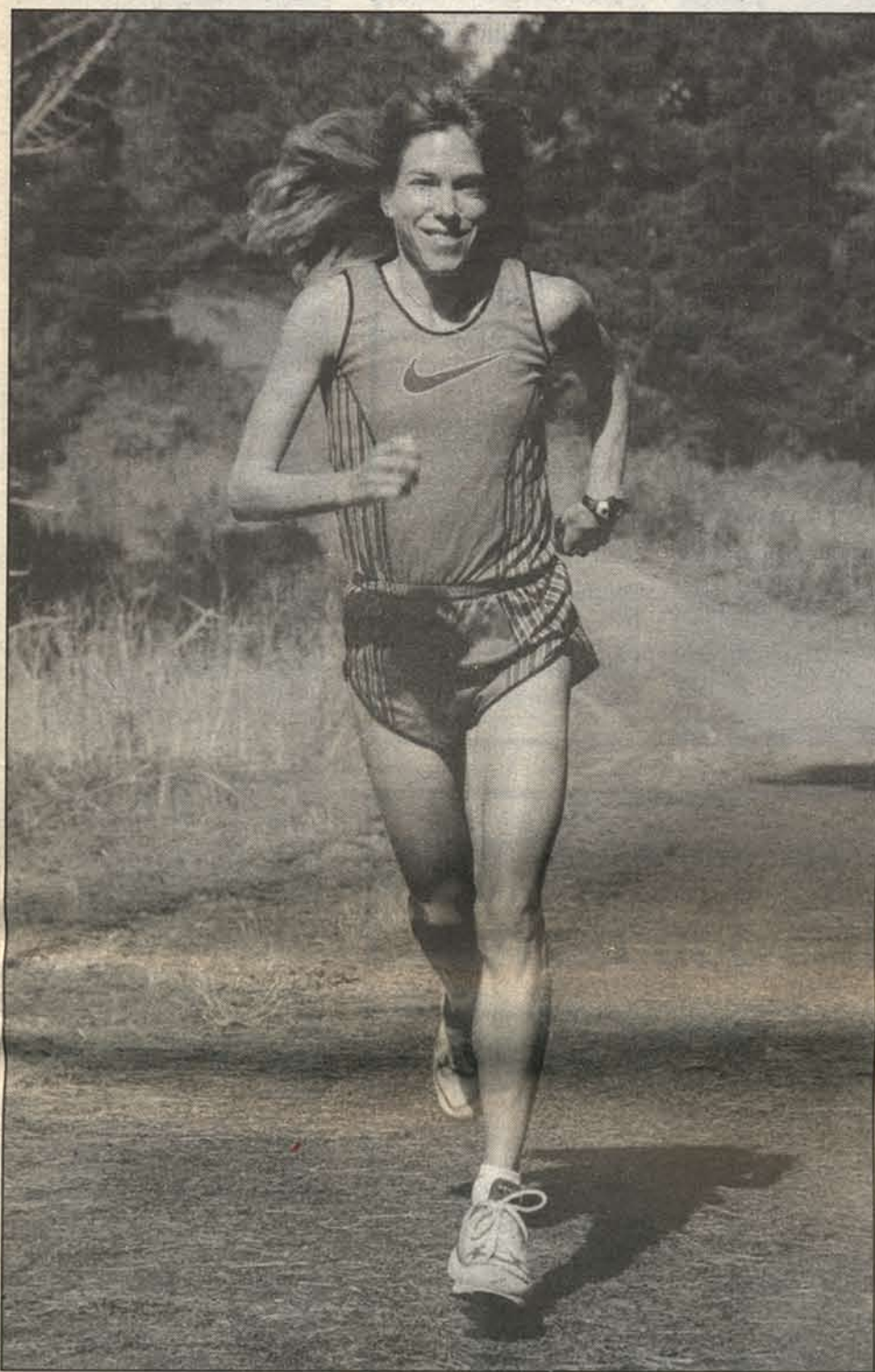


SPORTS: Best by Far



AENGUS MCGIFFIN

Distant footsteps: Trason has closed the gap on the world's best male ultrarunners.

# Ultrawoman

Ann Trason could be the greatest athlete you never heard of. By Sarah Lavender Smith

I was leaning into an uphill stretch of Grizzly Peak Boulevard, jogging along at an embarrassingly slow pace, when I first saw Ann Trason. I heard the footstrikes of a fast runner pelting toward me and glanced up from the pavement to watch a sinewy woman motor by, her eyes fixed dead-ahead.

I'd seen Trason's picture in a 1996 *Runner's World* article that called the Kensington resident the best female runner in America and "without a

doubt, the greatest woman ultramarathoner in the world."

Since she was headed home down Grizzly Peak, she might well have been on the tail end of a 50-mile training run to Lake Chabot and back. But she looked as fresh and swift as someone running half-mile intervals around a track.

For me—for anyone—to recognize Ann Trason is unusual. Perhaps no other athlete has accomplished so much and remained so little-known. The

37-year-old holds world records at distances from 40 miles up to 100 miles. She runs—and wins—against men in races far more grueling than Hawaii's famed Ironman triathlon. Yet mainstream sportswriters ignore her, probably because she competes in events that offer little or no prize money and get almost no media exposure.

The world applauded in 1994 when Michael Johnson scored a double Olympic victory in the 200 and 400 meters, but few

noticed when Trason accomplished her own historic double, a feat beyond the reach of any sprinter in gold Nikes. In the space of just 12 days in June 1996, Trason set a course record at the 54-mile Comrades Marathon in South Africa (6 hours, 13 minutes), then flew home and won the women's division of the 100-mile Western States race in 18 hours, 57 minutes (in a field of 370 she finished third overall). She did all this while struggling with the pain of a torn hamstring muscle. Then she did it again in 1997.

Western States race director Norm Klein calls Trason "the finest athlete in the world today. Look at what she does—she's competing against men because the women are no competition to her, and she's holding her own. And she's doing it and not getting anything in return. She's doing it for the love of the sport and the satisfaction she derives from it."

Trason now has her own Nike deal, but she doesn't have the ego that normally goes with it. She can't recite her record-setting times; she's a little skeptical that anyone's even interested. "I can't believe this isn't boring you to death," she tells me.

Trason would rather hype her sport than herself. She encourages me to try distances of 50K and farther, telling me I could do it, most people could do it—it's just a matter of training and mindset. She says she runs 100 to 120 miles a week when building for a race, "but you can get by on 60 or 70, that's the great thing." She sounds as if she's discussing an aerobics class.

I met Trason with the hope of gaining some insight into how she runs as far as she does and why she's so devoted to it. Even her home's location is defined by her passion for running. She and husband Carl Andersen, a senior vice president at World Savings and Loan in Oakland and an accomplished ultradistance runner himself, told their real estate agent that their house had to be no more than a half-mile from a trailhead. They finally found a place near Silby Trail in Tilden Park.

Trason could easily be a world-class marathoner. She's qualified three times for the U.S. Olympic Trials. But she isn't content to stop at 26.2 miles. And besides, she prefers to run on mountain trails, not paved roads.

Trason might reasonably have taken the past year off to recover from surgery in November '96 to repair her ruptured hamstring muscle, and to cope with nagging ankle trouble. Instead she ran in last summer's Comrades Marathon and in the Western States. Why does she push herself so hard?

"It's the sense of achievement," she explains. When you finish a 10K, Trason says, you



might look at your watch and see an improvement of 20 seconds or so from your previous time. But when you're running rugged trails over 50 or 100 miles, anything can happen. Your times vary by hours, not seconds. "When you finish 100 miles," Trason says, "I don't care what your time is—you feel like you've really accomplished something."

**T**he sport of "ultrarunning" is still relatively obscure and misunderstood. People tend to think of ultrarunners—if they think of them at all—as an individualistic, vaguely spiritual sect of athletes, plugging along, rain or shine, in pursuit of some mystical runner's nirvana. Perhaps they've even heard of the legendary Tarahumara Indians of Mexico, who run in homemade huaraches and are often the ones to beat in ultradistance races. (Trason has bested Tarahumara runners in the Western States race. The Tarahumaras reportedly were put off by sharing the trail with a woman and teased her as she passed.)

The number of runners who run farther than marathon

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distance is small but growing. Fred Pilon, editor and publisher of *UltraRunning* magazine, guesses there are some 8,000 dedicated ultrarunners in North America, based on his magazine's circulation and participation at races around the country. There were about 30 ultradistance races in the United States when his magazine started, in 1981, and that number has now climbed above 400.

The Western States is the Super Bowl of ultrarunning, a 100-mile trek that starts in Squaw Valley, traverses the Sierra and finishes in Auburn. Trason shows me photos from the race: in one she's running uphill through pine trees, a water bottle in each hand; in another she's fording the waist-high waters of the American River, clutching a rope to keep from being swept away in the current; in another she's standing on a scale at a medical checkpoint, making sure her 5-foot-4-inch, 102-pound frame hasn't lost too much weight. She's been the top woman finisher at the Western States nine years in a row. She's come within five minutes of winning the race outright, finished

second overall twice, third three times.

It was her love of this Sierra course that first got her hooked on ultradistances. In 1986 a friend took her on a run of the first 30 miles of the Western States course. "It was beautiful," Trason says. "There are some places you go in life where you feel like you just belong. I felt like I was floating, floating in the clouds and the flowers. Coming home, I fell down a hill. I'd left my friend and didn't know where the course was, but I found my way. It was mystical—and I'm not a mystical person."

"There's something very romantic when you're running 100 miles in the Sierra. And you have to know a lot about yourself. You have to be in tune with your body and know when you can push it and when to back off. Your head's the coach and your body is the team, and your body has to listen to the coach about how much water to drink, how much food to eat, the pace. I find it less boring than going out and running a marathon."

**T**rason hasn't always been so fond of long runs. Her first ultradistance competition, a 50-miler in 1985 when she was 24, was a miserable experience. She'd been dabbling in triathlons when she saw a flyer for the race, which was in Sacramento. The fact that she'd never even run a marathon didn't deter her. "I just thought, I'll run a 50," she says. "It was 108 degrees, the hottest day they'd ever had the race, and I didn't even know to carry a water bottle."

So, I guess, she must have done a lot of walking.

"No," Trason tells me. "I refused to walk because I was trying to learn something about racing. So I finished."

But she must have barely straggled home.

No, she says. She won.

In fact, her husband informs me later, she set a course record.

Andersen runs about 100 miles a week and occasionally he races. He's experienced the agony of dropping out 85 miles into the Western States, and he says he's amazed by his wife's ability to deal with the pain and fatigue during the toughest stretches in a long-distance race. "She has the ability to not only not drop out but at that point to push herself," he says.

Trason started running at her Pacific Grove high school, where she was a track standout. There was no girls cross-country team so she ran on the boys team. She won a track scholarship to the University of New Mexico but stopped running seriously in college because of a knee injury. She transferred to UC Berkeley and graduated with honors in biochemistry. She had planned to enter a graduate program in physical therapy at Merritt College last fall but put those plans on hold so she can concentrate on training and physical therapy for her ankle.

One goal Trason has not set—at least not out loud—is winning the Western States outright. In fact, she gets a little

defensive when asked whether or when she'll beat the men. She has won a handful of ultradistance races outright, and many who follow the Western States can't wait to see her finish first in that renowned race, as if her victory there would prove that gender differences do indeed disappear when the race is long enough.

Some observers theorize that the longer the distance, the more level the playing field for men and women. Men's muscle strength will always give them an advantage over women at short and medium distances, but certain aspects of women's anatomy—lighter bones, better fat metabolism, more estrogen—can help women in the long haul. Or

**Trason recalls a 100-mile race in 1995 when she finished just five minutes behind the man who won. "I caught him and it scared him. And it was like, this is good, I like this."**

so the theory goes. Trason thinks studies so far are inconclusive, and she doesn't buy into the notion that there's some magical distance at which gender differences cease to matter.

"This sport has a lot to offer women and I don't think they should have that burden," Trason says. "The thing that's probably hardest for me is when I've won and people say I was second or third. They don't do that in the marathon. Can you imagine [Boston Marathon women's winner] Uta Pippig finishing the Boston Marathon and being told she was 31st place or 37th or whatever? It wouldn't happen. But for whatever reason people say, 'You've done so well against the men, you deserve to win.' I just want to go out and run."

But Trason admits she has fond memories of the '95 Western States, when she caught up with defending champion Tim Twietmeyer near the end of the race and finished second overall, just five minutes behind. "I caught him with just 15 miles to go and his eyes were so big!" she laughs. "I'd never beaten him, because he would die before I beat him, but it's like, I caught him, and it scared him, and then he ran as hard as he could. And it was like, this is good, I like this."

**T**rason probably won't come so close next summer. She's respecting her limits these days, trying to take care of her troublesome left leg. "I don't think I'll ever be at the level I was before," she says. "I've pretty much

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known that for the past couple of years." She dropped out at mile 12 of a 100K race in Holland last September, an experience she calls "completely humiliating." But she'd recognized her pain and didn't want to risk injuring herself again.

Trason's problem stems from a less-than-full range of movement in her left ankle, which puts stress on her hamstring. She spent all of '96 running in pain while her doctors tried to pin down the source. Exploratory surgery finally revealed that 90 percent of her hamstring had torn away from the bone. That spooked Trason, who was awake with a local anesthetic during the operation and watched as doctors reattached her hamstring with surgical bolts. "When I saw that," she says, "the thing that upset me the most was, I can't believe I did this to my body. I said, this isn't sane."

She cautiously returned to form in early '97, training just enough for the Comrades Marathon and the Western States. "I wanted to prove I could come back after doing something as stupid as rupturing a hamstring," she says. "Running is about being smart and knowing your body, and if you're so stupid that you go and tear your muscle off the bone—I

**"Running is about being smart, and if you're so stupid that you go and tear your muscle off the bone—I looked at that as a failure. I said, this isn't sane."**

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Now she's working with physical therapists to improve her ankle and carefully gearing up for the coming season, training enough to stay in shape but not driving herself to her peak. I ask how far she's cut back her runs—down to 10 miles or so? No, she says, she and Andersen went to the Sierra the other weekend for a 50-mile run, 10 miles of it through fresh snow. Back home, she's doing about 85 miles a week. She says she's willing to forgo the upcoming Comrades Marathon if necessary, but it's difficult to imagine not showing up to defend her title at her 10th Western States.

"Comrades is more for the head," she explains. "It's televised, it's one of the world's premier road races. And Nelson Mandela personally congratulates the winners. The Western States is more for the heart. You're competing more against the trail than the competitors. You have to know the trail and feel the trail and communicate with nature. That's my goal, to get to where I can get back on the trail." ●

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