

Triumph & Tragedy

Last July, Jeremy Humphrey, Kent State '98, woke in the middle of the night to tumultuous thunderstorms outside his window. Waiting for the storm to pass, his wife checked Facebook and discovered a woman had gone missing in the nearby wilderness. Drawn to the obligation to help someone in need, Humphrey set out on foot to run the forest until he found the woman and her dog. The victim's name will not be used to respect her privacy.

BY LILLY STEGER

Mccall, Idaho is a small town of only 3,350 people nestled in the state's Payette National Forest. It's idyllic and a hub for people who love to hike, run, ski, or climb – part of what drew Jeremy Humphrey, *Kent State '98*, to it in the first place.

Humphrey is an ultra-runner, a high-intensity footrace that dwarfs a marathon's standard 26.2 miles. Ultra-marathons – or “ultras” – can be upwards of 150 miles and run consecutively to the finish line. These races are all-terrain and often take place in harsh conditions to elevate the competition, such as the Hardrock 100 across the Rocky Mountains, or the Badwater Ultra, the 135-mile July race across California's Death Valley. Then there's the 103-mile Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc across the Alps, or the 153-mile Spartathlon from Athens to Sparta.

For ultrarunners, a marathon is warmup.

An Ohio native, Humphrey grew up running. At age five he was already extraordinarily competitive and had his sights set on the Olympics. His father, a steel mill worker, rearranged his own life for his son's training and saw the Olympics as a ticket to a better life. He pushed his son, applying pressure to run faster, train harder, and win. “He tried to hold me to a standard I professed I wanted, but you can't hold the words of a child to an Olympic standard,” Humphrey shared.

Dedicated and talented, Humphrey ran himself to burnout. The years of high pressure training wore him down, as did injuries. Short-term, he endured a stress fracture that landed him in a cast for months, derailing his training, and long-term he battled exercise-induced migraines. “Becoming a champion at a young age is damaging, at age 12 I basically quit,” he said. He didn't compete in high school or college and the shelved potential strained his relationship with his father. He continued to run in private, enjoying the solitude and closeness with nature that it brought.

In college, Humphrey joined the Beta Mu chapter. He was drawn towards the older members of the chapter, the ones who had life experience he could rely on. “It was good to be around people who had been living their life for a while, not kids straight out of high school,” he said. “I'm kind of a hermit by nature, I spent a lot of time alone running. It was a really good influence for me to be around positive role models that kept me social.”

Humphrey moved to Colorado and passed the bar. While practicing law, he discovered a love for mountain climbing and learned running was the quickest way to get from peak to peak. Through

climbing and a mutual love of the mountains, he repaired his relationship with his father. “That brought us back together,” he said. “We wouldn't be competitive running, but we were pushing our standards as climbers.”

Then, in 2005 he lost his father to a climbing accident on Mount McKinley. “He passed as I was becoming very good at climbing, it was a big piece of my running journey,” Humphrey said. Running and hiking brought them back together, then he was gone. “The gift he showed me was I could marry the two – you can run in the mountains,” he said. “There's this whole other sport.”

“More and more, I began to value endurance and moving fast, and linking lots and lots of mountains together and using running to do that,” he explained. “One day I was bored at work and I signed up for the Leadville 100. I wasn't running consistently; I was built like a climber. But I finished in 28 hours or something.”

This was the start of the transition. Humphrey and his wife, Brandi, moved to McCall and he walked away from his career as a lawyer to build a life as a professional athlete. Now, he runs competitively again (and often wins), coaches other runners, organizes races, and manages sponsors. He trains hard for these races and spends more time than ever running in the mountains. “It's my whole existence and it has been since I dived back in,” he said.

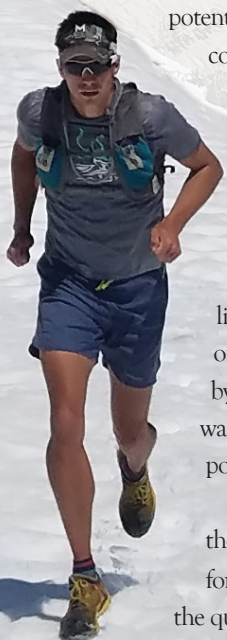
On July 9th, Humphrey woke in the dark to a howling thunderstorm and hail pelting the window. As he lay awake waiting for the storm to pass, his wife, Brandi, checked Facebook and saw the Sheriff's Department posted a notice about a missing woman. There was no indication of how long she has been missing or under what circumstances. All they knew was the trailhead where she left her car.

Humphrey knew the spot well. He runs the area frequently and organizes the IMTUF100 (Idaho Mountain Trail Ultra Festival) through the region. “I've climbed all the peaks above that basin and looked down on it from above. I've seen from a perspective most people haven't,” he said.

He decided to find her.

“I just had this really strange feeling,” he said. “I could see the whole day play out in an instant. I absolutely knew I was going to find her.” As someone who has spent a lot of time alone in the wilderness, Humphrey is more in-tune with the wild than most. “I have a lot of intuition and sense about how things happen in the mountains,” he said. “I could just see the scenario inside her head even though I had no idea who she was.”

He threw some energy bars, powdered drink mix, and some binoculars in a small pack. “I told Brandi, ‘I'm going to find her’ and I was out the door.”





McCall, Idaho (PHOTO CREDIT: BOB GOREN)

The plan was already to go on a long run that day. Although the races had been canceled due to COVID-19, Humphrey was training by seeing how far he could push himself. “I figured it was going to be a 40-mile day. The week before I had done a 50, so it’s not unheard of,” he said.

Setting out, he knew very little. He knew that the woman liked to hike to lakes and that a search and rescue crew had started at the area near her car, the north end of the trailhead. They were doing good work, but they have their disadvantages. “They’re heavy, they work in teams,” Humphrey explained. They moved slower and cover less ground, but Humphrey is quick. He could eliminate more terrain.

He started at the south end and ran north 20 miles, growing ever more-detail oriented as he approached the trailhead with her car. “Eventually I get within five-six miles and I know this is the real hot zone,” he said. “I wasn’t far from where I thought the search and rescue teams would have gotten to, but they rarely search off-trail.”

As he approached an area called Box Lake, he tried to get into her head. “It was COVID time, so I could anticipate her not wanting to go to the popular spots. I started to envision scenarios someone would take to get to a lesser known lake,” he explained.

At Box Lake he found nothing. Running around 7,000-ft elevation, he was already at a high altitude, but he needed a birds-eye view. “At that point I realized I needed to get higher,” he said. Humphrey scrambled up Rain Peak, an 8,500-ft granite-face mountain, to scour the area. He searched for tents, smoke – anything that would indicate where she was. But even with his binoculars, he couldn’t see anything. “The day was grinding on me, but I had a talk with myself to just go around one more time,” he said. “I knew that if I kept going it would work out.” He decided to check one more lake before making the 20-mile run back to his truck.

Humphrey moved down the mountain, shouting. “I’m yelling her name – calling and pausing, taking time to look instead of just moving,” he explained. The land he was covering was overtaken with brambles and bushes. “The lower you go, the denser the foliage

is, it’s almost jungle-like. The thickets are big and there was a fire there a long time ago, so there’s dead timber everywhere.” Humphrey drops another 100 feet still calling her name – then he hears a woman’s voice.

“I start sprinting, bounding full of adrenaline down towards her through all these brambles, tearing myself up,” he said. “I couldn’t understand what she said, but I heard it and went in that direction.” First he spotted a dog, then he spotted a single woman.

“I get 20 yards away and ask if it’s her, and she says yes,” he said.

He approached the woman and learned she had been lost for a week and hadn’t had food in four days. Destroyed by sunburn with deep red bubbles covering her skin, the woman had no shade under the telephone-like pine trees in the relentless July sun. But her hydration was the immediate problem. She was surviving off water from a swampy, pothole pond nearby. She was filtering it, but it was still warm and brown.

For the malnourished, refeeding is a critical concern. A sudden onset of food or water to the system can induce an extreme reaction, even death. Cognizant of this, Humphrey was cautious. “I took a little envelop of 200-calorie sports drink and mixed it into some water,” he said. “I laid out the energy bars I had in my pack and said, ‘Don’t touch this until you finish the whole quart.’”

As she drank, Humphrey wandered around the basin searching for cell reception. A hundred yards away he got a bar but continued to shout back instructions. “I kept yelling at her to do stuff, I was really trying to pump her up. In my mind, we were going to have to walk out over this impossible foliage. I didn’t want her to have to spend another night out there,” he said.

When he got dispatch on the phone, 911 helped triangulate a call and arrange for a helicopter. There was one nearby, but they had no place to land. “I seriously doubted they were going to be able to land,” he said. “I thought they were going to have to do a crazy long-ling rig to get her up and then they had too much fuel, so they circle and circle to burn it off.”

It took thirty minutes of circling to burn enough fuel and find a place to land. They finally found a spot on a small peninsula of land wedged between massive trees and a cliff.

Humphrey traded the woman his empty backpack for her 60-lb hiking pack, and the trio bushwhacked through the foliage to the helicopter where the pilots helped her and her dog climb in. They offered a spot to Humphrey, but he refused it. “I’m pretty big on self-sufficiency, if I can finish I’m going to. I don’t want to be rescued, I want to exit on my own power,” he said.

Moments before take-off, they remembered the car and she gave Humphrey the keys. It’s a long drive from McCall to the trailhead,

so Humphrey drove the car back to town. “The north trail head was much closer and an easier end to my day,” he said.

The woman was flown to the McCall fire department where she elected not to go to the hospital. They checked her for injuries, but at the end of the day she returned home to sleep in her own bed.

Humphrey did not see or speak to the woman until the day before his interview with Phi Tau. “I was on my run and there she was. I could have missed her so easily. We had a lot to talk about and it was neat to do it in person,” he said. The woman and her dog recovered fine and were back to enjoying nature.

The woman was an experienced hiker. She had been exploring those woods for years, but once you get turned around, Humphrey explained, maps don’t help. “You walk in circles and all your landmarks start to look unfamiliar. You get dazed and your brain doesn’t work,” he said. After a few hours her phone had died, and she was left wandering to find her way home.

When the story broke, Humphrey didn’t think it would be a big deal. “I thought it would just be a local thing, but the requests kept coming,” he said. He gave an interview to *Runners World* and *Backpacker Magazine* – publications where he thought his message about outdoor safety would be heard. Humphrey wanted to share the collective knowledge of how people get lost and what it means to find someone and get them help.

But the story struck a nerve. He was asked to go on national talk shows, to share the experience with a huge audience. He declined. At the time it was disorienting, but now he understands why it caught traction. “Taking a step back now, all the news was terrible,” he said. “There was nothing good happening that anyone knew about. I kind of warmed to it, I thought it would be a little bright spot in the triumph and tragedy of 2020.”

For Humphrey, it was validating that all of his training and dedication to this sport could help someone. “Running usually doesn’t feed the hungry or cure cancer, but it was good to do something useful for someone,” he said. “I used the skills I selfishly honed over a lifetime and ultimately it felt good that all that self-interest and self-pursuit benefited someone.”

His decision to be a Good Samaritan was organic. For a man who lost his father to the mountains, he couldn’t ignore the opportunity to help. “You see someone in immediate peril, most people are going to do something, you’re almost not human to see someone in need and not want to help them,” he said. “But on a bigger scale, I want to do my part. I want to play a good role in society and foster better relations with my fellow citizens.”

Care and empathy are what bind us together. “If you don’t care about your fellow humans, our society crumbles and we have nothing. That’s what being a Good Samaritan means to me,” Humphrey said. Being a good Samaritan is an obligation to help someone in need, and for Humphrey, when he woke up planning on a run, he seized an opportunity he couldn’t ignore.

Jeremy and Brandi welcomed their first baby this spring. Humphrey is organizing races for 2021 and training for a 100 mile race in Colorado this July.

