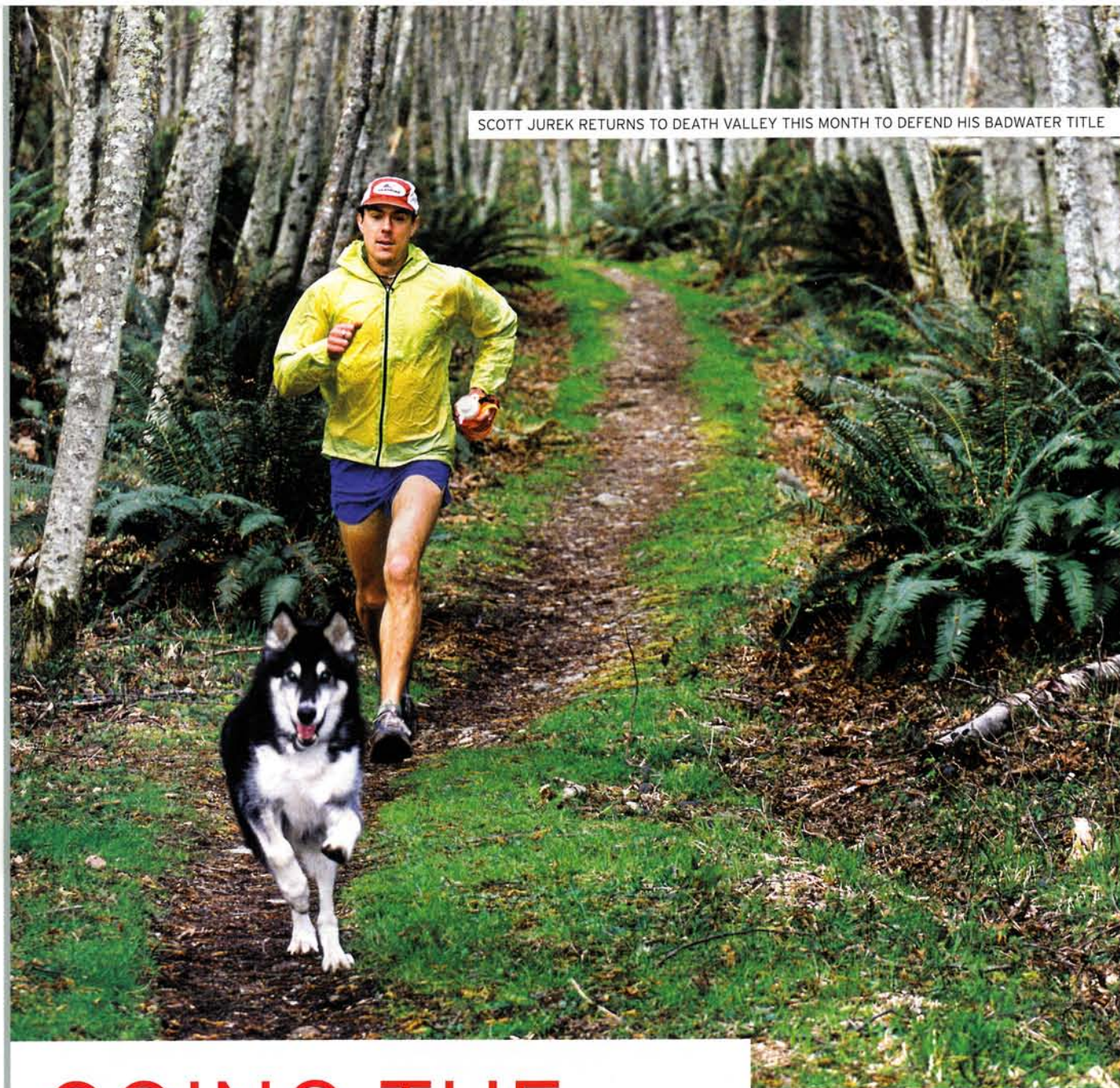


SCOTT JUREK RETURNS TO DEATH VALLEY THIS MONTH TO DEFEND HIS BADWATER TITLE



GOING THE DISTANCE

FOR SEATTLE ULTRARUNNER **SCOTT JUREK**, 26.2 MILES JUST AREN'T ENOUGH

BY TODD MATTHEWS

ON A THURSDAY afternoon last spring, Scott Jurek and his wife, Leah, huddle over a notebook calendar in their Capitol Hill office—a fourth floor space in the Odd Fellows Hall, decorated with a black-and-white picture of running legend Steve Prefontaine, a colorful North Cascades trail

map and pictures of Jurek at various races.

On the calendar: in two days, a 100-mile race that winds through the Marin headlands near San Francisco; a week later, a weeklong trail running seminar—call it a Scott Jurek boot camp—in the high Sierras organized by Beyond Running, a company

the couple formed in 2003; by year's end, races that will take Jurek to places as wide-ranging as Death Valley National Park, Provo, Utah, and Athens, Greece.

Jurek, 32, is an ultramarathoner: an athlete who challenges himself by running very long distances. Short ultramarathons cover some 50 miles; longer events can stretch 150 miles or more. A strict vegan who runs 90 to 110 miles per week on trails through Discovery Park, up Cougar Mountain and across the North Cascades, Jurek splits his time between racing, training and working as a physical therapist. He's a celebrity in the sport's close-knit community of runners: He was named Ultrarunner of the Year in 2003 and 2004 by *Ultrarunning* magazine, and a Hero of

2005 by *Runner's World*.

Jurek, who has an almost zen-like, easy-going manner, stands at the top of a sport that he admits some consider, well, strange. It's those extreme distances that have earned the sport its freak label.

Last year, when ultrarunner Pam Reed ran 300 miles non-stop in 77 hours (setting a record), many people scratched their heads: Why would anyone do that? "Unfortunately, with some of the publicity over the last couple of years, some of it comes across as freakish," Jurek admits. But, he says, "We're just real, everyday, average individuals who have a passion for running."

Jurek arrived at the sport of ultramarathons by accident. Born and raised in Duluth, Minnesota, he ran trails to stay in shape for Nordic skiing, his preferred sport at the time. In 1994, when a college friend ran a 50-mile trail race, Jurek was encouraged by his friend's enthusiasm for the sport. Always athletic, Jurek decided to run Grandma's Marathon (a perennial favorite for Duluth road racers), and, the next year, entered the same 50-mile race run by his friend. Jurek was hooked. "I didn't really think long and hard: 'Oh yeah, I'm going to be an ultramarathoner,'" he explained. "It was just kind of one of those natural progressions."

After earning a master's degree in physical therapy at the College of St. Scholastica in Minnesota, Jurek and his wife moved to Seattle in the late-1990s—drawn by the Cascades and the sport itself, which tends to have more racers and events on the West Coast—including the two ultramarathons that define the sport, the Western States 100 and Badwater.

The former is a 30-year-old, 100-mile trail run from Squaw Valley to Auburn in the high Sierras of California. Jurek has finished the race in first place for seven consecutive years, and set the course record in 2004, breaking the tape at 15 hours and 36 minutes. The latter is a mind-boggling, 135-mile trek that begins in the extreme 125-degree heat of Death Valley National Park, 282 feet below sea level, and ends on Mount Whitney at 8,230 feet. Last year, the first time Jurek competed at Badwater, he set the course record: 24 hours and 36 minutes.

Jurek's success is anything but accidental. He's extremely disciplined about his training and diet; during races, he sheds his friendly demeanor for a competitiveness that pushes him past other athletes and

FAST FEET

TRAIL RUNNING MECCA >> For the time-pressed corporate/family/over-achiever set, trail running presents a perfect blend of mountain escape and aerobic challenge. Just 20 minutes east of downtown on I-90, **COUGAR MOUNTAIN REGIONAL WILDLIFE PARK** offers a sprawling network of trails that ease the concrete-clad pressures of city living—and provide excellent hikes for families, dog owners and trail runners of all abilities. With 3,000 acres and 36 miles of trail, Cougar is a trail running destination nonpareil, and it's home to a popular but grueling Saturday-morning race series sponsored by King County Parks & Recreation and Seattle Running Company (206.325.4800; seattlerunningcompany.com). Distance: 36 miles of trails. Time: varies. Difficulty: easy to moderate. **GETTING THERE** The park, at 18201 SE Cougar Mountain Drive, is accessible from three trailheads. The most popular is the Red Town trailhead. From eastbound I-90 take exit 13; turn right onto Lakemont Boulevard SE. Continue about three miles and look for the park and trailhead on the left. Approx. 20 minutes from Seattle. *N.H.*

"THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT SEEING WHAT THE HUMAN BODY CAN DO," says Jurek. "WITH RUNNING, YOU DON'T NEED ANY EQUIPMENT and you don't have to RELY ON PRACTICALLY ANYTHING BUT YOURSELF AND YOUR BODY. I think that's one of the beauties of this sport."

toward the finish tape; and he loves the outdoors (nearly all ultramarathons are run on wilderness trails). Genes probably have something to do with his success, too. At just over six feet tall and weighing about 165 pounds, Jurek's long stride and lean frame are trailrunning assets.

For Jurek, Badwater was the most demanding race of his career. When he arrived, many of the sport's veterans scoffed when he predicted (some would say arrogantly) that he would win the race. "I know how it sounds," he says. "But athletes at a very high level have to be confident. In my mind, I knew that running a course-record pace was possible....It was more a prediction than a cocky comment."

Still, victory had its challenges. Jurek lost four pounds during the race, and was sidelined in the heat—lying on the side of the road at one point. But as he ran out of the valley, temperatures cooled and he regained his energy.

"The beauty about [these races] is that

you can bounce out of those low points if you pay attention to your body soon enough, and don't keep driving it down into a deep canyon," he explains. "What gets me going back for more is that you really learn a lot of things in those times. It doesn't sound like fun. And it's not that I'd like to repeat that level of discomfort. But it's at those times that you learn the most—when you get that deep down drive that all of a sudden you have this will to keep going."

This month, Jurek returns to Death Valley to defend his title. The goal? Finish the race in less than 24 hours. Also on deck: a trip to Athens, Greece in September, to compete in the Spartathlon—a 150-mile race that retraces Pheidippides's path from Athens to Sparta.

"There's something about seeing what the human body can do," says Jurek. "With running, you don't need any equipment and you don't have to rely on practically anything but yourself and your body. I think that's one of the beauties of this sport." **S**