

## Walking an Ultra Marathon

Looking back I wonder why I wanted to walk an ultra marathon (as for running I decided to literally learn to walk first rather than run). After all, what did I get out of it besides blisters, a few tears and legs that if they could, would have beaten the hell out of me and left me for dead because I certainly did torture them.

Well, why should you care? Why indeed. If the thought of walking the 46 mile long march has pricked your ears then read on. If the thought of walking 46 miles in under 20 hours brings you out in a cold sweat or causes expletives to burst from you that would terrify the old lady in the corner. Read on anyway.

The walk I did is basically a huge circle beginning from RAF Wyton. The terrain is typical of East Anglia. It's extremely flat. So those who enjoy walking in mountains will find this walk very boring. There's a challenge in that I think! Still, if you get the right company on the walk, the lack of interesting terrain isn't a problem.

The key to this is somewhat obvious. Be prepared! Still, there are idiots out there who cannot get this right. I'm one of them. My training consisted of running 3 miles a few times a week at a heart rate of around 161. This did not in anyway prepare me for the extreme fatigue my legs were under by the end. To tell you the truth, I got lucky! Learn from my mistake!

You need to build leg strength for this because leg strength is key. My lungs didn't have a problem at all on the walk. My legs just got stiffer and heavier as the miles clocked up and my feet, well, hello blisters! You can do it by simply walking long distances and building up your strength until you are able to cover the 46 miles in one go or you can add supplementary exercises on top of this like squats, one legged squats and general leg exercises. If you find that supplementary exercises make you more fatigued and hinder recovery then don't bother with them. Just focus on building your walking distance.

You will of course carry water with you on training walks. On the pathfinder, there are checkpoints where you can refill, negating the need to carry loads of water! It goes without saying to stay hydrated, as this affects your performance directly. If you want to do an organised walk check the walk you want to do to see if they operate a check point system. They should do for safety reasons.

Navigation may or may not be required depending on where you're doing it and your level of support. If it is required then simply practice on the training walks or find someone to do the walk with you who can navigate. Mind you, this person must finish the walk. It's amusing but still annoying to find you don't know where you are or where you're going! Your best bet is to get someone to teach you because you can get hands on experience rather than just reading and practicing. If this isn't possible then the book or internet is the way to go. A favourite of mine is Map and compass: The art of navigation by Pete Hawkins.

You should definitely vary where you train because not only is walking the same route over and over extremely boring; it's of no use navigationally. You need to challenge yourself by navigating in new terrain.

So far then, you know you should begin by building leg strength through long distance walking and possibly using supplementary exercises. You also need to practice navigation on your training walks.

Building up your distance depends entirely upon you. That is how you cope with the training. Some people are like machines, feel no pain and are rarely sore. Others find they can hardly walk the next morning, me included. If you begin by walking say 10 miles and find this is too much. Cut the distance to say 5 miles. If that's comfortable try 7 next time you go and build up slowly. For example you might go 10, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12,13,14,12,16 and so on. If you can make bigger jumps in distance by all means do so. You may well be able to build up more than if you were running because walking has much less impact upon the body. If you can only train on weekends you could do a really challenging walk each Saturday or split two hard walks between Saturday and Sunday. You can also make changes to your lifestyle. Don't use elevators, don't use remotes e.t.c. Perhaps get yourself a bike and cycle to work. Everything counts.

So, when I do this walk (46 miles) again my training will look something like this: I will start at 10 because I can handle this well. Obviously you should start at a good level for you.

Week	Sat	Sun	Total
1	10	10	20
2	12	12	24

3	15	15	30
4	18	18	36
5	15	15	30
6	20	20	40
7	23	20	43
8	24	20	44
9	27	20	47
10	20	15	35
11	30	15	45
12	33	15	47
13	36	15	51
14	39	15	54
15	20	15	35
16	42	15	57
17	46 (the walk)		

Boots are very important. If you want you can do the walk in trainers that's entirely up to you. Though if you come across a water logged field and can't go around, like we did, you'll regret it. Wet feet also mean more blisters! Which boots you buy depends on which are comfortable for you. Try a wide variety at the shops. I'm not inclined to buy from the internet because I don't know how they feel. Once you've got a comfortable pair you need to break them in. A variety of tricks are prophesised about breaking in boots so have a look on the internet, try them and see if they work. Obviously the one way that does work is simple. Walk in them! That's what I did. Of course you're going to get blisters. When I first brought my boots I couldn't run in them the blisters were so bad! Overtime though this isn't as much of a problem. I got more blisters when I first got my boots going for 6 miles than I did walking 46 now. So persist and you will see results.

Make sure your boots fit properly of course. Get you feet measured in the shop or anywhere you can before you buy. If you don't you will suffer from black toenails and they will fall off. Another mistake I made and therefore lost allot of toenails, not fun! (They do grow back so don't worry, just keep them clean if this happens to you).

As for clothing, don't wear jeans, you can do the walk naked but never wear jeans! Their useless to walk in. Check the weather and dress accordingly. I did the walk in summer so I took lightweight trousers, a light shirt, a jumper and waterproofs which where a godsend because the weather was not nice! Watch out for stinging nettles and the like if you're wearing shorts!

If you get the opportunity on the walk you should check you feet regularly. Prevention is better than cure so if you feel like you may be getting a blister, get it sorted immediately. A blister beginning at 20 miles is a nightmare at 25! A method of preventing blisters I use is to strap my feet. In doing this I got no blisters on my ankles at all. Only on the soles at the front where I didn't strap. Simply take some tape, I used zinc oxide tape, and put it over where you think you will or where you do get blisters and this should help. I also wore bandages over my feet, which made quite a difference! I wore the bandages you would use as a knee support, not something I usually do but then I don't usually walk 46 miles in one go!

Mental strength is extremely important. There are moments when you want to quit; it's inevitable when you're tired. How you train for this I don't know. I think the trick is to maintain a positive outlook when your doing the walk as often as you can, laugh allot, joke at anything even if it's not really that funny. Just don't let that sinking or miserable feeling get the best of you. Accomplishing the walk is a great feat and the pain is temporary, that's what I kept in mind when I did it. How you motivate yourself of course may be entirely different but no matter who you are, as long as you can put on foot in front of the other, you can keep going and each step is one step closer to the end!

Don't try this if you're injured! I've done myself in a few times because of too much pride! If you get an injury during the walk, how you react depends upon the injury and where you are. If you're right near the end e.g. a mile or so and the injury isn't bad, crack on, go for it. If you get injured near the start, pull out. You have no idea how much worse its going to get and you can seriously injure yourself. Any serious injury warrants pulling out immediately for obvious reasons. Of course how you react is down to your judgments.

What you eat on the walk and in training is very important. The pathfinder provided energy bars and drinks on the walk. Take advantage as long as they don't upset you! I ate boil in a bag rations cold because cooking wasted time and they are light to carry. Not brilliant but I'm not fussy about warm food. I'm not a nutritionist; I can't give you a ratio of carbs to protein or anything like that. I just ate food that wasn't bad for me, no cheeseburgers! My aim was to get loads of calories down my neck to keep the energy up. I also took nuts and seeds as well for essential fats as energy also come from

these. I did avoid foods that are likely to give you that sugar high and then the low, not good when you're already tired! By all means take boiled sweets or chewing gum if you really want something sweet. Trail mix is also good.

The walk then can be broke down as follows: You should begin by building leg strength through long distance walking and possibly using supplementary exercises. You also need to practice navigation on your training walks. Build your distance slowly but challenge yourself now and again. Get the right size boots by getting you feet measured and looking at a wide variety of boot to get the most comfortable. Strap up you feet and wear a bandage to prevent blisters. Wear your boots in! Maintain a positive outlook, eat well and don't do it injured.

As for what I got out of this. Yes it was painful, I got blisters and I did shed some tears over the last few miles but I also got one hell of a sense of achievement. I look back on it and feel quite proud that I pushed through the pain barrier and didn't give in. Knowing I can do that is pretty good in other aspects of my life.

Hopefully I haven't missed anything and this has helped you to get more enjoyment out of walking an Ultra Marathon trouble free. Good luck! And may you get the same feeling of achievement I did!

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#### About the Author

Living in England. Enjoys keeping fit and is currently training for an Ironman triathlon