



Sam Korsmoe (pictured left with his son Colter on the Madison Marathon route) is an American who has lived and worked in Vietnam for more than 15 years. He is the founder of the **Saigon Writers Club**, author of two books, and is nearing completion of a third book on the future of Vietnam.

Breaking Three started out as a sports story because I've been an athletic race director for 15 years and have seen a lot of athletes overcome personal challenges. I've always wanted to write about that. So it started out as a sports short story, but quite quickly became a family story and then really a father-son love story. I'm not the Dad in this story and my son is definitely not the son portrayed, but these two characters represent so many people in this world who are searching for more meaning in their lives or worried about the lack of meaning in the life of someone they love. Sports are a powerful tool to make that happen. But love and family is much more powerful especially when faced with a daunting challenge.

Breaking Three

by

Sam Korsmoe

On top of a high and long mountain range in Southwest Montana, there is a road that should not be there. It's not a road to nowhere. It's actually a road that leads to several destinations, but there are more direct routes on better roads that lead to those same destinations. It's called the Gravelly Range Road and for nearly 25 miles it averages around 9,000 feet in elevation, a near perfect distance to plot out a route for a marathon. Back in 2008, a guy named Sam did exactly that. He called it the Madison Marathon and promoted it as '*The Highest Road Marathon on Planet Earth.*'

The boastful claim was not entirely bullshit. There were higher elevation marathons but they were on trails not roads like the Madison. Sam was the RD (race director) and his job was to manage the race and deal with all the shit that happens when tens or hundreds or thousands of people tell themselves that they want to run a marathon. It used to be tens and hundreds of runners, but beginning in the year 2000 the number of new marathon races around the world exploded. Millions of people convinced themselves that they could finish a 26.2 mile race and in general most of them could even if it meant a lot of walking. They would survive the first marathon and be curious about doing a second and then a third and soon enough they were hooked. The whole world, it seemed, had gone mad for marathons.

When Chase Davis first came onto the marathon scene around 2015, the sport was on fire worldwide. He had run cross country in a Class C high school in Montana and he was good. At the state finals, he podiumed three out of four years and was the state champion as a junior and senior. This caught some people's attention and he was offered and accepted a scholarship to run cross country for a D2 college in Ohio. That was back in 2004. With a full scholarship in hand, he chose accounting as his major because it was a sensible and job-secure industry, he graduated in four years, got a job with a big company in the Midwest, and within five years his life was basically over.

It was sad, but really kind of predictable. Chase had Montana in him so he could have mentioned that and immediately people would have been drawn to him. Unlike most Montanans, he had an authentic Montana story to tell because he actually grew up on a cow/calf ranch. He really did ride horses, brand cows, and do all that cowboy shit that outsiders think about when they meet someone who grew up on a ranch in Montana. He was a good runner, too. Winning the Class C state championship back to back is noteworthy because there are a lot of schools in that division. Though they are all small in terms of enrollment, each school would send runners to the state cross country finals. This meant there were a few hundred runners competing at the state finals, compared to less than 100 for the upper division schools. For cross country among the Class C schools of Montana, Chase was on top.

Even with this background, Chase could still not tell the Montana story. He never knew what to say about growing up on a ranch. He was neither handsome nor ugly and had the kind of face

and body that was instantly forgettable. If you met him on the street and asked for directions, he would patiently and with great detail explain how to get where you wanted to go but if you tried to recall what that guy who helped you out looked like you would draw a blank. It was like he didn't exist.

College made it worse. He never rose beyond the middle ranks of the runners at his university in Ohio. He was good enough to keep his scholarship, but he rarely finished high enough to earn points for his team. His teammates called him Class C Boy once they learned what that meant in Montana. Most of them came from big cities like Cleveland and Cincinnati or cookie cutter suburbs near big Midwestern metro areas. For them, Montana was full of Cowboys and Indians with the occasional bear mauling. At the beginning, they would tease him that he had traveled to 'The Big Time' from his Montana ranch. It was all in good fun because they really wanted to hear some cool stories about Montana. Chase would accept the joking with a good nature, but the joking soon stopped because it never caused a reaction or made a difference one way or another. Chase had no stories to tell. It was like playing a joke on a person who had left the room hours before. It was not funny, fun to do, or even satisfyingly malicious for those who liked to bully others. So like everyone else who had ever been around Chase Davis, his college teammates moved on with their lives and on occasion would notice their Class C Montana teammate who always showed up for practice, always helped out when asked, and had never left the room, but no one could ever remember him being in the room in the first place.

It was his Dad who told him about the Madison Marathon. The family didn't ranch in Southwest Montana (their spread was south of Billings), but he knew ranchers who leased grass in the area. He was intrigued by '*the highest*' claim and thought it was kind of cool that someone had built a marathon on top of the Gravelly Range. The Dad had always been proud of his son's running ability, but like so goddamn many rural Montanan men he had a hell of a time telling him that. This was a guy who would pull a calf out of a cow in trouble and then start crying when the calf wobbled over to suckle its mom for the first time. It wasn't that he didn't have emotions inside of him, he did. But for some reason, he didn't know how to tell his own son that he was proud of him. Sadly, it was a Montana thing and a lingering trait of the bullshit myth of the stoic, square-jawed cowboy who settled the West.

The Dad knew his son was dying in his Midwest accounting job. He wasn't surprised that Chase had trouble fitting in at his university in Ohio. He also knew that it probably wouldn't be much different if he got an accounting job in Billings or even if he outright moved back home to take over the ranch. He knew all that, but he didn't know what to do until he learned about a challenge that the Madison Marathon RD had announced for the 2019 race.

On all the available media possible and directly to every running group and club that he could find, Sam posted a challenge to runners across the United States and abroad: Come to the Madison Marathon and attempt to run a sub-three marathon on the route on top of the Gravelly Range. The first runner to cross with a sub-three hour time would receive a \$2,620 cash prize and accomplish something that even the most experienced marathon runners believed was impossible. Break three hours at 9,000 feet.

Chase had never really stopped running after college. He probably ran 15 to 20 miles a week, but he never paid attention to either his mileage or times. He just ran because he had nothing else to

do. But he did know that he was dying inside and the ranch kid in him couldn't ignore that issue. In some ways, it was not really any different than ignoring a broken line of fence or helping a lost calf find his mom. Without tools or knowledge or even a plan, Montana ranch kids did whatever had to be done to figure shit out. To *get 'er done* as they would say.

But fixing what Chase had wrong wasn't easy. He had tried different ways to connect to others. He went on a handful of online dates. He joined a church though he was not at all religious. He even took an Italian cooking class hoping that might spark a connection with someone, anyone. It didn't have to be a girl or any kind of romance. It was during these trial and error attempts that he signed up for a local 5K race organized by his new church and backed by the city's park and recreation department. He was one of several hundred runners and was amazed at not just the number of runners but the huge diversity of them. There were little kids, teenagers, fit adults, a ton of unfit-looking adults, and a lot of old people. Some runners were quite fat and there were a bunch of women pushing baby strollers. Hardly anyone looked like they could run fast.

In that first race, Chase probably could have won, but he held back. The front runners were high school and college kids along with several running jock types who ran all the time and he enjoyed watching them run. He hadn't observed other runners in a long time. He broke 20 minutes without too much of an effort and that placed him in the top 10.

Running became his thing. He got good again at the 5K and won a few races in Ohio and even traveled to Chicago for a huge Race For The Cure 5K where he finished in the top 50 among something like 20,000 runners. He upped his game to 10Ks and then quite quickly moved on up to the marathon distance. That seemed to fit him. By his 10th marathon, he was running in the low threes. On his 20th marathon, he broke three with a 2:56:20 at the US Airforce Marathon in Dayton, Ohio. Later that night, his phone rang.

"Chase? It's Dad. Did you break three at the Air Force race?"

"Yeah. How did you know that?"

"It's already online. Hey, good job. How'd it go? I mean that's a big race, isn't it? I saw that the winner was some guy from Kenya."

"I know. I saw him run over the first half or so. It was amazing to watch him run."

Though they probably spoke for a few minutes a couple times a month, this conversation lasted over an hour. Chase replayed the entire race and his Dad interrupted frequently with comments, questions, and laughter. It was one of the best phone calls they had in a very long time. For the first time in a long time, they were connecting.

Like most people, they both knew of the Kenyans reputation for winning these kinds of big events, but it was something that they usually saw on TV or maybe on YouTube. Never in person. When he learned of his son's interest in the marathon, Chase's Dad dug deeper and researched the origins of the race. He wanted to know how someone got good. Genetics? Training? Living at high altitude? Nutrition or gear? Supposedly one of the reasons that the Kenyans were so good was that the best ones lived and trained at a place called the Rift Valley which had an elevation of around 7,000 feet. That helped his research, but Mexico City's elevation was over 7,300 and La Paz in Bolivia is over 11,000. As far as he could learn, there weren't that many world class Mexican or Bolivian marathoners, or at least not like in Kenya.

For Chase's Dad, it was a new thing to get into. Ranch life on a cow/calf spread is a series of intense workouts such as calving, branding, weaning, and haying mixed in with long stretches of not a lot to do. Each workout job had a beginning and an end. Calving, for example, was done pretty much within a two week period in February. Branding took place over a couple days in June. Haying a couple times during the summer. Aside from these specific jobs, the rest of ranch life was limited to moving cows to new grass in the summer and feeding them hay in the winter while praying for either rain, sun, good calf prices, and avoiding predators or a breakout of some kind of disease. Though he never shared this with many people, Chase's Dad hoped that this marathon thing would keep his son from dying.

Chase kept racing. Over the next couple years after breaking three, he was able to find a marathon nearly every other weekend somewhere in the Midwest. He frequently had to drive up to 10 hours, but that wasn't an issue. He had nothing else to do and he was making some friends among the community of marathon runners who also traveled a lot for races. He got his PR with his first win at the Ann Arbor Marathon in Michigan. He ran a 2:30:15 and beat some really strong runners from the University of Michigan. The race didn't offer prize money for the winners so it wasn't on the radar scope of the Kenyans, but it was hugely competitive. One of the Mich runners, an Olympic hopeful, was supposed to win, but Chase out-kicked him over the last 400 meters upon entering the finishing stretch at the Big House on the UM campus. There weren't that many people in a stadium that held around 110,000, but the few thousand that were there were screaming their heads off over that single last lap around the track as Chase ran head to head and stride for stride with the Mich runner and then out-leaned him at the finish line.

"Dad, Dad! I won Ann Arbor," Chase shouted into his phone 20 minutes after the race.

"What? You won! Goddamn it! That's great. Congratulations!"

"Thanks. There were no Kenyans here, but I ran down a University of Michigan runner in the final couple hundred yards right here in the Big House. It was amazing."

"Hang on. Shelby's here and wants to talk to you."

"You fuckin' won?? Really?" screamed Chase's sister Shelby who lived and worked in Billings. Shelby was two years older than Chase and had also been quite a good athlete in high school. She was a four-year starter at basketball and volleyball, but it was in rodeo where she really shone. She was a barrel racer and earned a scholarship to rodeo with a university in Texas, but ended up leaving after two years. She missed Montana too much and her horse, Sundance, was showing her age. Rather than train with another horse in Texas, she figured it was as good a time as any to retire from rodeo and return home. She later completed a nursing degree at Montana State University and began working at a hospital in Billings.

"Yep. I got a PR too. I ran a 2:30 something. Goddamn it, Shelby. I was on fire the whole way," said Chase.

"That's so fucking great, so fucking great," said Shelby with her voice breaking and tears streaming down her cheeks. "I'm very proud of you little brother."

Of course, Shelby knew that her brother was dying and she knew why. She had always seen it. They were both successful athletes and came from a strong family, but their lives turned out so differently. Shelby had a string of boyfriends and pretty much all of them were good guys. A

few years after finishing her nursing degree, she met a PT guy named Reno who worked at one of the orthopedic clinics in Billings. They hit it off and got married three years later. Two years after that, they had the first of what became two children and they lived an idyllic Montana life. They had good medical careers, a bit of money to spend since they were frugal, a ranch to visit whenever they wanted, and all of Montana for the family to play in. Shelby and Reno spoke about Chase often. They were both worried and were hopeful that this marathon thing could turn things around.

Shelby found out about the Madison Marathon challenge and told her Dad. They were close and spoke to each other at least a couple times per week. Both her Mom and her Dad would visit Shelby and Reno in Billings once a month to see the grandkids. Inevitably, they would end up talking about Chase and where his life was going. Shelby suggested, and her Dad immediately agreed, that they should put the pressure on Chase to train and go for the sub-three on the Madison route. Reno had done some elk hunting on the Gravelly Range and knew it fairly well. He had driven and walked on the Gravelly Range Road and was astonished to learn that a marathon had been launched on such a remote and high altitude road.

“It’s weird because I can’t figure out why that road is even there. It basically runs along the top of the entire range. It doesn’t go up and over the range like most roads do. I think one of the Ennis ranches runs cattle up there and there’s also a lot of sheep, but that’s it really. It’s beautiful though with amazing views and tons of wildlife. God, you can see 100 miles on clear days,” Reno told the family.

When Chase’s Dad called him to tell him about the challenge, Chase said he had just learned about it. One of his new marathon friends who knew Chase was originally from Montana had told him about the Madison Marathon and the three-hour challenge with the big cash prize. The two of them also met another chronic marathoner who had actually run the Madison in 2012. He got his PW there and talked at length about the incredibly long uphill, the longest was a three-mile stretch from mile two to five and the entire section was around 9,400 feet. He talked about the incredible views. Within the first half hour, he no longer cared about his pace, time, or anything else that he normally paid attention to during a race. He just enjoyed the views. He admitted that he was surprised he got a PW (a 5:31:10) because he never walked at all and was in great shape at the time.

“I’d give my left testicle to go back there again,” he told them. “Goddamn, it was a beautiful route.”

Chase surfed the website of the Madison Marathon and learned it was actually just one of the races in a series called the Greater Yellowstone Adventure Series. Its tag line was ‘*These Ain’t No Pansy Ass City Races*’ which Chase immediately fell in love with. He found Sam’s contact details and sent him an email.

Sunday, February 11, 2019 10:45 PM

Chase Davis <cdavis@.....>

Re: Madison Marathon Challenge

To: Sam, RD Greater Yellowstone Adventure Series <sam@.....>

Dear Sam,

Hello from Ohio. My name is Chase Davis and I'm originally from Montana. My parents have a cattle ranch near Fromberg which is south of Billings. That's where I grew up.

I'm writing to ask you about some kind of challenge that you're putting on for this year's Madison Marathon. My Dad and sister told me about it and I'm wondering exactly what it's all about. A sub-three time? Can you tell me more?

I hope to hear from you soon.

With best regards,

Chase Davis

* * *

Monday, February 12, 2019 8:52 AM

Sam, RD Greater Yellowstone Adventure Series <sam@.....>

Re: Madison Marathon Challenge

To: Chase Davis <cdavis@.....>

Hi Chase,

Thanks for writing.

Fromberg? I know that place. They play Six Man football there. I actually watched a game a few years ago because I was working on a piece about small Montana towns.

So about the challenge. It's simple really. The first runner across the Madison Marathon finish line with a sub-three time wins \$2,610. That's 100 bucks a mile. The current course record is a 3:02:21 and it was set a few years ago by an NCAA distance runner from Colorado State. Since then, no one has really come close. The elevation totally kicks everyone's ass and the hills are really long, like a three mile uphill followed by a one mile downhill (more like a downhill grade than a real downhill) followed by a real uphill of another couple miles. It's like that pretty much the entire route, especially on the back half.

Is this something you're interested in? Are you at that level? It would be kinda cool if a Montanan did it. I'm half expecting a foreigner to come and try though I'm not sure if \$2,610 is enough to pull in the real elites. We'll see I guess.

Let me know your questions and I'll do my best to answer.

Cheers,

Sam

* * *

Monday, February 12, 2019 9:15 AM

Chase Davis <cdavis@.....>

Re: Madison Marathon Challenge

To: Sam, RD Greater Yellowstone Adventure Series <sam@.....>

Hey Sam,

Thanks for the quick response. So a 3:02 is the course record? That's interesting because you've been going for more than 10 years and yet no one has broken three. I would have thought that someone would have done it already.

I don't know the Gravelly area, but my brother-in-law has hunted elk up there and he says it's beautiful. I also don't know if I'm really at that level. I've done around 65 marathons so far and my PR is a 2:30. My last 10 or so were sub threes so I guess it's possible. I don't know though. I've been living in the Midwest for several years now and not at all used to high elevations anymore. We used to go camping up in the Beartooths and one summer I cycled the Beartooth highway between Red Lodge and Yellowstone.

Anyway, thanks for putting on these races. It's cool that you have a whole series for the Yellowstone. I also love the *these ain't no pansy ass* catchphrase.

Thanks

Chase

* * *

Monday, February 12, 2019 10:10 AM

Sam, RD Greater Yellowstone Adventure Series <sam@.....>

Re: Madison Marathon Challenge

To: Chase Davis <cdavis@.....>

Hi Chase,

Yep. The course record is a 3:02.

If you're a 2:30 guy, I think you would have a shot. I tell 'normal runners' to add an hour to their regular time to account for the elevation and hills. For the good runners, I would say to add around 30 to 45 minutes so you're in the ball park.

Worthy challenge, no?

Sam

By the way, I love the Beartooth Highway. I've traveled over it at least a dozen times. I think it's one of the coolest places on earth.

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Shelby and Chase's Dad tagged team in their efforts to get Chase to commit. The Dad upped his phone calls to a couple times a week. Shelby would text, email, Facetime, and whatever else to get her little brother to, in her words (words which no one in the family ever figured out why she used so much), "just fucking try. I mean, shit, what do you have to lose?" Reno sent Chase long and detailed emails about the Gravelly Range, the road, terrain, and how the elevation impacted him during elk hunting season. It became a family push and Chase basically gave up with his excuses. He had a lot of time off accrued so that wasn't an issue. Nor was money for things like plane fare and travel costs. However, there was something about taking on this kind of challenge that he couldn't quite put his finger on. Too much of the unknown maybe.

Regardless of the reason for any hesitancy, it didn't hold because Chase signed up for the 2019 Madison Marathon the very same day that online signup opened on March 1. He then sent an email to Sam to say that he was going to train for the sub-three challenge.

Chase wasn't the only one.

Sam's pitch to any and every running club he could find went viral. He received a bunch of emails from elites and coaches asking for sponsorship, travel expenses, and accommodation "befitting a professional" runner. He thanked them for their interest, but said no such funds were available. He also got quite a few queries from past champions asking how the times had been since they won their race and if there was anything different about the route. There were other emails cautiously asking how feasible it was that someone could really run a sub-three at such an elevation.

There were two runners that stood out. Jimmy Rhoades, a two-time winner of the Missoula Marathon, wrote to Sam saying he was going to go for it. Sam didn't know his PR but he won Missoula in 2013 with a 2:26:40. The other guy was Elliot Weise who was from Flagstaff Arizona, a town in the mountains near the Grand Canyon that was over 7,000 feet in elevation. Weise raced a lot and he won a lot. He had an insane number of outright wins among an even more insane number of marathons that he completed all across the USA. His PR was a 2:27 among the 250 plus marathons he had run so far.

There was also a female runner named Darby Klein who signed up on opening day and caught Sam's attention because the name was somehow familiar. He might have seen her name on one of the many Facebook pages and groups about marathon running. One of Sam's contacts later told him that she had competed in the US Olympic trials in 2008. Sam couldn't confirm that but there was a Darby K listed who ran the trials in 2008 and finished in the middle of the pack with a 2:42.

For the Davis family, everything got kicked into high gear for Chase's run. The feasibility of Chase or anyone breaking three was irrelevant to them. It was all about the three-hour challenge being the savior that they all hoped and prayed that Chase would one day find. This race could be the one that saved his life.

Shelby dealt out the duties. Reno was responsible for describing the route in as much detail as possible so they could develop a race day plan. Dad was assigned to research running techniques and to try and find out what made the Kenyans so good. Shelby assigned herself as the training coach and morale booster, the latter after a heated argument with Reno and her Dad. They agreed only after she promised not to yell '*don't be such a fucking pussy!*' at Chase while he was in training. Her Dad made her shake on it. Reno just rolled his eyes.

Reno scoured the internet and constantly opened up Google Earth to learn more and more about the Madison Marathon route. The race started in a small bowl a bit south of Black Butte Mountain which was over 10,500 feet in elevation. The elevation of the road at the starting line was 9,250 feet above sea level. By comparison, the highest mountain in Ohio was around 1,500 feet.

From the start, there was an immediate one mile uphill. The route leveled out for about a mile and then a four mile uphill followed which peaked out at a place called Monument Ridge. This was the highest point on the route at 9,587 feet. After that, it was a series of uphill and downhill grades with each lasting a mile or more. As far as Reno could tell from Google Earth and other maps, there were no flat areas at all on the Gravelly Range Road. It was hard to know how, exactly, to plan the race because it was all so brutal looking in terms of hills, elevation, and

grade. He did surmise that Chase would need to run at least a 1:25 first half if he wanted to break three. From race reviews, emails with Sam the RD, and simply by measuring the terrain, Reno learned that the second half of the Madison was going to be a lot tougher than the first. It was slightly lower in elevation (a bit under 9,000 while the front half was entirely above 9,000), but the grades were enormously long and the route was also out in the open. There would be no shade and if there was wind there was nothing to break it.

The biggest epiphany that he shared with Chase and the rest of the family was the turn-around point. The route was 19.6 miles out and then 6.6 back to Clover Meadows (the finish line) on the same road. He had actually been near the turn-around point and remembered it because there was a US Forest Service sign noting the name of the small pass where the road cut through the ridge line. It was called Devil's Lane and the elevation on the sign read 8,592 feet. It was one of the highest points on the back half and runners had to come off Devil's Lane, go downhill nearly a mile, and then turn around and go back up the same hill. Reno could only imagine that it would be a spirit crushing turn-around to reach 19.6 miles and then turn around and face a mile long uphill. He advised Chase to use that turn-around point as his leverage move even though there was more than six miles to go. If he could stick with the lead group and then crush it up that mile long uphill at Mile 20, he just might crush the spirit of anyone near him who was also going for the sub-three.

Chase's Dad became fascinated with the Kenyans. He was especially interested in Eliud Kipchoge who held the world record for the marathon and broke two hours in a staged race in Vienna Austria. The route was set up in a park in central Vienna specifically for the sub-two attempt and there were pacers for the entire thing. It was like a science experiment and not at all a race-day conditions setting, but Kipchoge sustained an incredible pace of 4:34 minutes per mile for 26 miles in a row. He crossed the finish line with a 1:59:40 and Chase's Dad, who was watching the entire event live on YouTube at 3:00 AM Montana time, burst into tears.

There were two things that he wanted to share with Chase. The first was the length of the stride of not just Kipchoge but all the elite African runners. The second was how their foot hit the ground during their stride. He called Chase's cell.

"Hey, you got a sec to talk about something?"

"Sure. What's up?" asked Chase.

"I've been researching the stride of the elite runners. Have you noticed how they run? Did you see any in Chicago or at Boston when you ran there?"

"Of course, I saw them, but they were too far ahead of me to really observe their stride. Why?"

"None of them are very tall, but they seem to have huge strides. It's almost cartoonish. Like they're trying to stretch out their legs over a puddle of water on the ground as they run. Think about that advantage. I'd guess they add nearly a foot of distance over a normal stride for every stride they take. In a way, that shortens the race for them because they need fewer steps to cover the entire route. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I don't get how they do that over the entire 26," said Chase. "I've tried to do that in training, but have a hard time stretching my stride out that far for very long. I can do it for a couple miles, tops."

“Another thing is their foot placement. Kipchoge in particular has the long stride, but he also lands his lead foot on the middle or near the ball of his foot and not on the heel so his foot doesn’t roll forward from heel to toe as it goes into the next step. It goes from the middle of his foot to his toes and then off the ground again,” he explained. “It reminds me of Sundance.”

“Sundance? Shelby’s horse?”

“Yeah, remember how pure her stride and hoof placement were? She had the smoothest gait of any horse I ever saw run. That’s why Shelby did so well with her.”

They started talking about Sundance and how a highly trained horse runs. The gait is smooth, almost round, as the four legs gather and roll over the terrain. At full speed in a barrel race, the hoofs seemingly never touch the ground because they almost skim the dirt before leaping back off and propelling the horse and rider forward. Shelby was a superb rider, but she was on top of the equivalent of a Ferrari while the other barrel racers were riding Hondas.

Chase understood what his Dad was getting at, but he couldn’t sustain the Kenyan Stride, as they started calling it, for much more than a mile. He was able to get his foot placement a bit more middle foot and forward on his landing foot rather than heel to toe. He could tell though that he was nowhere near sustaining that kind of method over the entirety of a marathon.

Shelby and Chase spoke nearly daily about his training. She actually did refrain from calling him “*a fucking pussy*” and instead encouraged him to get the miles in and try to get something close to the Kenyan Stride. She had also watched a lot of the YouTube videos and couldn’t understand how the Kenyans stretched their stride out so long. They did agree that Chase should arrive in Montana two weeks before the Madison Marathon and that they would go into the Beartooth range to camp, train on hills at elevation, and hopefully get Chase acclimatized to the thinner air in the mountains of Montana. Shelby would use at least a week of her vacation days for the trip. Reno would drive up on the weekends with their kids.

Thursday, June 15, 2019 11:40 PM

Chase Davis <cdavis@.....>

Re: Three hour marathon

To: Sam, RD Greater Yellowstone Adventure Series <sam@.....>

Dear Sam,

Chase here. Hope you’re doing well and that all is going good for your upcoming race season.

I’ve been training hard for the Madison. I’m a bit worried though about the elevation. My place in Ohio is at like 500 feet and flat as pancake. There are runners in my running club that train on a bridge that goes up and over the Ohio River because it’s the only place where someone can run up a decent-sized hill. Any tips on training for the Madison’s elevation? Also, who else is going for the sub-three (if you can tell me)?

Good luck with everything. I’m looking forward to meeting you in person soon.

Chase

* * *

Thursday, June 15, 2019 11:55 PM

Sam, RD Greater Yellowstone Adventure Series <sam@.....>

Re: Three hour marathon

To: Chase Davis <cdavis@.....>

Hi Chase,

Thanks for writing. Things are going well and we'll be ready for the races. Tons of work, but that's part of the deal.

I get asked all the time about how to train and prepare for the elevation of our races. There's like a cottage industry of trainers, coaches, and analysts who go on and on about how elevation helps a runner, why the Kenyans are so good because of it, blood cell counts, oxygen deprivation, something called VO2 max, and so on. While some of it might be true, the reality is that a sea level guy can't just show up and perform at 9,000 feet no matter how hard they train at sea level.

The best advice I got is to get here as early as you can and simply live and breathe at high elevations. Get a sense of what that's like. Go for some runs and learn how your body reacts to the thinner air. You won't 'acclimatize' to the route like climbers on Mount Everest do, but at least you won't get a rude awakening of how the elevation is going to just slam you in the balls when the race starts.

You just gotta prepare.

Good luck with the training.

Sam

p.s. Have you ever seen how the Kenyans run? What I mean is their stride. It's freakishly long. Almost cartoonish. I actually saw some at the Shanghai Marathon (I lived there a few years ago) and saw both the male and female winners run past me near the finish line. They didn't look tired and they had these huge strides. Weird how they could maintain that over 42K.

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Friday, June 16, 2019 12:30 AM

Chase Davis <cdavis@.....>

Re: Three hour marathon

To: Sam, RD Greater Yellowstone Adventure Series <sam@.....>

Funny how you described the Kenyan's stride. My Dad said almost the exact same thing. Cartoonish! That's pretty accurate.

Who else is shooting for a sub-three?

Chase

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Friday, June 16, 2019 7:30 AM

Sam, RD Greater Yellowstone Adventure Series <sam@.....>

Re: Three hour marathon

To: Chase Davis <cdavis@.....>

Good Morning Chase,

There are two guys who I think have a shot at a sub-three. Keep this to yourself (and maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but I don't think they would mind). Their names are Jimmy Rhoades and Elliot Weise. Jimmy is from Montana and has won the Missoula Marathon two times. Elliot lives at 7,000 feet (he's from Flagstaff AZ) and has won a ton of marathons because he's run so many. They are quite boastful about breaking three. They have been almost dismissive and even offended that I would put out a challenge to a marathoner that claims breaking three hours is a challenge. They both have PRs in the 2:20 range and here I am saying that they can't break three, but I can also tell I've hit a chord. They're not sure about the elevation. I love the angst!

I've looked you up as well. Back to back state championships is nothing to sneeze at, nor is winning Ann Arbor. I read a story in the Detroit Free Press how you ran down the Mich runner. Ha Ha! Good fucking job! That must have been beyond cool to run him down in one lap around the track inside the Big House. My son is actually a student at UM so I can imagine the impact you had. Kinda like when Appalachian State beat Michigan a few years ago.

I'm a big Mich supporter now because of my kid but you gotta love the likes of Appalachian State winning in the Big House. Ha Ha again!

Be good.

Sam

BTW. There's a gal named Darby Klein who also might have a shot at a sub three. I think she ran in the US Olympic trials several years ago. If it's the same Darby, she ran something like a 2:42.

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Race day morning on the Madison was cool, around 45 degrees, with absolutely no wind or a cloud in the sky. The race was capped at 200 runners per the regulations of the US Forest Service. There were about 180 runners who showed up and were shuttled in school buses from Clover Meadows (the staging area and finish line) to the starting line. The atmosphere was oddly quiet as people tried to take huge, deep breaths. The vast majority of them had never been at such a high elevation, at least not for any duration and certainly not to run a marathon. Many watched the school buses as they had to downshift in order to climb out of the bowl they were in. The very first hill seemed too steep for the bus to drive up. How the hell were they going to run these hills?

Sam had quickly introduced himself to Chase when he got off the bus, but then had to get to other things. He pointed out two athletes who were at the front of the pack that had started to form near the starting line. Both looked athletic as all hell and dead set on running hard. They were Jimmy Rhoades and Elliot Weise. Right behind them was a lithe young woman, about Chase's age, with a ponytail who was bouncing in place, stretching, and focused on the hill in front of her. She looked totally in the zone. Chase assumed she was Darby Klein.

Sam jumped up on the bed of a truck to shout out instructions and his welcome to everyone. The runners were all stoked, extremely happy to be there, and hooted and hawed when Sam shouted, *"Welcome to the 12th Annual Maaaaaadisonnnnnn Maaaaarrrrraaathooooon!!!!"*

They all knew about the Three Hour Challenge, but none of them were even thinking about going for it. They were, though, excited to think that someone might break three when they were at the race. That alone made this year's Madison special. A few of the Montana runners knew Jimmy Rhoades and went up to him to wish him luck. Some had also heard about Weise, but he

didn't really engage with anyone. He was totally focused on the first hill. It was Darby, however, that seemed to get the most attention. Though no one approached her, there were a lot of people talking about her. A runner confirmed to Sam that she had run the US Olympic Trials in 2008 and so people were talking about that. She certainly looked the part. Chase, also at the head of the starting pack, went unnoticed.

Chase's Dad, who had already thrown up twice because he was so nervous, left the starting line area and decided he would wait at Monument Ridge with binoculars. He hoped to gather some kind of intelligence on the lead runners to shout out to Chase when he reached the ridge. Shelby and Reno stayed at the starting line constantly asking Chase if he was okay and what he needed.

Sam introduced a runner from New York named Diego who had asked to sing the National Anthem. Whether it was the nervous anticipation, the calm air, the elevation, or something else, Diego's a cappella rendition of the National Anthem was an emotional gut punch for everyone. He had a beautiful voice and could sing well, and his voice just carried and carried through the thin air. Its resonance combined with the setting and the anticipation of finally making it to Southwest Montana for the race overwhelmed many of the runners. Shelby totally lost it. She buried her head in Reno's neck and sobbed. He had to hold her up, and he gave a thumbs up to Chase when he looked over at them.

And then the race started.

Jimmy and Elliot charged off the line and hit the first hill with enthusiasm. Within 20 yards though, they both simultaneously slowed their pace as if they had been hit by a gust of wind. But, they adjusted and then set a pace. After that first uphill mile, the route flattened out in front of Black Butte Mountain and a group of about 10 runners, Chase included, formed and settled into a rhythm. Jimmy led with Elliot more or less beside him. There were three women in the group including Darby. Chase set himself up at the tail end of the group and comfortably maintained the pace.

The group of 10 slowly spread out with two runners, not Jimmy or Elliot, pulling ahead of the pack. They started the three mile climb to Monument Ridge. Chase's Dad was watching it all through his binoculars and immediately noticed that the girl had the Kenyan Stride. Even from a distance and through the binoculars, it was beautiful to watch. Chase had settled in right behind her and looked quite comfortable. He didn't have the stride but his foot placement looked solid. Chase's Dad also spied the bib numbers of the two lead runners and knew they were half marathoners though Chase probably wouldn't know that. As he watched his son climb the last hundred yards to the peak at Monument Ridge, he warned himself to keep it together. He had work to do and couldn't afford to get emotional as his son ran past.

"Chase, the front runners are half marathoners. Don't worry about them," he shouted as the group arrived. "Stick with the girl. Stick with the girl. She has the Kenyan Stride."

Darby looked over at Chase's Dad and smiled. Then, she started laughing as they ran past. She turned around to look at Chase with an impish grin.

"Sorry about that. That's my Dad," said Chase to Darby after they had passed Monument Ridge. "He's got a lot invested in this race."

“No problem. I got the Kenyan Stride? What’s that all about?” she asked.

“It’s how you run. He’s been studying how the Kenyans run,” explained Chase.

“Are you the ranch kid? Chase Davis?”

“Yeah. How did you know?”

“Sam told me about you. He thinks you have the best shot at a sub three.”

“He does?” asked Chase with surprise.

“Yep. Stick with me, kid, and maybe you got a shot,” Darby said with a grin and a funny accent. “I got the Kenyan *Striiiiiiide*, and I’m gonna kick your *aaaaaaaass* with it.”

Chase laughed as the two made eye contact. Damn! He thought.

The pack moved on past Monument Ridge. On this section of the route, the road skirted the ridgeline and offered immense views of the valley. If any of the front runners were looking, they could have seen mountains ranges that were close to 100 miles away. The air was incredibly clear and the only sound was the steady crunch of their shoes hitting the gravel road. Chase made the decision to stay about 10 yards behind Darby and focus on her ponytail. With each stride, it would bounce back and forth, left and right. It was almost hypnotic. It was like a metronome that people use to keep time while playing the piano. Left, right...left, right....left, right with a small bounce at each turn. He couldn’t really see Darby’s Kenyan Stride, but he could watch her ponytail bounce back and forth as she ran. He never saw any of the 100 mile views. Instead, he just focused on the bouncing ponytail. It helped him keep a steady pace and rhythm.

By mile 10 or so, the lead group was down to six runners and they were all quite a ways ahead of everyone else. There were the two front runners who were half marathoners and then the four marathon leaders. Jimmy still led followed by Elliot, Darby and then Chase, but they were all quite close together. The half marathoners were about 100 yards ahead. At the 13.1 mile mark, they peeled away and sprinted down the chutes to the finish line. The group of four marathoners didn’t pause other than to grab some water. They kept running amid the applause and encouragements shouted out by everyone at Clover Meadows. Chase glanced at his watch. It showed 1:25:45. Reno had said that he would need to run at least a 1:25 first half to have a shot at a sub three. He was close and didn’t really feel tired. He again focused on Darby’s ponytail.

Reno was right about the second half of the Madison. It was brutal. The grades were long and never let up. The land opened up and there weren’t even nice views anymore because they were running across huge meadows without trees or anything to break the monotony of the landscape. They could no longer see any ridgelines. The road just kept going off into the distance in front of them with seemingly no end. Other than the mile markers, it was hard to judge how far they had gone or how much they had left. Chase was anticipating mile marker 19 because that’s where Devil’s Lane was supposed to be with the turn-around point shortly after a long and steep downhill. When the group turned around to head back up, Chase intended to make his move.

From a distance, Devil’s Lane looked like a notch in the landscape, a kind of natural pass through and over the ridgeline. The group passed the US Forest Service sign and started down a steep incline. The turn-around station was visible and there was a volunteer there to check bib

numbers and hand out water or Gatorade. Jimmy reached the station first and stopped to drink some Gatorade. The volunteer asked how he was doing. Elliot also stopped and looked back up the road with a wince. Darby arrived, shouted out her bib number to the volunteer, and grabbed a cup of water. She paused to drink it. Chase arrived, slapped the volunteer's table, and immediately turned around and started running back up the hill. The others initially just watched, surprised that he wasn't taking a short break, and then they too started running. It was sluggish at first though because even the brief stop for fluids had slowed their tempo which made re-starting difficult. Chase never broke his rhythm and got at least 25 yards ahead of the group before they had resumed running even close to their original pace.

"Who the fuck does he think he is?" Elliot said to the group.

"Someone who's gonna kick your ass, I guess," said Darby with a laugh.

Jimmy snorted out a laugh and leaned into the hill. The grade back up to the Devil's Lane sign wasn't quite a mile, but it was wide open and Chase was running strong up the hill as he disappeared over the ridge line. There was a slight downhill and then he was back in the huge meadow. He could see some runners running towards him and the first one he passed gave him a thumbs up. By the time, the other three had crested the ridge Chase's lead was around 50 yards and he was on a flat section and running well. Jimmy, Elliot, and Darby were experienced runners and knew how to pace themselves for the marathon distance. They didn't freak out, but they were surprised at the pace. Once again, Jimmy set himself up as the lead runner and Elliot and Darby stayed right behind. By mile 24, they had caught up to Chase and the group of four resumed their original grouping from before Devil's Lane.

Chase felt better with the group. Without Darby's ponytail to focus on, he had been having a hard time measuring his pace since no one was in front of him. He knew they had been closing in on him and he was starting to feel everything, the hills, elevation, heat, and of course the pain and exertion of running such a long distance. He had felt all those things before, but not at quite the same intensity.

At mile 25, Elliot started to slow his pace. He ran side by side with Chase for about a hundred yards and then slapped him on the back and said, "I'm out, Davis. Go get it," and then he dropped back.

Now it was a group of three with Jimmy still in the lead, but Darby was basically right next to him. Chase was only a few yards back, but the distance seemed vast and he couldn't see how he would close it unless the other two slowed their pace.

They didn't.

At mile 26 and with just .2 to go, a large group of half marathon finishers, volunteers, and family and friends of the runners got their first glimpse of the three lead runners. A shout went up, "It's the girl. It's the girl." Everyone surged forward towards the road and finish line chutes to cheer and watch. Chase's Dad, Shelby, and Reno were screaming Chase's name and Chase tried to respond. He gained a yard or two, but Jimmy and Darby never let up. They, too, were totally in the zone and out for the victory. They were side by side as they turned off the road and ran into the finisher chutes. Darby made the turn more quickly than Jimmy and ended up a stride ahead of him. She shot down the chutes, leaned forward, and crossed ahead of a diving Jimmy who tried to leap through the air to get to the line first. He hit the ground, bounced, and rolled

sideways just as Chase also crossed causing him to trip over Jimmy's body. Chase stumbled forward and fell to the ground with a loud whump sound and rolled forward into a sitting position. His Dad, who was waiting at the finish line, immediately went up to him and squatted down next to him. He cradled his hands around his son's face and turned Chase's head so he could look into his eyes.

"I'm okay, Dad. I'm okay," said Chase.

"Okay. Okay," whispered Chase's Dad as he gently pulled his son's head to his chest and held him. "That was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my entire life. I am so proud of you."

The finish line was total bedlam. Jimmy had a big group of Missoula friends with him and they were laughing, shouting, and crying all at the same time. An older man who Chase later learned was his Grandfather was waving his arms above his head and dancing a jig around the group while Jimmy's friends were spraying beer on everyone's head. Darby was immediately surrounded by a group of women, but it seemed they weren't family or friends but simply girls who were stunned to have witnessed what happened. They put their arms around Darby, gave her some Gatorade, and one little girl was hugging her legs. At least three or four of them were crying. Darby smiled and was thanking everyone as she looked over at Jimmy and then at Chase who was being held by his Dad. She nodded to the Dad who mouthed the words, 'Thank you' to her. Shelby was one of the weeping women and she hugged Darby and whispered something in her ear which caused Darby to hug her back fiercely.

"Sam, Sam. What was her time? Did she do it?" shouted one of Jimmy's friends. There was instant silence as everyone looked at Sam who held the timers.

"Congratulations Darby. That was an incredible race. Jimmy. Chase. Well done. Darby your time was a 3:04:12. You beat the women's course record by over 30 minutes," said Sam.

A huge shout went up. Several of Jimmy's friends shook up their bottles of beer and sprayed Darby and all the women around her. Jimmy walked over to Darby with open arms and they hugged. They then went over to Chase and pulled him and his Dad up and then the three of them just hugged each other while everyone at Clover Meadows applauded.

They found some shade and Chase, Darby, and Jimmy along with some of Jimmy's friends and Shelby and Reno sat in the grass to rest. Chase's Dad joined them. They talked about the race, Chase's move up Devil's Lane, and Chase's Dad shouting out 'Stick with the girl. She has the Kenyan Stride.' They laughed and Chase's Dad apologized to Darby, but she brushed it aside. Chase tried to explain how they came up with the term and about Shelby's horse Sundance and her gait. Jimmy was a student of the Kenyan running technique and had a lot to say about the long stride of the Kenyans. He had been trying to implement it into his running, but could never sustain it for more than a few miles. He wanted to know how Darby did it. Darby wanted to know about Shelby's horse and their ranch and how a runner could learn from studying the gait of a horse. Chase's Dad suggested that she come visit the ranch and they would show her. There was a silent pause as Darby looked over at Chase.

“For fuck’s sake Chase, invite her to the ranch already,” shouted Darby which caused Chase to turn red and everyone laughed.

“Yes, of course. We don’t have Sundance anymore, but we have a lot of horses. I can show you. Would you like to come visit?” asked Chase.

“I would love to. Thanks,” Darby said with a smile.

The group started talking about anything and everything. Shelby was explaining barrel racing to Darby. Jimmy and Chase replayed Chase’s Devil’s Lane charge up the hill. Elliot joined briefly and shook everyone’s hand before excusing himself. He was going down the mountain because he was signed up for the Big Sky Marathon the next day. Jimmy’s grandfather started talking about Jimmy’s first Missoula Marathon win. Chase’s Dad eventually left the group and wandered back over to the finish line chutes. The other runners were starting to come in and Clover Meadows was getting busy. He approached the RD.

“Sam. Before it gets too crazy here, I want to say hello. I’m Wes Davis. Chase’s Dad,” he said with an outstretched hand towards Sam. They shook hands and locked eyes.

“Yes, of course. Chase told me about you and the whole Kenyan Stride thing,” said Sam. “I exchanged a bunch of emails with your son-in-law. Shelby wrote to me as well. You have a great family and I really appreciate that all of you were here. With the way you were all behind him, I thought Chase had a decent chance of breaking three, but maybe next year.”

“You bet. Thanks for putting this race together and especially for the sub three challenge. I can’t tell you how important it’s been for our family. It was never about Chase running a sub three or winning the prize or anything like that,” said Wes as he was looking over at his son talking with Darby, Jimmy, and some of the other runners.

Chase was sitting on the ground with his legs crossed. He was grinning and leaning forward towards Darby who was animatedly explaining something to him. Jimmy made some comment and they all burst out laughing. Chase rocked backwards with his legs still crossed and rolled onto his back and then popped back up again, laughing even harder, like he used to do when he was a little kid. Wes gasped and instantly became teary-eyed. Both Sam and Wes were looking at the group of runners.

“I haven’t seen him laugh like that since he was a little boy,” said Wes turning towards Sam with tears in his eyes. “What this race has done for us is I don’t know what to say.”

“I know. I get it, Wes,” said Sam. “I’m a Dad, too.”

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