

MARATHON MESSAGE
Celebrating 2,500 Years p.20

BEGINNERS
Look Good, Feel Good

RUNNING CELEB
TV's Carlo Rota p.76

CANADIAN Running

PERSONAL
TRANSFORMATION
ISSUE

Training Tips

4 Quick
Workouts
to Sharpen
Your Speed

Prevent Injuries and
Boost Performance with

Dynamic Stretching

Can **CrossFit** Make You Faster? p.52

Gear
2010 Holiday
Gift Guide
for Runners

9 Winter Running
Shoes Reviewed

November & December 2010 \$4.95



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Canadian 10,000m
record holder (27:23)



How to Break Through the
**Weight
Loss
Plateau**

TOP DIETS
DECONSTRUCTED

Tips to make the
most of your meals

Easy Recipes for
Busy Runners p.22

Running
Saved My Life

5 Runners Share Their
Success Stories p.34

Adventures in
Copper Canyon

A Canadian Races the Famed
Tarahumara in Mexico p.44





BORN TO RUN *in* COPPER CANYON

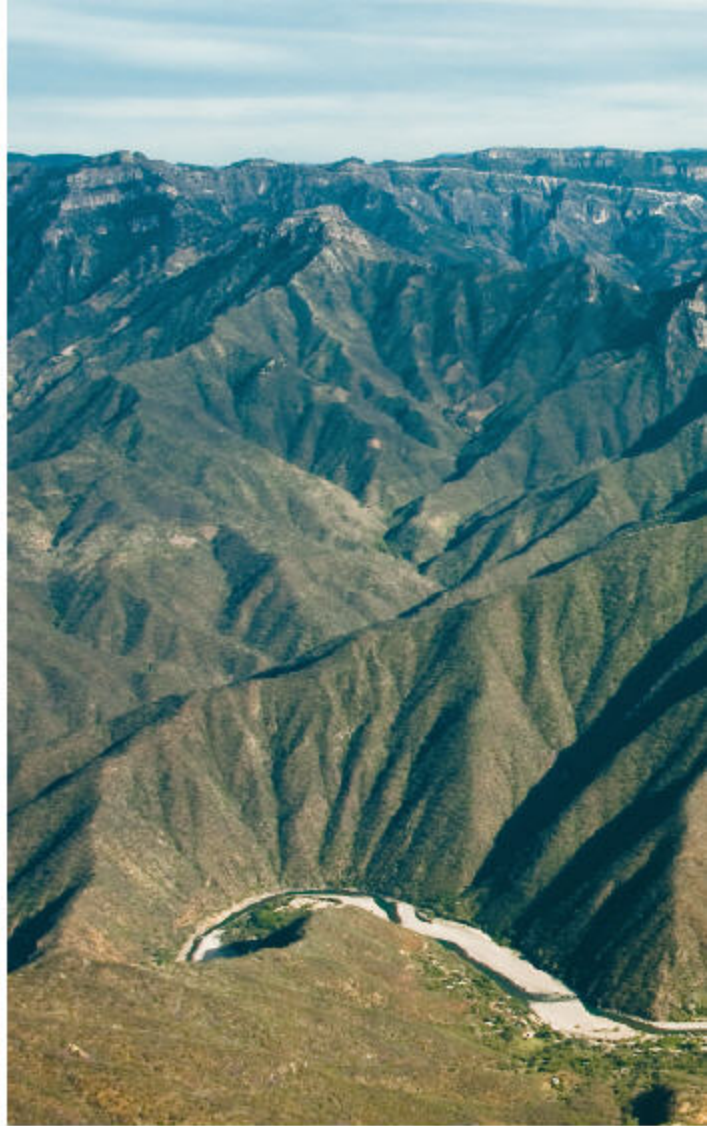
» A Raramuri participant in the 2010 Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon races in huaraches up the steep slopes toward the town of Los Alisos



A Canadian journeys to Mexico to run “the greatest race the world has never seen,” as chronicled in Christopher McDougall’s bestselling book, and to find out how the event and its eccentric race director have changed since the publication of *Born to Run*.

By Simon Donato

I glance across the valley and watch the clouds slowly cascading over the canyon rim, their silver hue offering hope that the temperature will soon drop, and that I just might survive this run. It's nearly 30 C and for the last 45 minutes I've been slowly trudging up the singletrack climb to the tiny town of Los Alisos. The cramping in my legs is worsening, and I begin to question why I agreed to enter this race. Didn't I promise my wife that we would take a relaxing vacation far from my busy schedule of trail racing and scientific work? Instead, I'm melting, my legs are shredded and I'm struck by waves of painful cramping every few minutes. I still have 17 miles (27K) to run, in the peak heat of the day.



» Maria Juliana, 16 from Huicorochi races along the trail toward Mesa Naranja in the 2010 Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon





Above » The Uruque Canyon of the Barrancas del Cobre. The race winds along this canyon.

The Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon – or the Caballo Blanco 50-Miler, as the locals know it – is an anomaly, even in the sometimes oddball world of trail racing. There is no entry fee, only donations. All racers are encouraged to adopt the name of a spirit animal from which they can draw strength. Any non-locals who place in the race donate their winnings to the resident Raramuri people. All finishers receive 500 pounds of corn, a staple in the local diet and also the main currency in the area, along with beer. It takes careful planning just to get to the start of the race, and once there, runners are expected to pre-hike the entire unmarked racecourse during the three days leading up to the event. Aid is advertised as limited, so self-sufficiency is a must, and the majority of racers will wear huarache sandals made from discarded tires and rawhide lace. Despite all of this, the race has a growing reputation as a spectacular event that affects runners on a profoundly spiritual level by reminding them of the simplicity of running free, metaphorically and literally. I wanted to see it for myself, even if it meant sabotaging my plans for a relaxing holiday.

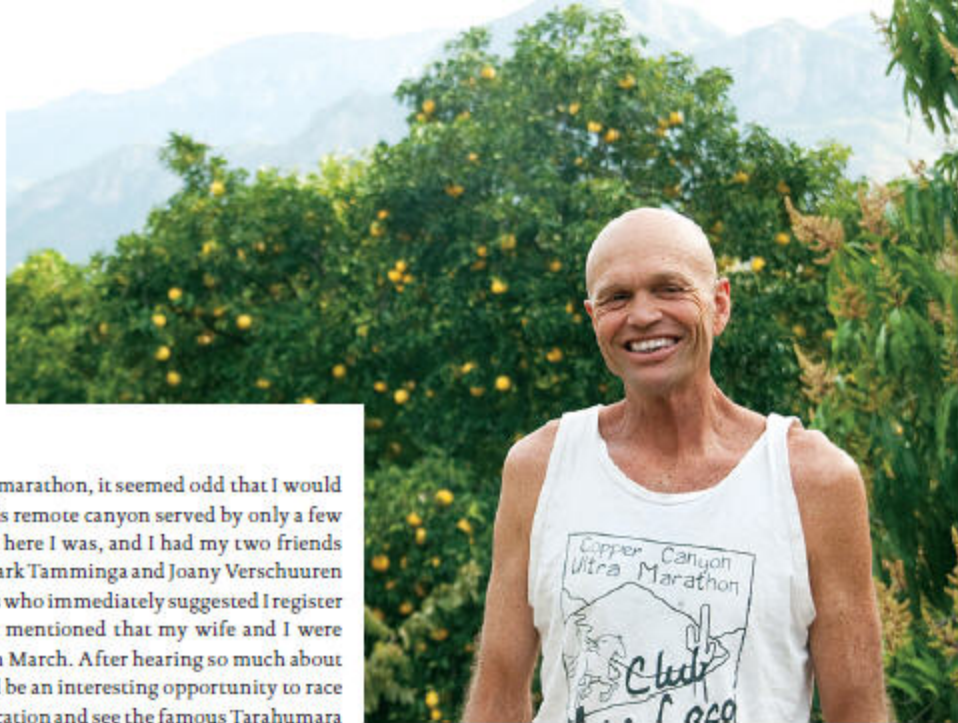


THE BOOK

Like most runners, I first heard about the Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon last year from the book *Born to Run* as its shoes-are-bad message rippled through the running community. Garnering *New York Times* bestseller status and global acclaim, *Born to Run* proved for many to be a transformative running bible that forced runners to rethink their technique and training methods from the feet up.

At the centre of this saga is a mysterious running Messiah named “Caballo Blanco” and the huarache sandal-wearing Tarahumara Indians – who call themselves the Raramuri, or “running people.” Said to be the greatest ultra-distance runners on the planet, they inhabit Mexico’s Barrancas del Cobre (Copper Canyon), a vast canyon system deeper than the Grand Canyon. The book deals with the spiritual aspect of running, and promotes the evolutionary and scientific basis for our need to run free of expensive and scientifically engineered footwear. These theories are tested in a classic 50-mile (80K) showdown between a crew of American ultrarunners, led by Scott Jurek, and the secretive canyon-dwelling Tarahumara. The centrepiece of the story, and by far the most intriguing part of it, is Caballo Blanco.

Right >> 2010 Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon race founder and organizer Micah True (also known as Caballo Blanco).



HOW I GOT INVOLVED

Never having done an ultramarathon, it seemed odd that I would do my first one down in this remote canyon served by only a few rutted and dusty roads. Yet here I was, and I had my two friends to thank (or blame) for it. Mark Tamminga and Joany Verschuuren are successful ultra veterans who immediately suggested I register for the race after I casually mentioned that my wife and I were planning a trip to Mexico in March. After hearing so much about the book, I decided it would be an interesting opportunity to race in a remote and beautiful location and see the famous Tarahumara in action. From the first time I visited Caballo Blanco's website, it was clear that this race was not for the faint of heart. Posted on the registration page was this strongly worded set of race rules:

- No entry fee [a donation]
- No aid [limited]
- No course markings [We will all pre-walk the course the Thursday and Friday prior to the weekend]
- No awards [but self-satisfaction] – The Raramuri will win prize money, corn and beans.
- No wimps, whiners or weenies allowed [except the RD!]
- No expectations [but of beauty!]

This was starting to sound more like an adventure race than a running race. I was sold.

GETTING THERE

After a day and a half of travel on planes, trains and automobiles, we finally reached the town of Urique, which sits at the lowest point of Copper Canyon, only 250 metres above sea level. To reach Urique, most racers take the train from either the city of Chihuahua in the east or from the smaller towns of Los Mochis or El Fuerte in the west. The scenery is more spectacular going west to east, as the train slowly huffs its way inland into the canyon, which cuts deeply through the Sierra Madres. The road to Urique spills from the mountain town of Bahuichivo and plunges down a dizzying series of narrow switchbacks to the bottom of the canyon, taking several hours to drive the 60 kilometres. By the time we reach the town, we had dropped nearly 2,000 metres and the temperature has climbed by 15 C.

Arriving in late afternoon, we immediately set out to find lodging. Luckily for us, someone guided us to a private home that provided us the bare necessities of shelter. Four concrete walls, a tin roof, and a bathroom with a cold shower would serve as home for the next three days. As roommates – at least the ones that were faster than my wife's shoe – we had spiders, cockroaches and a scorpion. The resident duck and goose provided a daily 5 a.m. wake-up call.

CABALLO

With housing secured in Urique, I set out to find Caballo and "register." My first interaction with Caballo, whose real name is Micah True, was months earlier by email and seemed far too easy after reading how difficult it was for Christopher McDougall to track down this ghost in the canyons only a few short years ago. Technology had made Caballo accessible to all who seek his counsel, apparently. It seemed surreal to get a reply from this ultrarunning legend who had embraced the internet, and was adeptly using it through his site, *caballoblanco.com*, to reach his growing audience. He was quick to answer email, monitored the Club Mas Loco Google group and maintained a Facebook page. Why? To help him spread the message of the Raramuri, running free and *korima* (the Raramuri word for sharing).

Caballo was not what I expected when I met him in person. Tall, tanned and lanky, creases lined his face from years in the sun. His head was now shaved – gone was the wild long hair that McDougall described in *Born to Run*. When I quizzed one of his friends about this change, I was told, "the women like him better this way." Our first meeting occurred on Mama Tita's patio in Paulina's Restaurant. I had just finished a delicious meal of beans, corn and fresh tortillas when he arrived. I introduced myself and he welcomed me to the town and the race, and then introduced me to his ultrarunning girlfriend Maria, who finalized my registration with my waiver and gave me a race T-shirt and poster. Obviously preoccupied with other matters as the race drew closer, I didn't press Caballo with any questions. Instead, I drifted back and simply watched as he engaged his Raramuri friends, who were all dressed in bright blouses and their famous huarache sandals, in friendly conversation. Caballo was in his element.

Later that evening, I sat with Caballo at a hostel run by an American named Keith, who amongst other things maintained an excellent vegetable garden and had high-speed internet. Caballo had dropped by to visit his old amigo, and to sneak in a few minutes of internet time. In this quieter setting, I was pleasantly surprised to find that he had time to chat about the race, the

book and his future plans. What struck me immediately was how being the subject of a bestselling book has an interesting way of quickly changing someone's life, especially someone like Caballo. During our chat, he spoke candidly about how the book was affecting him in both positive and negative ways. I learned that *Born to Run* had apparently raised the ire of the marijuana growers and traffickers in the canyon, who now viewed him as a potential threat. He expressed his feeling that certain people in the book had profited from the Raramuri without giving back to the people, and that some of the information in the book was blatantly untrue. He lamented that his email inbox now overflowed with queries from barefoot running converts, wannabes and more, and that the book read like a giant commercial for Vibram, the maker of the barefoot-mimicking FiveFingers running slippers. Finally, he told me that while he loves the race, it is taking up more of his time to organize and he doesn't know how much longer he'll continue it. I appreciated his candour and honesty, and our conversation left me with a firm belief that Caballo had a firm conviction that we should all run free. He was no gimmick.

THE RACE

I awoke on race day to barnyard sounds. After eating a quick breakfast, we left our house in the dark and began the short walk to the town square where the race was scheduled to begin at 6:30. We arrived to find spectators, along with dozens of machine gun-toting soldiers, lining both sides of the street for several hundred metres. The Raramuri clustered along the start line. The men wore sleeveless cotton race jerseys, the trademark huaraches and everything from loincloths to jeans. Women wore brightly coloured ankle-length skirts, colourful blouses and plastic sandals. The foreigners – or *extranjeros*, as they called us – stood behind the locals, and in stark contrast, all of us were clothed in high-tech, sweat-wicking fabrics. All but one of us wore trail running shoes (American runner Caleb Wilson had converted to Vibrams after reading the book). In the cool morning air, we bantered happily, waiting to test ourselves in what the subtitle of McDougall's book called “the greatest race the world has never seen.”

To my surprise, the race started at the predicted time, and in stark contrast to the grandeur that preceded the bib pick-up the previous evening was cued by the quiet countdown of Caballo, who stood hidden amongst athletes in the start corral. More than 350 runners from Mexico, Canada, the U.S. and Europe coursed through the main street toward the edge of town, urged on by the cheering spectators.

Below left >> Mark Tamminga (left) and Simon Donato (right) at the race start

Below right >> Participants climb the trail toward Mesa Naranja with Raramuri and Western competitors in tow during the 2010 Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon



“THE RARAMURI CLUSTERED ALONG THE START LINE. THE MEN WORE SLEEVELESS COTTON RACE JERSEYS, THE TRADE-MARK HUARACHES AND EVERYTHING FROM LOINCLOTHS TO JEANS. WOMEN WORE BRIGHTLY COLOURED ANKLE-LENGTH SKIRTS, COLOURFUL BLOUSES AND PLASTIC SANDALS.”



» Raramuri 2010 Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon participants race back toward Urique, preparing to make the first of two passes through the Mexican town that are plotted as part of the course

THIS WAS A UNIQUE RACE. IN COPPER CANYON, WE RAN TO HELP OTHERS PRESERVE A CULTURE WE ALL BELIEVE IN.



The course remained largely as it was described in *Born to Run* – a Y-shaped route of gravel road and singletrack. Racers were required to check in to each turnaround point on the racecourse by stating their number and receiving a coloured wristband – four in total. The race passed through three villages: Guadalupe, which required crossing the Urique River; Mesita Naranjo, perched high on the side of the canyon; and the oasis of Los Alisos, accessed by crossing a narrow suspension bridge and climbing several kilometres of twisty singletrack to the summit. Racers ran through Urique twice, and there was a final 10-mile (16K) out-and-back through Guadalupe. It was during this final stretch that McDougall wrote about Barefoot Ted drinking his own urine to stave off bonking. He was less than five miles from the finish. I think I would have tempted fate.

Lacking ultra experience and never having run a marathon, I stayed with Mark for the first three miles, letting him set the pace. But as we drifted further towards the back of the pack and I watched women in floral print skirts stream by us, I wondered if we might be going too slow. I was unwittingly succumbing to the classic ultra-rookie mistake and as my adrenaline and enthusiasm got the best of me, I began to surge with the hordes, leaving Mark and sensible pacing behind. It didn't take long until I caught up with some of the faster runners, including my new friend Tim, an



American soldier who trained for this race by running hundreds of laps around the 2K perimeter of his forward-operating base in Afghanistan. Feeling energized and relatively invincible, I ran the long climb to Mesita Naranjo, cresting the hill just behind Tim and some of the lead Tarahumara and *extraterjero* runners.

When I reached Urique, I had covered about 21 miles (37K) in less than three hours. I refuelled quickly and headed off down the dusty road to Los Alisos, now fully exposed to the blistering Mexican sun. About half an hour later, my early pacing transgressions caught up with me. What had begun as minor twinges in each quad muscle rapidly morphed into cramps that felt like the muscles were clenching into fists in my legs. I stopped. 'This is not good at all,' I thought, frantically trying to massage the pain away and relax the muscle. This worked long enough to start moving again, which was more of a lurch than a walk. I maintained this until the first minor rise in the road, which brought more spasms,



Bottom left >> Leah Atwood (left) and Elizabeth Wistrom (right) racing along the trail toward Mesa Naranja during the 2010 Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon

Bottom centre >> Raramuri and foreign participants climb the steep slopes toward Los Alisos

Left >> Ultra runner Jamil Coury crosses the Urique River along with 350 other runners during the 2010 Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon

Below >> Mark Tammings (front) and Simon Donato (back) recover after the race

but also volunteers from a nearby aid station who, despite my protests, applied a vigorous massage to each leg, which eased the cramping and allowed me to start running again.

After this, my race became something of a learn-to-run clinic, with short bouts of running on flat and downhill sections interspersed with walking on any uphill. Despite many bananas, oranges and liquids, I was unable to restore the electrolyte balance and staggered along the course as other runners jogged past. After somehow managing to climb the trail to Alisos, Mark finally caught back up to me and we ran together for several kilometres. He pumped me full of salt tablets and encouraged me, but now, nearly six hours in, I had reached my physical limit and had to admit that my race was in jeopardy. I urged him to leave me behind. I was roasting, my quads were shredded and I still had 15 hilly miles to run.

Every step of those final 15 miles was a painful ordeal. I continued my run-walk strategy, weaving my way down the road chasing the fleeting fragments of shade, praying for rain. My prayers were rewarded during the final 10 miles of the race, as light showers fell briefly, cooling me and rejuvenating my desire to run. By the time I reached the turnaround point in Guadalupe, with a mere five miles to go, I had already seen the race leader pass me on his way back to Urique and had dropped to more than 20 minutes behind Mark.

I was determined to push myself as hard as possible for the last five miles. When I reached Urique, my finishing sprint was reduced to an ugly shuffle. I crossed the line in a time of nine hours and four minutes, nearly two hours behind the winner, a Raramuri named Jose Madero Herrera, who won in 7:12. After a brief celebration with Ally, Joany, Mark and Tim, I began feasting on chips washed down with Coke and collapsed on the sidewalk beside Mark, our legs elevated against the wall to begin the recovery process. My body was not done tormenting me, though, as my right quad seized into the mother of all cramps, prompting everyone with a camera to snap photos of my writhing, physiological display.

When I was finally able to walk again, I found Caballo, who had cut his own race short at 40 miles to be able to watch the finishers



arrive. Caballo was noticeably more relaxed as he moved from group to group in the finishing area, receiving praise from all the competitors. I shook his hand and thanked him for the experience.

By 8 a.m. the following day, we were bouncing uphill along the road toward the railway in Bahuichivo and back to our lives. The race left me with a deeper appreciation of running. *Korima* abounded during the event, from runner to runner and volunteer to competitor. I handed out gels or salt tablets to amigos I passed on the course. More than once, the volunteers helped me with massage.

This was a unique race. In Copper Canyon, we ran to help others preserve a culture we all believe in. Financially through our donated entry fees, economically through our corn and bean donations post-race, and finally through opening our minds to gain some level of understanding of the Raramuri people and the respect for their traditions. Caballo's message is that by running in places like Copper Canyon, we remind ourselves about the importance of peace, harmony and sharing in our lives, and carving out time without distraction to appreciate what we have. The message got through to me. ■

Simon Donato is a Calgary-based geologist and the founder of Adventure Science (adventurescience.ca). The next Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon will be held on March 6, 2011.