

RUNNERS' HIGH

A world-class ultramarathoner explains why he does it.

Saying Scott Jurek is an accomplished runner is like saying Lennon and McCartney could write a catchy tune. In June, the Boulder-based Jurek's first book, *Eat & Run: My Unlikely Journey to Ultramarathon Greatness*, landed on the *New York Times* bestseller list. He's been *UltraRunning Magazine's* ultramarathoner of the year three times, and in 2010, he set an American record by running 165.7 miles—in 24 hours. Jurek recently chatted with *5280* about just what it is about extreme distance running that keeps luring him back.

Beginning to run on trails was key. I connected to the variety, running over rocks and roots, uphill and downhill. It forced me to stay in touch with my senses, which made it a different sport.

I was a midpack cross-country runner in college, but in ultramarathoning, because it doesn't require as much speed, I got better results.

It's much more than just running long distances; it's eating, drinking, and managing all the body systems. It's also a time to unplug from life's stressors while plugging into my body and intuition. You become more animal-like and attuned to

your surroundings. The beauty of this sport is that getting through rough patches becomes a metaphor for life.

You might feel fear and loss during a race, but you don't wallow in them. I always try to take stock, realize I'm not going to die, look at things in a different light, then do what I can to remedy the situation. It's about trying to be clear even though you might be freaked out.

I've beaten guys who were a lot faster than me on paper. You can have raw speed or talent, but the beauty of the ultramarathon is having intuition, calmness, and clarity in tough situations, and I pick different environments to race in because it brings out these moments of flow.

What most ultramarathoners remember are the low points and coming out the other side. That to me is the ultimate runners' high.

There will always be a struggle during a race, but that's what I like about it. When you're running in the mountains, in the elements, over that much distance, there's a lot of opportunity for things to go wrong, but there's also a lot of time for redemption.



Scott Jurek

THE ONES THEY LEFT BEHIND

Do climbing tragedies change anything?

IN MID-JULY, BOULDER RESIDENT Will Butler got the call. His close friend and climbing partner Gil Weiss had missed his flight back to Denver from Lima. Butler, 29, immediately knew Weiss was gone. Not *gone*, as in returned to the Andes to explore more new routes—although that would've been just like Weiss. *Gone*, as in never coming back. "In the last couple years, five of my friends have died climbing," Butler says.

Weiss, also 29, perished along with climbing partner Ben Horne, 32, after scaling Palcaraju Oeste, a 20,000-foot glacier-capped peak in Peru. According to the rescue team that found their bodies, the pair probably fell during the descent.

A highly visible Colorado climber, Weiss blogged about climbing for Pullharder.org and founded Beyond Adventure, a company of professional guides and photographers. For many on the Front Range, his untimely death tore the scab off the summer 2009 loss of Boulder mountaineers Jonny Copp, 35, one of the founders of the Adventure Film Festival, and Micah Dash, 32. (The two climbers died in an avalanche in southwestern China.)

Like those two men, Weiss was pursuing a first ascent—an accomplishment revered among climbers that means you've arrived where literally no one has gone before. Had Weiss survived, he'd have been immortalized in climbing guidebooks; instead, he's a cautionary tale. "This is kind of weird to say," Butler says, "but the day Gil died was probably the happiest day of his life."

Most people can respect Weiss' ambition to explore uncharted territory, even if few can relate to taking such a risk. Given that a first ascent, truth be told, affects very few people and isn't terribly relevant outside the insular climbing world, dying in pursuit of it might seem pointless—especially when losing a friend, spouse, son, or brother has such a devastating impact on so many lives.

Accidents like these evoke one question: *Why?* Erik Monasterio, a mountaineer and psychiatrist from New Zealand, recently concluded a study of climbers and BASE jumpers and found that boundary-pushers like Weiss score higher in novelty- and sensation-seeking and self-direction, and lower in harm-avoidance. This suggests that biology and genetics partially determine who's drawn to sports that encourage exploration and a tendency to view difficult situations as a conquerable challenge—sometimes with foolhardy optimism.

This implies that some people simply are hardwired for adventure, pushing boundaries to nurture their sense of purpose and mental stability. Colorado's adventure-sports community echoes this ethos, and even idolizes it. People like Weiss are considered inspirations because they live the way their destiny commands.

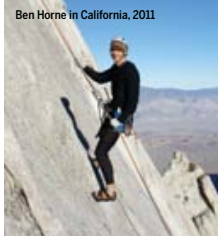
Monasterio's research shows that even after a near-fatal accident, most of these people will stick with their extreme adventure sport if they're physically capable. For evidence of this, look no further than Weiss himself. A year before his death, in the same



Jonny Copp (left) and Micah Dash in India, 2007



Gil Weiss in Chile, 2011



Ben Horne in California, 2011

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF BEN MONY; JONNY COPP; COURTESY OF PALCARAJU. COURTESY OF SCOTT NELSON

COURTESY OF EMBASSY REALTY PHOTOGRAPHY

Peruvian range, he survived a life-threatening fall and blogged about it later with an almost eerie acceptance.

We had sent, suffered, lived, and above all, learned. A sea of fog blanketed the valley below. That night I dreamed of Pollo a la Brasa and beer, but the taste I had in my mouth when I woke the next morning was one of alpine glory spiked with humility, bittersweet, the only way life ever tastes.

Like Copp and Dash, Weiss was single and childless. Among athletes with spouses or families, however, the motivation remains. In 2002, Loveland's Craig DeMartino, now 46, was climbing in Rocky Mountain National Park when he plummeted 100 feet. Despite shattering both feet and ankles, breaking his back and neck, tearing a rotator cuff, cracking ribs, and puncturing a lung, he survived. The accident cost him half of his right leg; it had no effect on his desire to keep climbing. He was at it again within a year, and in 2005, he won two events at the Extremity Games, the X Games for disabled people. He later became the first amputee to climb El Capitan in Yosemite, normally a four- to six-day endeavor, in less than 24 hours.

DeMartino's wife, Cyndy, another climber, understands her husband's motivation. When he resumed climbing, her primary emotion was excitement. "I actually went through a grief process thinking we were going to lose climbing from our lives," she says. "Maybe that sounds shallow, but I wanted us to continue."

Like most climbers, Cyndy doesn't view her sport as dangerous. It's a calculated risk, no more perilous than, say, cycling, a difficult point to rebut considering how many Coloradans have been killed or maimed while riding bikes. These athletes stress climbing's soul-enriching mental and spiritual aspects. "When I started climbing, it was the first time that something clicked in me that made me 100 percent present," DeMartino says. "I don't know of anything else that can do that."

Another climber, Boulder resident Malcolm Daly, 57, echoes DeMartino—to a point. Daly lost a foot to frostbite, and nearly his life, while attempting a first ascent in Alaska in 1999, when his kids were 10 and 13. "When we have children," Daly says, "we don't stop being who we are."

Even so, Daly doesn't believe climbing is the only way to achieve the bliss extreme athletes romanticize. "The phrase 'he died doing what he loves' really gets under my skin," Daly says. "I hate it. Gil Weiss loved climbing, but he sure as hell didn't love dying. [His death] is a wake-up call." —Jayne Moyer



Craig DeMartino bouldering near Fort Collins

» INTO THIN AIR

The most lethal types of accidents over the past few years, and where they occurred.

Source: 100summits.com

