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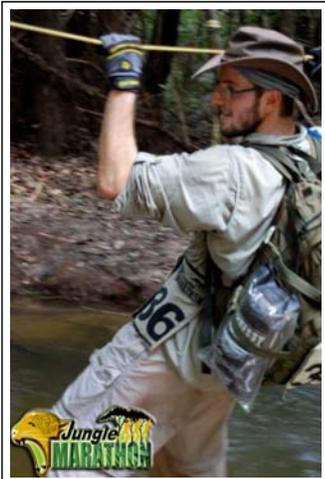
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**RACE REPORTS**

**The Amazon Jungle Marathon. World's Toughest Foot Race**



**Race Location:** Brazilian Amazon Jungle  
**Race Date:** October , 2007

Judah Epstein traversing over a creek on a Tyrolean rope cross

ALTER DO CHÃO, PARÁ, BRAZIL – My life-long dream had been to travel through the Amazon, a jungle alive with flora that holds the key to so many scientific discoveries and fauna and terrain to astonish any adventure seeker. Having experienced several adventures throughout the world, I sought to compete in an extreme challenge that would be my Amazon adventure. The Jungle Marathon, advertised as a 200 km extreme, ultra-marathon, unsupported foot race deep in the Amazon Jungle of Brazil, fit the bill.

In this race, every participant needed to carry all his equipment for the 7-day duration, including food and gear. The nights would be spent sleeping in hammocks in the jungle or along the Tapajós River. Additionally, the difficulty lies not so much the 200 km distance, as the intensity of the treacherous terrain and slopes spawned by the harsh jungle conditions.

Upon arriving at the departure point, in the small beachfront town of Alter do Chão (in the State of Pará), I met other competitors from all over the world who had come for this extreme ultra-marathon. All told, there were 45 of us. Some adventurers told stories of surviving gun battles with poachers while photographing wild mountain gorillas, or embarking upon a canoe trip down a river in the Congo in the midst of a civil war. Nearly all of them had previously run other ultra-marathons elsewhere, including at the South Pole, the Sahara Desert, Mongolia, the North Pole, the jungle of Borneo, and more. They had come to the Amazon to challenge the event known by all extreme ultra-marathoners as the toughest race on the planet (in 2006 – with no American competitors – only 59%

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completed the race).

Not until arriving in Brazil had I dreamed that in a single leap I would go from the tame 8-mile "Turkey Trot" Thanksgiving road race I'd run on the flat terrain of Dallas, Texas to the hardest race in the world. Perhaps I should have trained better by first entering other ultra-marathons in tough terrains abroad – or at least in Colorado's Rocky Mountains. Or I could have competed in simple marathons at home, or even a half-marathon or two. But none of these races peaked my interest. I bore easily and don't like to run unless there is something interesting to catch my attention. So the thought of running through the largest and most diverse jungle in the world appealed to me, unaware of the immense struggle that would lay ahead for me, should I enter it.

Two and a half days before the race began, race participants and volunteers boarded a boat for an 11-hour journey down the Tapajós River, headed for the small village that would serve as the jungle base camp. I had planned to meet more of the competitors, but to my dismay I'd caught a bug and developed a cough with a 102° F fever. Suddenly, my immediate goal turned into improving my health before the start of the race by resting in my hammock as much as possible. Tired and weakened by the fever, I felt as though I'd already completed a jungle marathon; but this proved that I knew nothing about this race's extreme toughness.

As the boat approached land at the jungle base camp, my only concern was whether the race doctor would let me run, since the sickness combined with extreme physical exertion could potentially cause permanent internal damage. Fortunately, the following two days were allotted for race preparation and jungle survival training. The training was very short, but we were warned of the numerous venomous snakes (if bitten, stay calm, perform first aid, and wait for assistance), taught how to lessen the chance of a rare jaguar attack, and cautioned about the many insects, as well as plants with devilish spikes and thorns. The jungle trainer – an experienced Brazilian soldier – showed us a normal-looking piece of grass and then proceeded to use this single blade to quickly cut through a 2-inch thick piece of raw piranha meat without much trouble!

In the remaining time, we prepared our race equipment to make our packs as light and efficient as possible. Racers spent the time packing and unpacking, again and again. Due to my inexperience, I had brought along too much food and gear, so much so that I couldn't fit it all inside my pack, even though I'd tied much gear to the outside.

A couple of experienced racers, Mark and Becky, took pity and helped lighten my load, taking out much of my food and some gear. They also lightened some of my necessary gear by reducing the amount. For example, I had a small package of waterproof matches, but after the overhaul I was left with only 3. Even after all the reductions, my pack still weighed well over 30 pounds, while the average competitor's bag weighed only 20 pounds. My food was mostly trail mix, protein bars, and MREs. These were substantial nourishment, but much heavier than the backpacker dehydrated food that most racers carried. Fortunately, Mark and Becky let me keep my 2 packets of ice cream (dehydrated!), since they only weighed 3/4 ounce each.

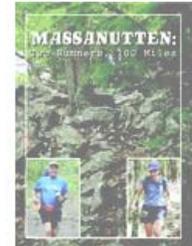
Fortunately, my fever subsided the day before the race, but my cough worsened. Nevertheless, I felt much healthier and was strong enough to race. After hearing from the race organizer that Stage 1 was the toughest – though shortest – of the 6 stages, I planned to take it easy and simply complete the stage without injury.

**Day One, 8 October** – As the race started, I found the terrain to be extremely treacherous. The day began with a creek crossing that drenched us all up to our chests. Then came the ground that was so covered with exposed roots that one could easily trip and fall, or what's worse, sprain or break an ankle or leg, or tear a knee ligament (ACL). There was another ever-present danger as well – impaling oneself on the many protruding spikes, roots, thorns, and other unknown dangerous jungle objects. Therefore I took great caution, since falling with my heavy backpack could very likely injure me. Another danger was the deep, leaf-covered holes in the ground. If I caught my foot in one while running, I could easily break or at least sprain my leg or ankle.

To increase the physical demands, we spent the entire day hiking up and down extremely steep and slippery hills. The ascents and descents were so near-vertical that I had to grab onto trees and roots to pull myself up; otherwise, I would have slipped down the hill. We have no such hills near my home in Texas. Nor did running in the Dallas parks include finding large obstructions along with small hidden traps.

In the jungle, I had to climb over and under fallen trees and logs, and sometimes over

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and under at the same time! This constant negotiation of hazards was so tiring that I had to sit and rest wherever I was, even on the jungle ground covered with insects and perhaps venomous snakes. When the support crew sweep team caught up with me, Dos Reis from the Brazilian Military Jungle Special Forces used his machete to cut a walking stick for me. Little did I know then how invaluable this stick would become. With my stick, I continued the course and finished the day before dark – to a cheering crowd on the beach campsite, adjacent to the jungle. They cheered because I had been in the jungle the longest of all competitors. They cheered because it was my first ultra-marathon. They cheered because even though I was green, I finished the stage, a stage in which two other racers had already pulled out of the competition. By the end of Stage 2, nine others would also fail to continue because of weather, humidity, heat, exhaustion, dehydration, or injuries.

**Day Two, 9 October** – After a full night's rest, Stage 2 began very early in the morning. The distance was much longer, but I kept my hiking pace because the terrain was too rough for running. The hills remained very steep and by the time I reached the final checkpoint, I was told that another racer – Derek from Hong Kong – and I were not allowed to continue to the finish line for the day. Why not? Because many racers had encountered several jaguars! A couple of Brazilians had crossed the finish line knives in hand, prepared in case of an attack. A racer just in front of me had heard a jaguar in the bushes just feet away, and then saw the jaguar as it gave a loud warning purr.

Normally, jaguars leave an area that has many people as they are quite elusive and extremely rare to see in the jungle. But these jaguars remained in the territory and were undeterred by our presence. Instead, it seemed that they might have been tracking and stalking us! If Derek and I had gone on, we would have been trekking through this section at dusk and perhaps dark, which would have greatly increased my chances of using my favorite stick in an attempt to fend off an attacking jaguar. It should be noted that humans cannot outrun jaguars, neither can we out-climb them. Our only option for survival is to be loud and raise our bag over our head to appear larger and possibly intimidate the jaguar. But if attacked, the only chance for survival is to protect one's neck and throat and fight back by attacking vulnerable points such as the jaguar's eyes.

There is a downside to this last strategy. Even if a racer were to successfully fight off a jaguar, which would be insanely difficult, the racer would nevertheless have been ripped to shreds by the jaguar's powerful teeth and claws. Therefore, the race organizers took Derek and me on an alternate route out of the jungle by taking us on a small boat to hike through a less hazardous part of the jungle... where ironically we encountered a venomous snake. We arrived at the base camp late in the evening. By the end of Day 2, my body was completely exhausted. For the remaining five days, I would need to rely solely on willpower and determination to complete the adventure I had began.

**Day Three, 10 October** – Stage 3 was a much longer stretch than Stages 1 and 2. I determined that I would have to move much faster in order to keep pace and complete the stage. My race pack remained extremely heavy and I knew that the load would slow me down, so I ditched what I didn't deem absolutely necessary and gave some of my gear to Ivan – a support crew medic – to return to the boat. Gone were my extra two pairs of socks and pair of underwear (this left me with only the socks and underwear I was wearing), gloves, camera; bag of protein powder; and even my bug spray (although it was quite light, it wasn't essential for running). This trimmed 5 pounds off my pack.

Now I could move faster than before and developed a "jungle run/jog" as I tried to imagine myself moving smoothly like a jaguar. Although the terrain remained amazingly tough, the trail opened up in some parts and the course ceased to be the never-ending, constant array of steep hills. Of course, many steep hills remained, but at times it "flattened". However, these so-called "flat sections" were as steep as the toughest hill that Dallas had ever offered me for training.

To my dismay, near the end of the stage the steep hills returned. A few were so downwardly steep (and I was so tired) that I sat and slid down them, although I risked sliding into or on top of any creature that lived on the jungle floor. In spite of all this, somehow I completed the stage shortly after dark, which gave me an idea of the time. My watch had broken earlier, during a torrential jungle rain, so I rarely knew the exact hour. It was difficult to gauge time visually, since the thick canopy blotted out the sun even at noon, immersing me in a green darkness. (I should have mentioned that this part of the Amazon is known as "the rain forest.")

Now that I was at camp and began preparing for a night's rest, I realized that not only had I lost my watch, but the waistband on my pack had rubbed my skin raw. I worried that

this might keep me from carrying my pack and therefore completing the race, but the medics taped my waist and I was OK after that.

**Day Four, 11 October** – As the morning of Stage 4 dawned, most of us had awakened exhausted from Stage 3's extreme difficulty. My ten-hour sleep didn't seem to help, and I felt I needed another ten just for decent recovery. But fortunately Stage 4 turned out to be much shorter and not as difficult. We had some much-needed respite, as sections of the course ran through villages and away from the jungle treachery. Even so, armed guards were placed at certain points near the beginning of the course because of additional jaguar sightings. Although I didn't see any, my time had come for something potentially worse for a long distance runner – foot blisters.

This was something nearly all of us had to deal with, and a common problem even since Stage 1, because the humidity as well as swamp and creek crossings kept our feet wet throughout most of the marathon. I think I'd been able to delay my blisters until Stage 4 because of the time and care I'd taken to balance over roots through the swamp crossings each day. This kept my feet relatively dry (less drenched, anyway), though they were still wet. Of course, crossing the way I did slowed my progress, but may have helped my feet. But now that I had blisters and also needed to move faster through the jungle, I took less care to keep my feet dry and ended up suffering like the others.

Stage 4 was a milestone for me. For the first time, I was able to complete a stage a few hours before dark, which finally gave me time to eat my food and rest for Stages 5 and 6. All the previous days had been so rushed, that I could hardly find the time to eat properly. After my meal, the medics taped most of my toes (and both heels) to prevent further blistering. I could now face Stage 5 with my feet well prepared.

**Day Five, 12 October** – As it turned out, my feet would desperately need the help, as Stage 5 was by far the longest, covering 44 km of jungle and 43 km of village trails. Throughout the race I hadn't believed that the distances were actually as advertised. The stages had been so arduous that the mileage felt significantly greater! Other racers agreed, and one of them actually tracked part of the course with his GPS and determined that we'd been right!

Apparently, the distances that the race organizers provided were in "Brazilian Jungle Kilometers," and the equivalent value in miles or kilometers is unknown. Because of Stage 5's great length, it would take us two days to complete it. Any racer who didn't leave checkpoint 4 by 4:00 pm on this day would have to sleep deep in the jungle until dawn before he would be allowed to continue. Of course, this was necessary because the area between checkpoints 4 and 5, "The Dark Zone," was thick jungle often inhabited by jaguars, and it was unsafe for racers to traverse it in the dark.

In the early afternoon, after realizing I wouldn't make the cut-off, I took my time and enjoyed my hike. I found a feather from a very large bird and affixed it to my bag. I stopped and chatted in a mixture of Spanish, Portuguese, and English and shared some of my trail mix – that I'd been carrying for 5 days – with the Brazilian military sweep team that followed me. Although I felt much more comfortable in the jungle on this fifth day and moved more fluidly, I was the only racer to arrive at checkpoint 4 after the cut-off time. Therefore, I was the only competitor to sleep deep in the jungle along with a few support crew members and a few Brazilian soldiers.

Before reaching checkpoint 4, I found it exhilarating to traverse through the thick jungle darkness with only my small flashlight. I felt like a true adventurer as the jungle and its nocturnal life awakened at the fall of darkness. The plethora of mysterious sounds from unseen creatures engaged me into an unknown world where around every tree and under any plant might lurk creatures large or small, poisonous or non-poisonous, but foreboding nevertheless.

Throughout the race, when I tired, I would rest on the living jungle ground. I ignored the dangers from my apathy born out of absolute exhaustion. Fortunately I didn't get insect or snake bites while sliding or resting on the jungle ground, even when I rested on or near ant piles. I theorize that I had become so dirty and spent so much time in the jungle, that I had become "one with the jungle." It seemed as if insects crawled onto me and then off without biting, as though I were simply part of the jungle floor.

During our jungle training we'd been told that everyone was guaranteed to be stung by large wasps and bees, and indeed, everyone else was stung multiple times and bitten by mosquitoes, ticks, and perhaps leeches. To prove the jungle insects' size and

aggressiveness, one support crew member had shown me a picture he'd taken of a gigantic wasp eating a tarantula. Throughout the competition, I had spent by far the longest time in the jungle and was certainly the most exposed to insects, wasps, and bees. However, since I had "merged" with the jungle, I got no bites or stings.

**Day Six, 13 October** – Day 6 was a continuation of Stage 5. I awoke at checkpoint 4, deep in the jungle, and still had to complete 53 "Brazilian Jungle Kilometers," but by now I was so tired that I could barely walk. My left leg from below the knee up to the hip had been in great pain the past few days. I couldn't let that beat me. I remembered that I just needed to go on placing one foot in front of the other. I used my stick so my arms would help propel me, and on the straight paths I used it like a kayak paddle, pushing off the ground for extra propulsion. While ascending hills, I used my stick as an anchor to pull myself up; and when going down, as a balance.

My stick had now become my best friend. I wouldn't have traded it for anything, not even an all-you-can-eat-buffet of fresh food. Although I had tired of eating trail mix and protein bars, I kept at it because I needed the nourishment. But by the fifth day, I could no longer drink my protein powder mix. Actually I'm quite used to protein powder, but at home I normally mix it in a blender with milk and a banana for a smooth and tasty treat. Here in the jungle I only had water to mix it with, using a piece of paper as a funnel to meticulously scoop the powder into a small bottle. Even after shaking the bottle vigorously, the mixture was inconsistent and lumpy at best. For the first four days, I could stomach it, but by day 5 it began to taste like vomit and smelled like dung. I refused to consume any more of it and gave the remainder to an excited Brazilian soldier, Dos Reis, the one who had cut me the walking stick. I am certain that I got the better part of that exchange.

For most competitors, the greatest challenge was to achieve sufficient hydration and replenishment of electrolytes and salt. The jungle heat and humidity quickly depletes us of these necessary elements. But for me, my toughest challenge had been the steep hills. After the race I heard that we'd climbed over 16,000 feet of cumulative altitude gain and loss! My home in hill-free Dallas did nothing to prepare me for this ordeal, but it did train me for the constant sweating and extreme heat.

I grew up playing sports every summer in the Texas heat, and my body must have adapted. Throughout the race I simply drank a lot of water in small amounts and also drank a couple of servings of Gatorade and Sustain drink mix powder along with a couple of electrolyte tablets per day. Although I remained hydrated, my body suffered total exhaustion and I struggled to complete this longest of all days. Mark and Ivan from the support crew walked with me to encourage my movement – and probably to ensure that I didn't keel over and die!

This part of the course traversed between thick jungle and a beautiful beach that overlooked the sun setting over the ocean-like wide river. Although too tired to take notice of such a picturesque landscape, I stopped and forced myself to look and remember the magnificence of my surroundings. I struggled to drum up the energy just to appreciate it. I had to fight to keep focused on all the beauty about me. My body simply didn't care, but I willed myself to enjoy it, just as I willed myself to go on. Miraculously, I completed Stage 5 at 10:15 pm on the second day allotted, and was surprised to find several fellow competitors still awake, waiting to cheer me across the finish line.

**Day 7, 14 October** – This day, devoted to the sixth and final stage, began early in the morning after just a few hours' sleep. Most competitors had the opportunity to rest all night as well as part of the previous day. Stage 6 was supposed to be easier, rather than a foot fight through hostile jungle vegetation, but I found it quite long and arduous because of my complete fatigue built up during the preceding days. The lack of sleep and rest, the constant hot sun, and trekking through the sand had tested my body far more than anything else I'd ever experienced.

Nevertheless, I started the morning with a jog, as I longed for the finish line that promised a buffet of fresh food including spaghetti and chicken with ketchup. I mention the ketchup because I put it on everything. At various villages throughout the course, chickens roamed near the trail and I mentally conspired to use my favorite stick as a spear to hunt one of them. But the chicken would have to wait until the finish line.

When my body remembered its extreme fatigue, I ended my jog and went back to trekking, again using my stick for extra propulsion. After many hours of struggling through

my body's pain, I finally saw the finish. I had actually planned to run across the finish line, but by the time I reached it I was amazed that I was even able to hobble.

After seven grueling days in the jungle, I joined the 60% of competitors that had completed this race. My reward for such an accomplishment? A buffet lunch and dinner, a T-shirt, a medal, and, yes, my favorite stick that I got to keep. I was not going to let it go, this new friend of mine, after it had helped me through the harshest of terrains and climates. Of course, there was the pesky little problem of getting it through U.S. Customs, but I would deal with that obstacle later.

**Home at Last** – Now that my new friend (the stick) and I are back in the States, I am home and resting, replenishing my body with the same foods that I had such difficulty eating on the course – trail mix, protein bars, and yes, protein drinks that no longer taste like vomit and smell like dung! The milk and banana do help with that!

Story written by Judah Epstein.

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Edited by Arthur Woodgate, Rose Biderman, & Doug Andrew

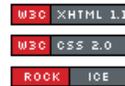


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