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METTLE TESTERS

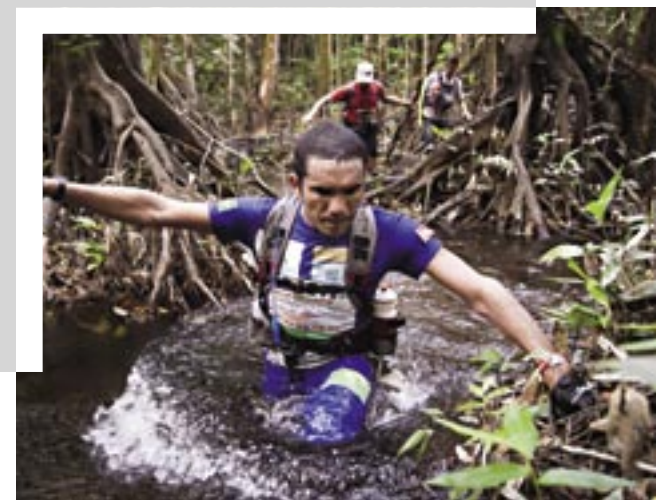
By Tim Foley

We rank the cruelest, toughest, most unforgiving endurance races on the planet.

10

JUNGLE MARATHON

If your local half marathon is too pedestrian for you, hop a plane to South America and enter this 200-kilometer race along the Amazon. You'll want to avoid the poison dart frogs, duck the occasional vampire bats, and keep an eye out for panthers. Still interested? There's also the possibility of drowning in the world's least forgiving river, or running afoul of the local indigenous tribes as you penetrate the jungle. That probably won't be a problem, though—chances are you, like roughly 40 percent of the race's entrants, will hop into an aid station after a few miles and call out for a return to your community Shamrock Shuffle.





9

PATAGONIA EXPEDITION RACE

If 11 days of trekking, climbing, kayaking, biking, and orienteering in Chilean Patagonia sounds like your idea of a good time, then this white-knuckle adventure race is calling your name. It requires competitors to navigate one of the most dangerous and remote patches on the planet, while also being responsible for their own food, water, and safety. In 2009, the American team Calleva got stranded after an ice-climbing mishap. The party survived on berries until two team members made a daring water crossing and mountain descent to flag down assistance.

8

YUKON QUEST

Longer, colder, and darker than the famous Iditarod, the Yukon Quest puts its contestants through minus-10-degree days and minus-40-degree nights as they mush dogs along 1,000 miles of Alaska's Yukon River. Men and beasts alike spend two weeks racing over some of the world's most inhospitable terrain in conditions that can easily claim your digits—if not your mind.



7

GREAT DIVIDE RACE

Does 200,000 feet of elevation gain along a monthlong ride from Canada to Mexico sound appealing? How about a kick in the head? The Great Divide Race is the longest mountain-bike race on the planet (2,745 miles), with the most elevation gain, and it's 100 percent do-it-yourself. If you're hungry, it's on you to find food. If you slam into a Montana grizzly bear going 40 miles an hour down a mountain pass, you're expected to both fix your bike and fend off the beast with your bent wheel. No cellphones and no team of riders off which to draft. This race is pure and simple: eat, sleep, ride, repeat.

6

ULTRAMAN TRIATHLON

This one pits 35 souls in a 6.2-mile ocean swim, a 171.4-mile bike ride, and a 52.4-mile run. Each stage takes place on a separate day, but that in no way detracts from the complete insanity of the event. Last year's winner, Alexandre Ribeiro of Brazil, cranked out his double marathon in 6:30:59. That's two 3:15:00 marathons (a brisk 7:26 per mile), back-to-back, the day after doing a 171-mile bike ride, and two days after completing a 6.2-mile swim in the ocean. We give up.



5

TOUR DE FRANCE

Every July the French host a race so arduous and with a top prize so coveted it motivates wispy men from all over the globe to introduce other people's urine into their bladders, intravenously consume partially frozen blood, and utilize microscopic motors to propel their bikes. Gam-smashing, heartbreaking, and deadly, the world's most popular bike race attracts the global media and thousands of spectators to small mountain towns across France. Though the route changes each year, certain hells are always included: the Pyrenees, the Alps, and more than 48,000 feet of elevation gain and loss.

4

RACE ACROSS AMERICA

Here is a bike race that starts in Ocean-side, California, and ends in Annapolis, Maryland, traversing roughly 3,000 miles and more than 100,000 feet of elevation gain. Sea to shining freaking sea. There are no rest days and no stages; the first rider to show up at the other ocean wins. If you don't get it done in 12 days—that's more than 250 miles a day—you earn "Did Not Finish" status. Fewer than 200 riders in the 28-year history of the race have made it to the finish line in time.



3

DEATH RACE

The race organizers have a clever domain name: YouMayDie.com. It's not entirely tongue-in-cheek. Participants gather in Vermont's Green Mountains to remove stumps, trudge through miles of mud, split logs, and climb mountains. But what puts the race over the top are the "special tasks"—multiple puzzles and feats of organization and memory competitors must perform. Should they fail one, they may have to re-climb the mountain they just descended. As a race official said, "There are physical challenges in this race, but we're trying to break them mentally." They usually succeed.

2

THE BARKLEY MARATHONS

This 100-miler takes place in Tennessee's Frozen Head State Park and features more than 120,000 feet of rocky, wooded elevation gain and loss. Since the first race in 1986, only nine (yep, *nine*) of an estimated 700 participants have finished within the 60-hour cutoff. Entrants climb overgrown trails with names like "Testicle Spectacle" and "Son of a Bitch Ditch." They must show progress by tearing a page out of books placed at 12 stops on the route by the event's fiendish founder, Gary Cantrell. For the many mere mortals who can't hack the full 100, there's also a 60-mile "fun run."

1

BADWATER ULTRAMARATHON

This California race takes runners from Badwater, Death Valley (248 feet below sea level), to Whitney Portal (elevation 8,300 feet)—135 miles that combine the fire of the desert with the ice (and thin air) of Alpine elevations. Start-time temperatures in the valley routinely crest 120 degrees—competitors claim they must stick to the painted lines of the road to prevent their shoes from melting on the blacktop—while snow and wind gusts of 40 miles an hour are not uncommon up on Mt. Whitney. Badwater calls itself the toughest foot race in the world, and we're not going to argue. ㊦

