says. "For me, the first big Skyrun goal was to get to Balloch Caves (at 65 kilometres, more or less seen as the halfway point) and from there focus on getting to the finish. Where things got really bad, I broke it down into kilometres and just went one by one."

And things can go really bad very often in an event as long as the Skyrun. Ryan speaks of the proverbial lows athletes endure in these types of events with the knowing, faraway eyes of a yacht captain recounting a vicious open-ocean storm.

"You learn a lot from them," he reflects. "Often, you look back at those lows and wonder how, when you really thought you couldn't take another step, you somehow managed to push through."

He believes managing these is the key to completing an endurance challenge. "I think the further you go (the longer the race), the lower the low. But when I'm hitting a really bad patch I kind of know I have something to look forward to, because the high will be proper."

### FIGHTING FEAR

Another pivotal factor in the Skyrun is the remoteness. "There's just so much open space," says Ryan. "It's almost the opposite of claustrophobia; it's just these rolling hills and grass plateaus. There are the checkpoints, of course, and every now and then you'll come across a shepherd, but it can be intimidating. Scary, really."

Again Ryan's antidote to this is to keep moving. "If you're managing that, then you're doing well. At times it gets disheartening because it's quite slow and you're at altitude and there aren't many trails. This is when people often get lost. I think that's one of the worst things that can happen ... but that's all part of this event.

"This was my first Salomon Skyrun, and what an epic experience! Rain, hail, thunder, hot, cold, strong winds; a pretty fun day in the office. I think everyone who crossed that finish line has some awesome memories and would have pushed themselves way beyond their physical and mental boundaries." ❖

### ▶ THE SALOMON SKYRUN

Athletes have to carry mandatory minimum gear and be completely self-sufficient (including navigation). There is also a Skyrun Lite, over 65 kilometres, which finishes at Balloch Caves. We touch here on mental fortitude but make no mistake: you need to be in peak physical shape to even consider entering just the Lite event.

[www.skyrun.co.za](http://www.skyrun.co.za)



### WANDERING FEVER

Watch the trailer for *The African Attachment's* soon-to-be-released documentary on Ryan Sandes – [www.wanderingfever.com](http://www.wanderingfever.com) (we dare you not to get goosebumps). Also check out *Beauty of the Irrational*, a film of his Fish River Canyon record run at <http://vimeo.com/47355798>.

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