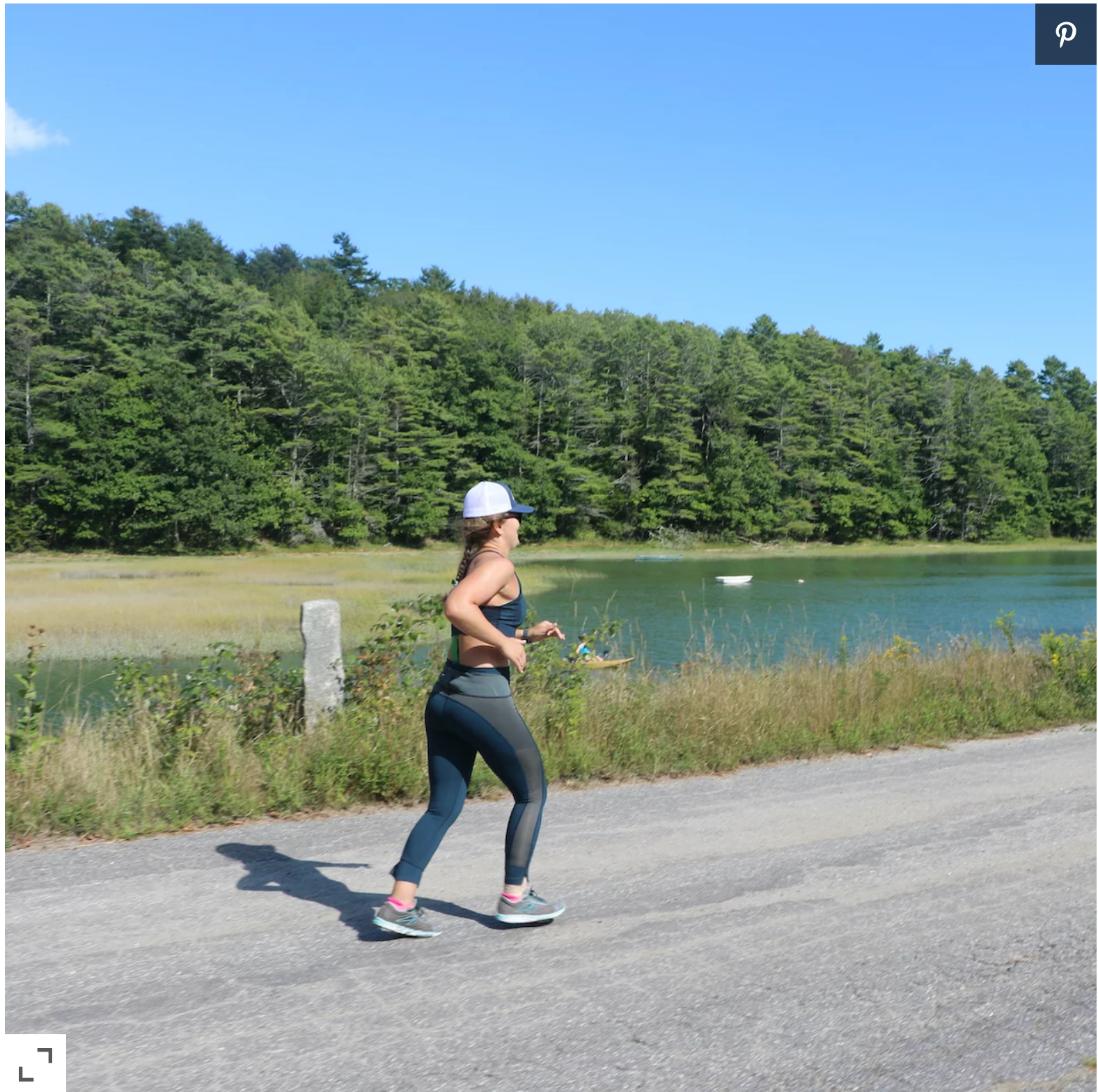# I Ran 137 Miles Nonstop Across the State of Maine to Raise Money for Clean Water

Endurance athlete Kate Spotz took on the challenge to raise money for clean water in impoverished countries.

By **Faith Brar**

September 11, 2020

At 17 years old, I took a walking/running gym class because I thought it would be an easy A. Although, at the time, I wouldn't have called myself "active" or "athletic" by any stretch. I remember showing up to that class one day and being told I had to run a mile — eight laps around the school's track. TBH, that sounded like a massive undertaking.

After nearly sprinting around the track, I made it to the end. I was shocked; I had no idea my body was capable of doing that. I wanted — *needed* — to keep experiencing that feeling over and over again. (Related: The Truth About Runner's High)

In the years to come, endurance challenges became my life — and they went way beyond just running. In 2008, I became the first person to swim the 325-mile length of the Allegheny River. In 2010, I set the world record for being the youngest person to row solo across the Atlantic Ocean. In 2011, I biked 375 miles in 24 hours as part of the San Francisco Randonneurs 600K Fort Bragg Brevet. That year, I also completed the 3,000-mile bicycle relay for Race Across America. In 2014, I completed my first Ironman in Louisville and went on to finish three more in Texas, Chattanooga, and in Louisville again.

In the midst of it all, I also ran several marathons, including the Boston Marathon. But it wasn't until three years ago that I got into ultrarunning. In the span of one year, I ran three 100-mile races and realized my true passion lied in where my journey began: running. (Related: Everything You Need to Know About Marathon Training for Beginners)
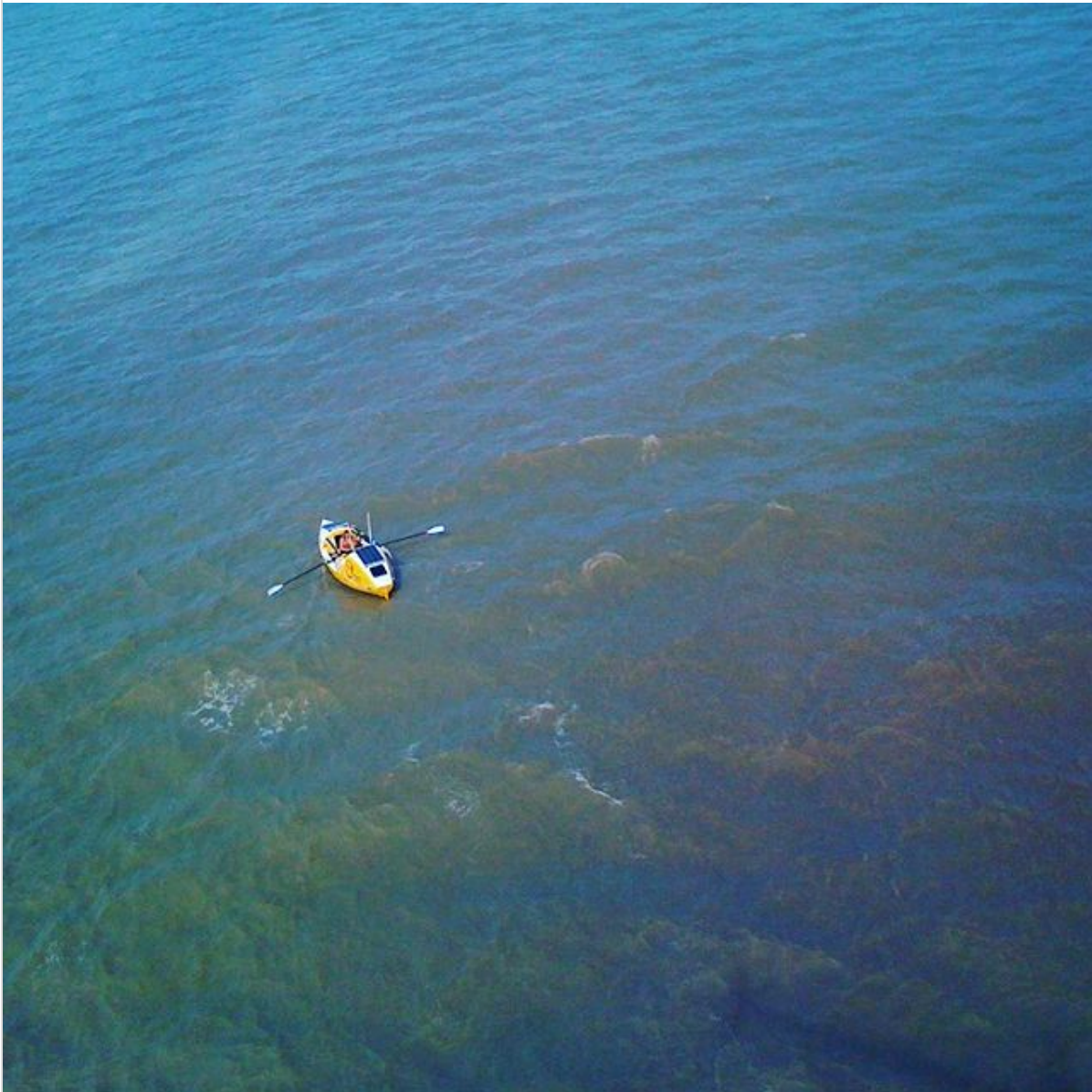
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Have you ever asked someone, "Who do you enjoy spending time with?" or "Who are your closest friends?" and the person responded by including themself?

Probably not.

I spent 70 days of my life alone at sea. No follow boat, no humans. As somebody who is *highly* introverted, I have found that spending time with myself is something that brings me clarity, comfort, & peace. Even if you are not an introvert, there are benefits that can be gained during times of solitude.
Innovation & creatively.
Focus & concentration.
Intentionality & productivity.

These can all be found when making friends with solitude.

While I'm certainly motivated by breaking records and striving for the impossible, I'm also inspired by the causes I get to support during these challenges. Throughout the years, I've mainly worked with organizations that help to provide clean water and sanitation for underserved communities — an initiative that benefits billions of people around the globe. Worldwide, an estimated 2.2 billion people lack access to a safe, clean water source, and roughly 4.2 billion people live without adequate sanitation services, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

In doing my part to help those suffering from the current water crisis, my adventures have taken me all across the world. But I've never had the opportunity to do something in my own backyard — that is, until now. (Related: These Inspiring Health and Fitness Charities Are Changing the World)

I recently moved to Maine and started toying with the idea of doing a long-distance run across the state to raise money for Life Water International, a non-profit organization that's helped more than 2 million people gain access to clean water and sanitation.

As I started to iron out the details, I realized that no one had ever run across the *entire* state of Maine before. After mapping out a few routes, the total distance came to somewhere between 130 and 140 miles. The numbers were daunting; I'd never run that far nonstop before.

But the fact that no one had *ever* done it kept gnawing at me. So, in February 2020, I decided to go for it.

How I Trained for the Run

I'm not a newbie when it comes to training for endurance challenges. I like to keep things pretty simple, so I decided to only run twice a week. The first run was designed to be a shakeout run, lasting 10-15 miles, and the second run was *long*, ranging 30-40 miles.

On the days I wasn't running, my goal was injury prevention. I don't know a lot of endurance runners who don't have either hip or knee issues. So, my strength training focused entirely on stability to avoid muscle imbalances. That meant lots of core work, plus one-legged stability exercises such as lunges, single-leg deadlifts, and single-leg glute bridges. These workout sessions were short, lasting around 30 minutes each, and they relied entirely on bodyweight. But since I was still running 60-ish miles a week, I only did strength training once or twice a week. The rest of the days, I focused on yoga, foam

rolling, and took barre classes to remain flexible and agile. (Related: 3 Things Everyone Gets Wrong About Recovery, According to an Exercise Physiologist)

34 likes

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First thing I want to do after running really, really far.

RECOVER so I can run really, really far again.

Getting pumped up, literally, for my next long run 🏃 with #normatec boots thanks to @StartingLine207.

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Come June (four months after I'd started training), I knew I needed to kick my routine up a notch with longer runs. I also needed to get used to running long distances self-supported, with minimal help, while staying fueled, hydrated, and safe. I scoured routes around New England and mapped one out across the entire state of New Hampshire. It was 61 miles — a manageable, yet challenging distance for me — and the fact that no woman had ever run across the state before was a thrill. I'd initially planned to do the run with a friend, but she had to bail last minute because of coronavirus restrictions. Since I was completely on my own, I bookmarked a couple of gas stations along the way where I could refill my water and use the restroom. (Related: Top 7 Ways to Stay Hydrated on Long-Distance Runs)

On June 27, when I toed the starting line for my run across New Hampshire, it felt like Christmas morning. I didn't know what to expect, but I knew I was excited.

A few miles into that run, I realized the terrain was more challenging than I'd imagined. The first 20-25 miles were mostly uphill, and there were definitely moments where *I just. wanted. it. to. be. over.* But even though the grade was steep, the route was beautiful. The scenery distracted me enough to keep moving forward and enjoy the experience.

I finished the run in 12 and a half hours with a running time of 11 hours — a time I was pleased with.

> **With each step forward, I'm propelled to a space of gratitude for what my body can do.**
>
> - KATIE SPOTZ

With New Hampshire behind me, I wanted to squeeze in one more long run before Maine. At this point, running across entire states had become almost routine to me. So, I set my eyes on conquering the state of Vermont — another feat no woman had completed before.

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 Grateful to have been able to run nonstop 73.85 miles across the Green Mountain State of VT starting from NH and finishing at the waterfront in downtown Burlington.

This was one big step closer to #Run4Water for @LifewaterInternational next month!

Thanks to @Garmin for keeping me on track, @newtonrunning for keeping my feet happy, and YOU the support, donations, and prayers.

See link in bio for run route and stats.

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Leading up to the Vermont run, I maintained my regular training routine, though I did take about two weeks off immediately after running New Hampshire. I set a Vermont run date for August 7, eyeing a 73.8-mile route. Given the distance, I really wanted someone to assist along the way, and my aunt was kind enough to help. Since Vermont was going to be my last run before Maine, I wanted to keep it as close to what the Maine run would feel like. I mapped the route so it was mostly on main roads, and on August 7, I woke up at 4 a.m. to start running.

Unlike New Hampshire, Vermont's terrain was essentially a false flat, so I didn't really notice the incline. What made it challenging, however, was the headwind, and the fact that there was hardly any shade; from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. it was 80 degrees. The main roads were also heavily trafficked, so I had to stay alert while I ran.

I wanted something to look forward to at the end of the run, so when I planned the route, I decided to end in Burlington, a city known for its quintessential New England charm. I spent the last few miles running into the sunset and over the water, which honestly couldn't have been more perfect. I finished in about 15 hours, with a run time of 13 hours and 9 minutes.

What Kept Me Going

For me, the hardest part of *any* run, regardless of total distance, is the first 4 miles. But since my training plan for Maine only included two runs a week, getting through those four-mile humps was much easier.

When I was marathon training, I ran five times a week, which was seriously exhausting — not just physically, but mentally, too. Running long distances several different times a week meant I rarely looked forward to conquering those long runs. The thrill of the challenge just wasn't there when I ran that often.

By cutting down the number of runs in my training for Maine, I found myself feeling more excited to train. Mentally, I became much more engaged; I was driven by the drama and adventure that comes with not just the act of running 30-60 miles nonstop, but also the uncertainty of whether your body can *actually* run that distance. (Related: How Mindful Running Can Help You Get Past Mental Roadblocks)

That said, there have been, and still are, so many moments when I want to quit. What pushes me past that is being able to see what happens *after* I doubt myself. With each step forward, I'm propelled to a space of gratitude for what my body can do. As long as my mind is there, I know my body will follow.

Back in my Ironman days, it wasn't so much about mentality and how I felt; it was more about how my body looked. Truth is, many people have told me that I don't *look* like someone who could do an Ironman or break records. That got into my head. Once, after signing up for a triathlon, I was placed in the plus-size category for weighing over 140

pounds. I obsessed over that fact and didn't acknowledge that it was my body that allowed me to be at that competition in the first place. (Related: Why You Should Start Thinking of Yourself As an Athlete Even If You Don't Look Like One)

> ❝ *Ultrarunning helped me learn that if you get out of your head, you get out of your own way.*
>
> - KATIE SPOTZ

It took me *years* to transition from focusing on numbers and measurements to mentality and accomplishment. That shift happened when I started ultrarunning. Because the races are so long, they're more about community than competition. You're not worried about speed. You're not worried about shaving off a few seconds. You're not worried about looks. It's more important to take care of yourself so you can keep moving forward. Coming to that realization has made being an endurance athlete so much more enjoyable. (Related: What Is Body Checking and When Is It a Problem?)

Ultrarunning has been a huge part of my own personal growth. I've learned to really appreciate and thank my body for what it can do instead of what it looks like. Ultrarunning helped me learn that if you get out of your head, you get out of your own way.

The Run Across Maine

I hardly slept the night before my run across Maine. Usually, I find that being nervous can actually be a good thing; it's an awesome energy to channel. Plus, this run had been on my mind since February, so by September, I was pumped to finally do it.

I hit the starting line when it was still pitch black at 5:07 a.m. I had my headlamp on, along with my reflective gear, and I planned to meet a friend to refuel about every 5 miles. But what started as sheer excitement, quickly turned into fear at mile two. The last time I'd run was a week prior, so my body felt way stiffer than I'd anticipated, and my knee was acting up. About an hour in, I began asking myself, "Why the heck did I sign up for this?" Thankfully, though, by mile 15, I started feeling warmed up and as close to normal as I could feel. (Related: How I Run 100-Mile Races with Type 1 Diabetes)

I hit most of the elevation from miles 30-40. It was hard. Physical strain aside, there was nothing I could draw mental strength from because I wasn't even close to the end, yet I'd already come so far.

What *did* help, however, was remembering why I was doing this in the first place. I'd just run some 30 miles, and not once did I have to worry about having access to clean water. Whatever temporary pain I was enduring, it wasn't a match for that hardship — one that billions of people face every single day. So, instead of focusing on how challenging the run felt, I slowly started to accept and feel at peace with it. After all, it was never meant to be easy. (Related: 10 Insane Ultramarathons That Are Worth the Hurt)

Around miles 90 and 100, I hit some hills again. My back started spasming, and my ankles started hurting. It was in the middle of the night, and fortunately, my friend who was crewing the race for me was able to bandage me up. (Related: These Socks Completely Eliminated My Painful Post-Run Blisters)

At that point, my body was pretty banged up. But I felt reassured by the fact that, even if my ankles couldn't pound the pavement anymore and I had to walk the rest of the route, I knew I could make it to the end.

By mile 130, I was running more with my arms than my legs — moving at about a 14-minute pace. It was rough. My body had had enough, and my mind was reaching its wits' end, too. I was *so* close to the end, but 7 miles started feeling like a lifetime of distance. Every inch of my body ached, I was drenched in sweat, and no matter what I did, I didn't feel better. (Related: This Is the Grueling Reality of What It's Like to Run an Ultramarathon)

At mile 132, my friend informed me that her tracker was calibrating the route to be 140 miles instead of 137 miles. That's when I had my first and only meltdown. I don't quite remember what I said, but expletives were dropped, and I was ripping grass and throwing it while screaming "no no no" into the air. The tantrum was necessary, and the only thing that kept me going was knowing that my friends and supporters were joining me for the last 5K.

138 likes
katiespotz

WE DID IT! 🏃‍♀️

137-miles non stop across Maine and more than $17,000 raised for Lifewater International.

That was the hardest endurance challenge I have ever done in my life, and the support at the end pushed me through when I wanted to quit.

Thank YOU for your support, prayers, positive messages, and to everyone who joined me in the final miles of the journey.

Thanks to @NewtonRunning, @GarminFitness, @Spillovermaine, @startlingline207, and @Athleta for making this journey possible.

With tears in my eyes as I approached the last 3 miles of the run, I saw a small herd of people running toward me, cheering. My pain started to fade, and I even managed to smile. Their cheers drowned out my doubts, and I finally saw the end.

Somehow, I was able to pick up the pace, finishing the run at the end of a pier looking out onto the ocean. I slipped off my shoes and jumped into the cold water, clothes and all. As I came up for air, I couldn't believe what I'd done. I remember thinking that, despite all the doubts and all the pain, that moment was totally worth it.

The night I finished running across Maine, I slept for 12 hours straight. Because of the pure and utter exhaustion, I barely felt the pain through the night. But the next day, I paid the doctor a visit to make sure I didn't sustain any serious injuries.

Even though I didn't have any broken bones, I was told I had developed rhabdomyolysis, also known as rhabdo. The rare condition is essentially an extreme form of muscle injury. It causes muscle fibers to die, releasing myoglobin, a protein, into the bloodstream. If you have too much myoglobin in your blood, it can cause kidney damage, which can lead to death. Many endurance athletes develop rhabdo because of the stress that their level of activity puts on the body. (Related: How I Learned to Appreciate My Body After Countless Running Injuries)

For now, the treatment plan is to flush my system with fluids and go to physical therapy — that is, after I take *several* weeks to recover.

After completing my run across Maine, I also developed edema in my ankles, aka swelling caused by excess fluid trapped in the body's tissues. Edema usually goes away on its own, so for now, the best thing I can do is elevate my legs to process those extra fluids.

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Being too lazy can be dangerous. So dangerous, you can get edema (swelling) in the feet and legs due to inactivity. Is it just me, or is it ironic to be diagnosed with edema after 33 hours of strenuous activity!

Just a quick post to let you know how recovery is coming along. Yesterday, I was able to get a medical evaluation to make sure I didn't have any stress fractures with my ankles being SO swollen and SO bruised up but, thankfully, with rest, ice, and elevation, they

should nicely heal in time.

How amazing that our bodies can heal without us needing to do anything but wait for the recovery to happen and rebuilding to occur!

Huge shout-out & thanks for encouraging me in person and virtually. It means the world to know I am never alone on these journeys, and that I can share the journey with you!

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Looking Ahead

Realistically, I probably won't run for at least six weeks — and I don't think I'll feel 100 percent for at least a month, if not longer. But even though my body doesn't feel great, my heart is filled with gratitude for both my body and the support I've had from loved ones along the way. (Related: How to Stay Fit — and Sane — When You're Injured)

So far, I've been able to raise over $18,000 for Life Water International, leaving me just short of my $20,000 goal (you can still donate here if you so choose). So, for me, the pain was worth it.

Sometimes I look back and think of my 17-year-old self, and the disbelief I felt when I finished running my first mile. Countless runs and endurance challenges later, I still feel like every mile is worthy of that reaction. It's the curiosity and celebration of those little accomplishments that keep me wondering: Can I take another step? Can I swim another stroke? Can I turn the pedal one more time?

If nothing else, I hope my story inspires people to channel their own extraordinary abilities. Remember: Each and every one of us is capable of making a difference in this world.