

# THE THIN LINE

WHAT CAN THE TRAIL-RUNNING COMMUNITY LEARN  
FROM THIS YEAR'S TRAGEDY IN PATAGONIA?

*by* YITKA WINN





**By the time Arturo Martínez Rueda reached the aid station** at Hotel del Paine around mile 30, he felt unusually worn down. In the preceding miles of southern Chile's 2016 Ultra Fiord 100-Mile race, he'd taken a few falls and scraped up his leg. However, he insisted the pain didn't bother him.

Nevertheless, he did feel inexplicably tired. At the aid station, he napped on and off in a chair indoors for over an hour. When the 11 a.m. cutoff arrived, race volunteers woke him up and asked if he'd like to continue running. He said yes.

"I am getting energy from the land of Patagonia," the 57-year-old Mexican runner said on his way out. "You can do anything as long as you have passion for it."

The most challenging section of the race still lay ahead. After a few runnable miles in the woods, runners would begin a steep, five-mile climb up to the highest stretch of the course—five more miles across an exposed glacial basin in Chile's Chacabuco range. Though the weather had deteriorated since the race's midnight start, Arturo had plenty of mountain ultrarunning experience to draw from. He'd even specified on his application to run Ultra Fiord, "My body is very acclimatized to cold weather."

Just three weeks earlier, he became a two-time finisher of one of Mexico's most grueling races, the high-altitude 120K Pentamontaña. A longtime university professor and business consultant, he loved drawing parallels between his adventures in the mountains and his teachings in the classroom and business world—a patron disciple of ultrarunning if there ever were one.

Here in Patagonia, the higher he climbed, the harsher the wind became, whipping violently once he'd passed treeline. With it came pelting rain and snow. Around mile 35, partway up the climb, he sat down on a log to rest. Another runner, Vinicius Boscolo, joined him for the break. Arturo offered



Arturo on the Ultra Fiord course around mile 34, beginning the big climb up to Chacabuco. The paint on his nose is the remnant of "lion whiskers" he'd drawn on his face at the start line—a nod to both his Zodiac sign (Leo) and a running alter ego he'd adopted, "Leoncito."

him some smoked salmon from his pack.

"He appeared to be strong psychologically and determined to finish the race," Boscolo later reported to a Brazilian running-news website. But moments later, as they were packing up to start moving again, he noticed that Arturo had fallen asleep. Boscolo shook him awake. In a daze, Arturo told him, "Estaba soñando." *I was dreaming.*

Several other runners reported seeing Arturo moving very slowly up the climb, shivering, his legs covered in goosebumps. Another passing runner, José Ignacio Bellorini, noticed that he seemed in bad shape. At the next race checkpoint—one of three checkpoints staffed by race personnel along the five-mile high stretch—Ignacio mentioned that Arturo should probably not be permitted to continue.

But no one stopped him.

NESTLED AT THE BOTTOM OF SOUTH AMERICA, Patagonia is a place renowned not only for its unspoiled beauty, but also for its unforgiving weather. It lies closer to the shores of Antarctica than to Chile's capital city, Santiago.

Several years ago, native Patagonian Stjepan Pavicic began scheming a new route through the region's Chacabuco Mountains, an untrammeled swath of trail-less backcountry just south of Torres del Paine National Park. It brims over with dense, gnarled forests, crevassed glaciers and jagged peaks, icy rivers and iridescent alpine lakes. The rugged route that he fashioned morphed into the 100-mile course for Ultra Fiord, which took place for the first time in April 2015. Several simultaneous Ultra Fiord races of shorter distances—30K, 70K and 100K the first year—overlapped sections of the same course.

Pavicic, now 48, had been directing trail-running and multi-day adventure races in Patagonia since 2004 through his organization, Nomads International Group

(NIGSA). The work was so demanding that he lost his marriage and, lacking corporate sponsorship for many of his events, much of his money, too. But his passion for sharing the beauty of Patagonia with people all over the world has never wavered.

"Today, most of the economy here is based on taking things from nature," Pavicic says. "Take, take, take—take the oil, the gas, the fish, put more sheep and cows on the land, cut the forest. I believe the only way to have sustainable development here is to export experiences, not parts of our nature."

Months before its inaugural running, Ultra Fiord's international prestige received a boost with an influx of marketing dollars from the Chilean government and local tourism organizations. NIGSA shared dreamy YouTube videos of the race's mountain terrain and announced that dozens of elite-athlete "race ambassadors" and other top ultrarunners would be running Ultra Fiord.

After last year's race (see "The Wildest Race," September 2015, Issue 106), many athletes heralded the course's majesty and immense challenge. They told proud, exultant stories of wading through chest-high river crossings, slogging through some 30 miles of knee- to thigh-deep mud bogs and surviving a spectacular, perilous glacier traverse. Praise proliferated for Pavicic's visionary commitment to establishing a truly wild race.

"Even though the journey was stripping me of my usual reality and all the comforts of daily life, it was giving me back my life," wrote Candice Burt about getting lost for hours, being charged by pumas at night and going on to be the only female 100-miler finisher (in 37 hours). "A life that could only thrive on the edge of what is possible, because, without these intense adventures, I am nothing."

Not all runners, however, shared that exhilarated assessment. Some felt that Pavicic had conflated the idea of fashioning a "tough" race with creating an unnecessarily dangerous one. Crevasses on the glacier crossing had been unmarked. Most backcountry aid stations offered little more than bags of peanuts and unfiltered creek water. Two runners narrowly missed being crushed by a boulder rolling off the glacier. When heavy fog rolled in at night and course markings were spaced far apart, many runners got lost, and several, as a result, became hypothermic, saved only by the benevolence of fellow racers.

SOMETIME LAST YEAR, Arturo became dazzled by photos and stories of the inaugural Ultra Fiord, and signed up. By finishing the race, he also hoped to gather points to qualify for another bucket-list race, Europe's Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc.

"My dad was always looking for bigger, more demanding challenges," says his



Arturo (in blue) with his sister, Nohemi, and brother-in-law, Bobby, on a trail run last winter near the crater of Nevado de Oluca, a 15,350-foot volcano in Mexico.

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daughter, Sofia Martínez Quintero, 25, of Mexico City. "He enjoyed tough competitions and took his passion to the limits."

Two years ago, Arturo, then an avid road runner and nature lover, chanced upon a group of ultrarunners in the woods in Mexico. They called themselves Esteparios Puros Lobos (the "Steppe Wolves"). According to Sofia, there were no such things as strangers to her father—only friends he hadn't met yet. Fascinated by the ultrarunning "wolf pack," he ran alongside and showered them with questions about their curious sport. He couldn't keep up with them that day, but, within weeks, he began training regularly with them. Two months later, alongside his new friends, he ran his first trail ultra, the Ultra-Trail de Mexico (UTMX) 100K.

He quickly became a beloved member of the club. He trained vigorously and ticked off an impressive array of ultras and Skyrunning races in the span of two years, including Mexico's only 100-miler, the Travesía en las Sierras.

"Arturo defined himself as a 'disrupter,'" says Ramses Sanchez de Ita, 29, the leader of Esteparios Puros Lobos. "Curiosity was one of his greatest attributes, leading him to have many friends and many experiences." He had hoped to run the 2015 Ultra Caballo Blanco; when the race was cancelled last minute due to drug violence in the area,



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he jumped onto the event stage to act as an impromptu translator. At UTMX, he helped a hotel owner rent his last 10 vacant rooms by borrowing his donkey and parading it around town on a leash to market the hotel to other runners. (All 10 rooms rented.)

Ultrarunning quickly became a way of life for Arturo. He created a blog and eponymous hashtag, #soyultra ("I am ultra") to share his passion, his belief that leaving our comfort zone is the first step to a life well lived.

"The trail taught me to see life in a different way," he wrote. "Being a better person is not a destination but a journey full of experiences and learning throughout our lives."

NOT LONG AFTER Arturo passed the first checkpoint in the Chacabuco basin, another runner came up on him, again resting on the side of the trail. He immediately recognized that Arturo was in distress and tried to help him back to his feet. But Arturo had trouble standing.

The wind was high, howling and blowing snow across the open basin, flanked by glaciers and granite massifs barely visible through the fog. The runner gave Arturo some dry clothes and an emergency blanket, helped move

him behind a rock in an effort to shelter him from the wind and ran ahead to alert the race personnel at the next checkpoint, approximately one mile ahead.

Three race personnel at the checkpoint grabbed some dry clothes and a sleeping bag and ran back along the course to find Arturo. According to Pavicic, when they reached him about half an hour later, they found him lying on the ground in an advanced stage of hypothermia—conscious, but able only to say his name.

He was dressed in shorts, compression calf sleeves and a lightweight jacket over a base layer. Though he had been wearing a warm beanie at the start line, his head was bare now. It could have been a case of a phenomenon in advanced hypothermia called "paradoxical undressing," in which a person's brain mistakenly thinks the body is overheating instead of freezing. By all accounts, though, Arturo didn't strip any clothes off on the mountain; he arrived to the high mountain pass in the same set of clothing he wore when he'd left Hotel del Paine.

The three race personnel dressed him in long pants and a down jacket, then wrapped a sleeping bag around him. He was able to take a few steps without assistance before collapsing and falling unconscious.

Within minutes, he passed away.

SERIOUS ACCIDENTS AND FATALITIES are not uncommon in the worlds of climbing, mountaineering and backcountry skiing. Such communities are accustomed to grappling with questions of risk, of where responsibility belongs when things go wrong. Entire books are devoted to detailing preventable disasters in the mountains, and the lessons others can glean from them.

For many of us trail runners, though, these conversations are uncharted waters—especially those who arrive to the sport with a background not in wilderness travel, but in endurance. In some ways, the very tenets of trail running's culture fly in the face of the traditional code of caution. Every mountaineer has been taught to be wary of "summit fever." Conversely, many ultrarunners' code is "endure at all costs; DNF is a dirty word."

We travel light, we push through pain, we chuckle at our body's physical rebellions, joke about stumbling or hallucinating or vomiting. For our stubbornness and triumphs, we're awarded medals and belt buckles. We get labeled inspirations, immortals, machines, kings and queens of the mountains, conquerors of the wild.

And sometimes we are.

But it becomes easy for any of us—runners or race organizers, outdoor veterans or novices, midpackers or elite runners—to forget how thin the line between life and death on the trails really is.

Arturo's case is not an isolated one. In 2008, two runners died of hypothermia in a snowstorm just minutes from the finish line of the rugged, 10-mile Zugspitze Extreme-Berglauf race on Germany's highest peak. The next year, three runners perished in a storm—at least two confirmed of hypothermia—after slipping down a grassy slope during France's Grand Raid du Mercantour. Hypothermia also took the life of an experienced trail runner at Spain's 2012 Ultra Pirineu, and another at the 2013 Buttermere Sailbeck Fell Run in the UK; both races were plagued by high winds and freezing rain or snow. France's Diagonale des Fous and Italy's Tor des Geants have also claimed lives in recent years when runners slipped off the trail in bad weather, sliding down steep slopes or over cliffs.

Most cases have sparked emotional debates about where responsibility lies when a runner succumbs to the elements during an organized race. Though races may create the illusion of a safer environment than a solo run in the backcountry, they also carry additional risks—sometimes causing people to venture out in dangerous weather, say, that might otherwise inspire a rain check.

At the 2014 Hardrock 100 in Colorado, for example, many runners went marching up above treeline in the midst of a lightning storm—a choice it's hard to imagine anyone making if not for the pressure of a ticking race clock. That same weekend, separate lightning strikes killed two people in Rocky Mountain National Park and sent 20 more to the hospital.

Especially if traveling from afar, runners may feel pressure to "get their money's



Race director Stjepan Pavicic course scouting in Patagonia for Ultra Fiord before its inaugural running.

worth" by finishing a race no matter what. Well-intentioned fellow runners, pacers or crew cajole one other into being strong and not quitting. And a fallible race organization's security protocols may not match what runners were promised when they forked over their entry fees.

The truth is that none of us—no matter how experienced or fit or strong—is immune from scenarios that, if experienced in the wrong place at the wrong time, can prove fatal. A rolled ankle. A misstep off the side of a trail. Stray rockfall. Errors in nutrition or hydration that result in life-threatening conditions. Poor decisions made when sleep deprived. Bad weather, muddy terrain, a gear failure or a navigational mistake that unexpectedly slows one's pace in harsh conditions.

Perhaps no one can speak as well to this point as Steve Tally, 55, an experienced ultrarunner who nearly died at last year's Lost Boys 50-Miler in southern California. After missing a few turns and running 10 bonus miles in high wind and rain, Steve began to stumble. He wrote off his clumsiness as the usual "symptoms" of fatigue at the end of an ultra. He wasn't shivering and didn't even feel particularly cold, despite his clothes being soaked.

At an aid station at mile 46, a volunteer looked him in the eye and said, "Are you sure you're OK to continue?" He said yes, still cracking jokes about the crazy weather.

Two and a half miles later, Steve stopped moving. A buddy running with him called 911 and ran to the finish to get help. The race had hired a nonprofit called Ultra Medical Team to be on site; their team was able to administer aid to the semi-conscious Steve until the fire department showed up with a wheeled stretcher to carry him to an ambulance.

Hypothermia occurs when the body's temperature drops below 95 degrees. Anything below 90 can be life threatening. When Steve finally reached the hospital more than two hours after he'd collapsed, his body temperature was 82 degrees. It was estimated to have been as low as 78 before the first responders' aid.

"What scares me most is that there was never a point where I decided to sit down," says Steve, who recovered well and returned for a top-10 finish at Lost Boys in 2016. "The last thing I remember was running along the trail. Then I woke up in an ambulance. As ultrarunners, we think, 'As long as the decision's mine, I can push forward to any finish line.' But another 10 minutes out there and my heart could have stopped. It was very scary and very humbling."

A NUMBER OF CONCERNS about Ultra Fiord's safety protocols surfaced after its inaugural running in 2015. Among the most upset runners was Nikki Kimball—arguably also one of the most experienced participants, with 20 years of ultramarathons and Nordic and ski-mountaineering races under her belt. For most of the race, she had run with Kerrie Bruxvoort, another top American runner with more than a dozen ultra wins to her name in just three years.

The women held a comfortable lead together, enjoying the magnificent scenery and challenging terrain. But they also stopped multiple times to assist runners on the course who'd become hypothermic. (Ultra Fiord does not permit pacers, and, because most aid stations are accessible only by foot, horseback or boat, crewing is virtually impossible.) One runner's fingers were so frozen he'd accidentally broken his only headlamp in the middle of the night while fumbling to change its batteries. Nikki and Kerrie sandwiched him for miles to ensure he made it through the night.

When they reached the Estancia Perales aid station at mile 75, they inquired about the status of two friends ahead of them on the course. The race personnel had no record of the runners passing through and couldn't confirm their location. Nikki was



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worried they might be lost or worse. As reported later by Anne-Marie Dunhill of Sleepmonsters.com, the aid-station captain’s response was dismissive: “No way was I going to send anyone up there, because the rescuers could have become victims. ... Sadly we can’t do anything for anyone at night; our best shot was to wait till dawn to send someone.”

Angry and worried by what they perceived to be negligence on NIGSA’s part, Nikki and Kerrie decided not to continue the race, despite being in good condition. Later, especially after they learned their friends had already passed safely through the aid station, they felt judged by some who implied they’d simply not been tough enough to finish Ultra Fiord.

“Part of dropping out was making a point,” says Nikki. “We didn’t drop because we couldn’t finish, but because we thought people might be dead out there. It was really disturbing.”

Despite her misgivings at the time, Nikki said after the race she believed that if NIGSA bolstered its communication systems, safety protocols and education about Ultra Fiord’s extreme risks, it still had “the potential to become an icon,” a new classic on the international trail-running circuit.

Jeff Browning, who added his win at the inaugural Ultra Fiord to a long list of ultramarathon wins spanning the past decade, agreed: “It seems to me like Ultra Fiord is what Hardrock was in the beginning, like before they thought, ‘Oh, we should probably put a fixed rope on the snowfield coming off Virginus Pass.’ I really think it has the original Hardrock spirit.”

However, in a post-race email to Pavicic, Browning conveyed his belief—echoed by many others who ran that year—that NIGSA needed to make some changes, including incorporating mandatory gear checks. Such required equipment lists



2015 Ultra Fiord runners Jeff Browning, Nikki Kimball and Kerrie Bruxvoort.

are uncommon in the United States, but they’re standard at many ultras abroad. At the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB), for example, runners can be disqualified at random aid-station gear checks if they’re missing certain mandatory equipment, such as a waterproof hooded jacket, waterproof pants, warm cap, headlamps and spare batteries, or a first-aid kit and emergency blanket.

Ultra Fiord enumerated a similar gear list on its website, adding a synthetic insulated jacket to the usual inventory. But NIGSA did not conduct any checks before or during the race last year.

“If you don’t check the packs, people will not carry everything,” Browning wrote to Pavicic, “and if bad weather rolls in, someone with not enough gear would be in serious danger very quickly.”

This year, it seemed as though Pavicic would heed the advice to show more concern for runners’ safety. At the last minute, due to an especially grim weather forecast, he decided to modify the course. Even for April in Patagonia—the height of autumn in the Southern Hemisphere—the projected high winds, heavy rain, snow, sleet and freezing temperatures concerned him.

To the disappointment of many runners, Pavicic cut out the glacier crossing. Instead, all runners of Ultra Fiord’s longer distances (100-mile, 100K and 70K) would be partially rerouted onto the new 50K course he’d devised for 2016—a lower-altitude, less technical mountain pass. The 100-miler would be shortened to 88 miles.

No mandatory gear checks, however, would be carried out this year either.

IN THE TWO DAYS following this year’s race, NIGSA made no online acknowledgment of Arturo’s passing. His family—including his wife, two grown children, sister and brother-in-law—received mixed information initially. Pavicic told them that Arturo had died during the race, but local police said he was still considered a missing person. Any solid confirmation was prevented for days by the storm—so severe that the national special-operations police force, GOPE Carabineros de Chile, would not be able to retrieve Arturo’s body by helicopter



Runners faced high winds and developing snow storms on the highest, most exposed stretch of the 2016 Ultra Fiord course.

until three and a half days later. In that time, more than three feet of snow piled up.

Social media, meanwhile, exploded with outrage over rumors of Arturo’s death. Many of the angriest and saddest were those who’d run Ultra Fiord the previous year and felt their grievances had been ignored by the race organization.

“To have insufficient safety protocols in the inaugural year of an event is not good, but can be potentially understood,” wrote Nikki Kimball in a Facebook post. “A death due to hypothermia in the second year after significant feedback to the race director is not acceptable.”

Many of this year’s runners were also upset, though most for an array of reasons independent of Arturo’s death. Buses carrying 30K runners had gotten lost on their way to the start line. Many aid stations ran low on food; at least one was missing altogether, due to a problem with the horse supplying it. Several runners who sustained minor injuries felt there were inadequate medical supplies and inexperienced race personnel at aid stations. Many 50K and 70K runners waited up to five hours in the cold at their remote finish line for the boats that NIGSA had promised would take them back to Puerto Natales.

Perhaps the most traumatized of all was 50K runner Micaela Schirinian, 63, of Argentina. A few hours before Arturo perished, on roughly the same stretch of the course, several 70K runners found Micaela sitting alone on the side of the trail in heavy snow and winds. Fellow Argentinians Eduardo Ripoll and Franco Simunek quickly determined she was hypothermic and mentally compromised. They picked her up and carried her to the next checkpoint, Chacabuco 2, about two and a half miles ahead—a herculean task that took them nearly an hour over the snow-coated scree fields.

The checkpoint consisted of three backpacking tents. Three race personnel were stationed there, one of whom—according to Pavicic—was certified as an emergency medical technician and wilderness first responder. After Micaela had regained her body temperature in one of the tents, she says she hoped for an evacuation by helicopter, but NIGSA deemed the situation a non-emergency.

They also worried about whether a helicopter could safely make it in the worsening weather. Because they felt the checkpoint had sufficient sleeping bags, food and camp

stove fuel to last several days, they thought the best course of action would be for Micaela to stay camped out with race personnel until the weather cleared.

Around the same time, another 50K runner, Eliane Carvalho, 49, of Brazil, had also arrived in distress. She’d slipped in an icy river earlier, soaking all her clothes. Soon after, her fingers froze, causing excruciating pain. She could not eat or drink, and began stumbling and falling frequently. Another runner helped escort her into the tent at the same checkpoint. (Several hours later, the race personnel here would also be the first responders to Arturo.)

Over the next three days, Eliane and Micaela camped out in a single tent with NIGSA’s mountain staff, awaiting clear weather for an evacuation. All day long, wind gusts battered their tents and water seeped in. The batteries on the team’s satellite devices died rapidly on the first night, cutting off communication with the race organization. Two of the race personnel hiked out in a blizzard the next day to call for help, as well as to confirm Arturo’s passing to those on the ground.

Two days later, when the weather

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Shortly after passing the third Chacabuco checkpoint, a runner ponders crossing a river of glacier melt along the muddy descent back into the forest.

finally cleared, two helicopters were dispatched, unbeknownst to those at the Chacabuco 2 camp. Before the helicopters arrived, Eliane and Micaela—accompanied by race personnel—began hiking out. After a six-hour trek down to the town of Serrano, they were picked up by police and transported back to Puerto Natales.

The two women’s accounts later differed vastly. Micaela told me there was very little food available, and that the race personnel just slept and smoked marijuana and cigarettes in the tents all day. Eliane, on the other hand, recalled being comforted by the calm demeanor of the mountain staff, whom she says made food and coffee and sang songs to keep everyone’s spirits high.

“Thank you from my heart for the care and patience,” she later wrote to NIGSA, praising her rescuers’ competence. “I would do it all again. Unfortunately I could not complete the race. That was my goal, but who knows in a new opportunity. I love running; it makes me feel free. Freedom is priceless.”

Indeed, despite some negative reports, many other runners loved their experiences at Ultra Fiord this year.

Genís Zapater, 25, of Spain—who’d called the 2015 edition “the best fight I have ever lived through”—had equally florid prose for his experience winning the 70K in 2016, calling it “the most beautiful race, perhaps for me the best in the world.”

Chilean Javier Chávez Barra, 37, ran the 100K both last year and this year. As

a mid-pack runner who grew up in Patagonia but now lives in Santiago, he told me, “No other race has created this kind of nirvana for me. We ran through the wildest part of Patagonia and, for me, the wildest part of being human.”

FOR THE 2017 ULTRA FIORD, NIGSA has vowed to enact many of the changes Browning and others recommended last year—a more robust communications system and evacuation plan, strengthened pre-race information and technical talks about the race’s high risks, and better trained race personnel to pay attention to runners’ conditions when they pass through aid stations and checkpoints.

“Although it took some time for Stjepan to acknowledge his part of responsibility, in candid talks with us, he did accept what should have been done better by NIGSA,” says Arturo’s brother-in-law, Bobby Manjarrez, “and most important, his commitment to work on what he’ll call the ‘Arturo Rule’—a series of regulations that he’s pledged to enforce in the future.”

This will include mandatory gear checks before and during the race and a zero-tolerance policy for letting runners continue without all required equipment. It is a rule Pavicic says he is sad to enact, because he feels it robs some freedom from the runners, but one he also understands now is necessary.

Bobby and his wife, Nohemi, are also avid trail runners. After the race, they traveled to Patagonia to bring Arturo’s body back home. They were touched by the amicability and support of Pavicic who, with their blessing, is working to have the pass through Chacabuco officially named in Arturo’s honor.

“Arturo was always looking for how to improve and learn new things,” says Bobby. “He was humble enough to ask for advice when he knew someone else knew best, but was always trying to also pass along what he’d learned to others.”

Bobby and Nohemi believe the best way to honor their brother’s love of running in the mountains is for Ultra Fiord to continue in future years. As for honoring Arturo’s passion for sharing knowledge? We all have an opportunity to pay our homage by learning what we can from what happened in Patagonia this year and working together to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

“You say goodbye to us from the place you most loved life, where you were doing what you loved,” Sofia wrote in a tribute to her father. “There is no doubt that your last day was your happiest.”

YITKA WINN traveled to Patagonia to run Ultra Fiord this year. She thanks Amy O’Toole and George Orozco for translation assistance in interviews, and thanks Arturo Martínez Rueda for helping a few friends find a place to stay the day before the race.