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From the Provost: Ultramarathons and COVID-19, December 4, 2020

University of Northern Iowa

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From the Provost: Ultramarathons and COVID-19

From the Provost: Ultramarathons and COVID-19--Pace, Sustenance and Finishing Strong

Dear Colleagues,

Some of you know that I have competed in several ultra distance races--two ironman distance triathlons and one ultramarathon (100 miles). I was fortunate to have a fantastic mentor who saw my ability to compete at this level and shared with me all of his strategies. His mentorship was critical to my successful competition.

Through our training together, he helped me develop a certain mindset that prepared me to make it through a 17-hour or 18-hour (in the case of the triathlons) or 26-hour (in the case of the ultramarathon) race. That mindset revolved around the pace I set and the sustenance I took during the race.

Here's the interesting thing about running 100 miles. At times, you feel really good, and you want to push forward, and go fast. At times, you feel really bad, and all you want to do is stop and--if it is in the middle of the night--sleep. And you never want to eat anything because your entire system is shredded.

There are three critical pieces to successfully making it through to the end and finishing strong.

1. You can't go fast, even when you feel great. If you do, you will crash and burn harder than you would otherwise. What you can do, at this time, is cheer on someone else who is struggling.
2. You must push forward, even if it is just a walk, a crawl, when you are in the most pain you've ever experienced. This moment will pass and at some point in the future, you will feel good again. And hopefully someone who is feeling strong at this moment will inspire you to continue.
3. You must take sustenance when it is there, whether you want it or not.

This last point is truly important. When I competed in the Umstead 100, we ran eight 12.5 mile loops. At the start and half-way on the 12.5 miles, the race organizers had

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food and drink stations. Very wisely, they altered the food that was available at different times during the race. I remember eating a salty bowl of chicken noodle soup at 3:00 am. Boy was that good!! Oh my!!

Friends--we are in the beginning of the dark night right now. We are weary, anxious, and disbelieving. We are watching the numbers go up around the country, the state, and in our county. And the numbers are going up on our campus because we all go out in public at some point. Our positivity rate is going to increase, partly because we have more positive cases, and partly because our testing ability is limited (we hope to get some reprieve there with a Test Iowa site coming to UNI starting next week).

But we also have just 2 and a half weeks left in the semester. One more loop and we will finish.

Now is the time to take some sustenance. Get out today and tomorrow and enjoy the weather. But do so safely, with your pod, safely distanced, with masks.

And if you need to do something different in order to keep moving forward--move your class online, for instance--please do so after a conversation with your department head, who should notify your dean. Let's make sure that we finish the semester intact, as much as possible: mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually. Take sustenance where you need to.

I was blessed when I ran the Umstead 100 in that my father agreed to be my anchor. He ran the last two loops with me. He was in his early 70s and still strong. But it was 25 miles and I was hardly great company. When we were nearing the finish--I was walking, limping--he said to me: "Jim, you've got to run it in." I responded with some profanity about how I would never run again.

But when I got near that finish line I sprinted. And he cheered me on.

Thank you so much for what you do for our students. Take care of yourselves and of each other.

Let me know what I can do to help you make it to the end.

Be well,
Jim