

Episode 37: Ray went from 500 pounds to ultrarunner

My conversation today is with Ray, who lives in St Augustine, Florida. Just a couple of years ago, Ray was on a downward spiral in terms of his health. Like a lot of people, his weight had gotten out of control. He didn't realize how far off track he was until he visited a doctor one day.

That doctor visit was his wake-up call. And he definitely woke up. I think you're gonna love this story.

I also wanted to mention something right up front. Part of Ray's amazing turnaround is the fact that he underwent gastric bypass surgery. And I want to be clear, and Ray will tell you this as well, this is not for everyone, and it's not an easy quick fix. If you're considering it, or really if you're thinking about ANY change in your diet or exercise regimen, you should consult your doctor for advice. In this case, this surgery was just a tool that was available to Ray, and he used it to his advantage.

And his transformation has been amazing. Calling this a "weight loss success story" is a huge understatement. He has plunged headfirst into the world of long distance running, which, as you might be aware, is also a personal interest of mine. Hopefully we didn't geek out too much on the details of ultrarunning, and I hope you find his story and his progress as interesting and inspiring as I did. And at the end, I'll have a quick update on Ray and how he did in his most recent race, because when he and I spoke, that race was still in the future.

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And now, please enjoy my conversation with Ray.

Scott

Ray, what kind of work do you do?

Ray

Currently, I'm a project manager for a large company that builds online websites and do marketing for customers here in Jacksonville.

Scott

So, kind of an IT-oriented position?

Ray

Yeah, it's an office job. I'm at my desk for a good portion of the day. I roll out big releases that we have for our customer service department. I, kind of, coordinate between our marketing group and product group and make sure we're getting our call center agents the information they need.

Scott

It sounds like the type of job where you wouldn't be - it would be considered a kind of sedentary position - out walking around or anything like that. That kind of fits with the story here. Let's take us back. Two and a half years ago, you were 34 years old. What was your life like then?

Ray

Well, I would like to say that I was happy at that time - it seemed happy. I was 34 years old. My life was pretty much getting up, going to work, and coming home. I was over 500 pounds. I didn't know how much I weighed at the time. I just knew that I always, kind of, knew I was a big guy. Most of it was attributed to eating really poorly. I made a lot of bad food choices, which I found out kind of a little bit later when I looked back at what I was eating. Lack of exercise, lack of activity, plus making really bad food choices led to me being as large as I was.

Scott

Yeah. That's unfortunately true about a lot of Americans - the obesity epidemic - but you had, kind of, taken that to more of an extreme.

Ray

Yeah. Looking back, I would, kind of, lie to myself, "I'm not that big." Anytime I see somebody out in public that was, maybe, a little bit bigger, then I would think, "At least I'm not that guy or that person." It started two and a half years ago, in around March of 2017. I started getting progressively worse. Being active was really difficult - walking from my desk at work just out to my car. I have really bad and severe back pain. I couldn't do much with my kids. Taking my kids to places was very difficult. So, it just was really starting to impact me.

Scott

So what made you finally decide to go to the doctor?

Ray

As I said, I was having a lot of back problems - or what I perceived to be back problems - and I wanted to see if there was anything that the doctor could do for me. So, I asked my wife and she had set up an appointment for me. When she scheduled it, they asked what it was for. Prior to that, I hadn't gone to the doctor for probably a decade. I tried to avoid them at all costs because when I had gone in the past - I was pretty much heavy my whole life - I always heard, "Your weight is a problem." So, just because of the back problems, eventually, I wanted to go to the doctor and see if there was something wrong.

Scott

Tell us about that visit to the doctor. What happened?

Ray

It was a real eye-opener. As I said, I didn't go for quite some time. I wasn't, like, checking how much I weighed on any consistent basis because most scales at home didn't work - I was too, too big for them. So, when I was getting screened at the doctor's, they were checking my blood pressure, how much I weighed - I stepped on the scale for, probably, the first time in close to a decade - and I would read 509 pounds. I immediately got really, like, sick to my stomach because I didn't think I was that big. I didn't feel like I was that big. The first thing that the doctor said was, "You don't have a back problem. You thought you're still a pretty young guy, but you need to do something soon, or it's going to be too late."

Scott

Yeah, because you were only 34 - you were a pretty young guy.

Ray

Yeah. It was a nice lady. It was my first visit to her. She kind of suggested eating less food and drinking more water, or some blood tests - that was it. She didn't really put me on any type of

real path or give me any advice I haven't heard before. But when I was leaving the doctor's office, I was just so sick to my stomach over how much I had, kind of, let myself get up to that weight that I call my wife immediately and said, "I got to do something today. I can't wait any longer." Through the years, I always tried to lose weight. I would say 'I'll start on Monday' or 'I would start a diet' and then I would stop or put it off a couple of weeks later. I had a varying levels of success with it, but I would always go back to old habits.

Scott

Sure. Just like a lot of people do. This is a standard process. You lose some weight. You go off the diet. Then, you gain back that weight plus some more. It's just a never-ending cycle.

Ray

Yeah, exactly.

Scott

You hear about this with a lot of people that had a dramatic weight loss - there was something that happened that triggered something in your brain that said, "Okay, this is it. This is the end of it. I've got to do something." It sounds like your trigger was that day when you stepped on the scale...

Ray

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it's almost like I, kind of, hit rock bottom and was just kind of over it at that point. Throughout my life, everybody - my mother, my wife, and all of my family - had always said, "I'm worried about you. You need to lose weight.". I would always say, "Yeah." I understand and, kind of, push it off. But something I truly believe is, in order for you to make a life change. You really need to want it for yourself and have your own reasons for it. Somebody else they could want for you want it for you as much as they want. But it's really got to come from you. You have to be the one that wants to make that change.

Scott

Absolutely. So, you decided that something has to change that day. How did you decide what to do?

Ray

Throughout the years, I had tried varying different things - calorie counting. At one point, I went to a doctor that prescribed me a bunch of medication to lose weight. This time around, I said that I'm just gonna stick with calorie counting. I immediately started going to 1200 calories a day, or less on some days. I had a lot of success in the beginning. It was really repetitive, so that may not work for some people. I just found foods that worked for me that I enjoyed eating and didn't mind if I ate them 5 days a week.

Scott

When you were thinking about how boring the food is - the repetitiveness of the food - did you think "Well that's the price I'm paying because this is what's gonna make me lose weight."?

Ray

Yeah, a little bit. Like I said, I tried to find ways to, like, mask the food. If I was doing chicken breasts, I would try to find different ways to cook it in a way that wasn't so repetitive or something I didn't really enjoy eating. I realized it took me 34 years to get as big as I was and it

wasn't gonna just fall off overnight. I had to make a long-term change and really accept the fact that - although I'm eating this meal that I may not love - in the long run, it's going to be worth it.

Scott

With 500 pounds and 1200 calories a day, you must have been starving.

Ray

Yeah. At first, the first couple of weeks were difficult. Then, you kind of fall into a rhythm. I drink a lot of water. I tried to use my calories wisely. For example, broccoli has very few calories. So, if I was eating for dinner, I would have a big huge portion of broccoli and a little bit of chicken. So, I would try to get as full as I could on large portions of foods that didn't have a lot of calories.

Scott

Right. Yeah, you can do that with a lot of vegetables. That's great. How did it go? How did the weight loss go from there?

Ray

When you're as big as I was and you cut your calories to that level, the weight comes off pretty quickly. After about 2 - 2.5 months, I had lost 40 pounds, and I was pretty happy with the progress. I had the fear in the back of my mind that I could always fall back into bad habits and I would lose all that progress I had in the past. So, it was right around that time that I started looking into gastric bypass surgery to determine if that was something I wanted to look at and leverage for weight loss.

Scott

I want to say right up front that neither you nor I are doctors, and we're not dispensing any kind of medical advice. Anyone who is considering this should consult their own doctor. Can you describe what gastric bypass actually does? What's the process?

Ray

There are several different types of surgery. Gastric bypass is the most risky, but has the highest success rate. What they do is they reroute a part of your intestine so that your stomach is very small - typically 2-4 ounces - so that it restricts the amount of food that you can eat at one time. So, that helps for me. I decided that it would be a good tool. I had to go to a seminar where they explained it to you. For me, I looked at it as a tool - that's the way they explained it. It's not a magic pill. It's not something that's going to make you lose weight overnight. If you use it properly, you can leverage it as a tool. For me, that's what I wanted to use it as. If I ate something that wasn't necessarily the most healthy for me, there's only so much of that I could eat because, again, it restricts how much you can eat.

Scott

So the surgery itself doesn't take any weight off - it just restricts what you're able to eat...

Ray

Correct. There are people that have the surgery and didn't have success because, while it restricts your portion size, it doesn't necessarily restrict what you eat. Maybe, they're eating cupcakes all day long - they're having half a cupcake, waiting an hour later, and eating another half a cupcake. So, you still have to really make wise decisions with your food choices. Like I said, if you do fall off and have something that's not necessarily healthy, you can only have so

much of that something. So, it helps with portion control. What I gravitated to is, "Hey, this will help me with my portion controls and make sure that I'm not taking too many bad calories."

Scott

You mentioned earlier that gastric bypass - the one that you had - has the highest chance of success, but it's also the riskiest. What makes it risky?

Ray

The surgery has become so common that it's really not risky anymore - or there are some risks to it. There could be a leak where they reroute the stomach, so they would have to go back in and fix the leak. There are a few others just like any surgery - going under the anesthesia has its own risks. So, through the interview process, they kind of explained that there's, like, a certain percentage of people that have passed away from the surgery, but it's so low at this point that getting your tonsils removed is more risky than having a gastric bypass. So, I looked at it and the reward outweighed the risk. Me doing nothing is more risky than having the surgery.

Scott

Yeah, you're right. Any surgery is risky, especially when the doctor is, literally, kind of, rearranging your insides. Do they tell you to try to lose more weight before the surgery?

Ray

It's different with every doctor that you go to. Some have really strict requirements where they want you to lose a percentage of it. Also, everybody's insurance has different requirements. The company I work for did a really great job when they were working out our insurance rates and having it built-in, so we didn't have to really meet many requirements. We just had to meet the doctor's requirements. The doctor I went to didn't really have a set limit. He wanted to see some progress that I was committed to it. Through the process, you have to go for quite a few tests to make sure that you're healthy enough to last through the surgery. You also have to speak with a psychiatrist, because they want to make sure - this is a huge procedure - that you're really dedicated to making a lifelong change, and that you're not looking at this as, like, a magic pill that, once it's done, you're gonna lose all the weight tomorrow.

Scott

Yeah, there's definitely a big mental aspect to this. So, how much weight have you lost by the time you had the surgery?

Ray

When I started considering, I had lost about 40 pounds - that was right around June of 2017. I had my surgery at the beginning of September. By then, I had lost 90 pounds. So, I went from 509 to, like, 419 on the day of surgery.

Scott

So, you lost 90 pounds... Did you ever consider "Maybe I don't need to do this surgery. I could just lose it all on my own."?

Ray

Yeah, the thought was there. In the back of my mind, I still had that fear that I would go back to my bad habits. So far, in this process, I made the decision that this was going to be the thing that is, kind of, my safety net. If you do fall off the bandwagon or make a mistake, you can't

make that many mistakes because this is gonna really help you restrict that. I never had surgery in my entire life, so it was a pretty big step. There were parts of me that wanted to just see if I could, but I had pretty much committed to it at that point and wanted to follow through.

Scott

How nervous were you going in, like, that morning?

Ray

I was really nervous. It didn't hit me until they, kind of, took me into the back and started prepping me. Then, my wife and I had to sit in the pre-op area for, like, 45 minutes. I was pretty nervous.

Scott

Lots of time to work up those nerves.

Ray

As I said, I just kept on telling myself, "This is going to be for the long term. This is going to be really great for me. This is something that they do every single day." It was kind of funny when you were going through that process. When we booked my appointment, the doctors were, like, "You're the first one of the day, and then I have 9 more the rest of the day." They're doing the surgeries in bulk. So

Scott

That's a good way to look at it. That's the perspective. I had, kind of, the same thing when I had Lasik surgery. When I thought about it, "Man, this is your eyes. I can see okay with glasses. Do you really want to take a chance on messing that up?" But then, the guy that did the surgery has done, like, 20,000, so it's just routine to him, but it's not routine for me. This surgery wasn't routine for you because it's the only time you'd ever have it done but, for the doctor, it's just another day.

Ray

Exactly.

Scott

Were you exercising at all during that time?

Ray

Not when I was that big. When I was 400 pounds, my mobility still wasn't very good. I would try to walk around a little bit more at work. I'd get up every hour or so and just, kind of, walk around the building, but I wasn't really doing much of what I would actually consider 'exercise'.

Scott

How long did the surgery take and how did you feel right after?

Ray

The surgery wasn't very long - I think it was about an hour. Then, I was in the hospital for two days. The pain wasn't too bad at all. In fact, I probably only took pain medicine on the first day. Then, when I got home, they gave me pain medicine. I didn't take any of it because it wasn't too painful. Because they did it laparoscopically, there were only a couple of small incisions. So, I was in the hospital for about 2 days. The 2 days are just to make sure that nothing is leaking

from where they connected the intestines. While I drink some liquid, they had to watch and make sure that everything was still connected and there were no leaks.

Scott

Right. You don't want any leaks - that's for sure. How long did it take to fully heal?

Ray

Not long at all. I actually took the recommended 2 weeks. So, I worked from home the first week. Then, I took, like, 3 days off of work - I used PTO. Then, I worked from home the following week. Then, I was back at work. As I said, I'm not very active at work, so it wasn't too bad. I was up and able to drive and do everything I needed to do within five to seven days.

Scott

I'm thinking that the people at work didn't really understand - you probably already explained to them - what the surgery was, or they probably knew but some people that didn't really know might see you come back the first day at work and think, "Well, wait a minute, you're the same size."

Ray

No, I think they kind of knew. That surgery is becoming more common. There were other people in my office that had similar surgery, so they kind of saw other people who had gone through the same process.

Scott

What were the instructions that they gave you on how your eating habits had to change? Just eat less? Was there something else more than that?

Ray

Once I had the surgery, one of the things that I was told was 'no carbonated beverages'. So, I haven't had a soda, carbonated water, or anything carbonated in, like, 2 years because of the way that the carbonation can react with your stomach. Also, when I do eat, I can't drink and eat - I can drink something 30 minutes before I eat and, then, wait 30 minutes to drink something. Then, have them in small portions.

Scott

I got a question about the drinking, though. What would happen if you didn't wait?

Ray

If I didn't wait, it could actually increase the size of my stomach. It could make me sick because the food, kind of, naturally digests. If you drink, it kind of forces the food down, so you can get kind of nauseous and sick from it.

Scott

Of course, the main thing is you have to have smaller portion sizes. If your stomach is so much smaller, you must get full pretty quickly.

Ray

Yeah, absolutely. It's kind of weird. Right after the surgery, I had to be on, like, a liquid diet for about 2 weeks. Then, I was finally able to eat, like, soft food. One of the first things I had was a single scrambled egg. They tell you to eat slowly and naturally. I've always eaten kind of fast. I

got about halfway through the egg when I had eaten too much - I got nauseous and sick from having half of a scrambled egg at first.

Scott

That has got to be the weirdest thing. I mean, before, you could sit down to a burger, a double cheeseburger, fries, a beer, and you're fine. But now, you're feeling full just from half an egg.

Ray

Over time, that changes a little bit. Now, I can eat a little bit more. Now, I can probably eat an egg and a half to two scrambled eggs. At first, I was on liquids. My stomach was pretty small. It definitely messes with your mind a little bit because you're so used to eating big portions. Now, you're eating way smaller portions because, throughout the process prior to my surgery, like I said, my calorie count was really low. I was eating large portions of broccoli and healthy foods like big salads, a lot of lettuce, and things like that. So yeah, it definitely took some time to get adjusted to.

Scott

Fundamentally, if you physically can't eat very much food - your body requires a certain amount of protein, carbohydrates, and nutrition - can you get enough by what you're able to eat?

Ray

That's a really good question. One of the things you do have to go on immediately is supplements - multivitamins, vitamin B, vitamin D, iron, and protein. They want you to drink protein shakes and things. I'm not a huge fan of protein shakes. It would usually take me, like, an hour to drink a protein shake, especially when my stomach was that small. Now, it's a little bit different because, after two years it was removed, I can eat a little bit more and I eat a little bit more frequently. But at first, a lot of supplements.

Scott

Okay, so take us to, like, 6 months post-surgery. What was your weight? How did you lose weight after the surgery? Was it just as quick?

Ray

Yeah. It started falling off really quickly. I had the surgery in September, and it was right around March when I, kind of, hit my first plateau - at that time, I was down to about 275-280 pounds.

Scott

So, at that point, you had lost, like, 230 pounds.

Ray

It just started slowing down. At first, I was losing, like, a pound a day, almost every day - it was coming off really easily. I was really happy with my progress but I didn't want to stop there. One night, I decided that I was gonna go out for a walk. So, I started doing nightly walks for, like, a mile or two.

Scott

So you started walking. How did you transition that into running?

Ray

One night, I just decided that the walking was alright, but I wanted to kind of challenge myself. So, I said, "Let's see if I can run." I work with a couple of folks that labeled themselves as runners. They were always talking about 5K's and doing those on the weekend, which sounded interesting. So, I decided that I would just try to run for a mile and I didn't enjoy it at all. It was very hard. I wasn't very good at it.

Scott

People listening to this right now are thinking "Yeah, I can understand. I wouldn't enjoy it either."

Ray

It was really just to see if I could do it. It was probably around May, I think, when I first wanted to try doing a mile. I slowly started improving and was able to do a mile. Then, one of my co-workers who - she doesn't classify herself as a runner - does a lot of 5K's, kind of, challenged me and said, "Hey, I'm doing this 5K. Why don't you do it with me? It's in September." So, it kind of gave me a couple of months to train for it. Then, I said, "Sure, I'll give it a shot."

Scott

So, you set a goal of doing a 5K. There's a common exercise program called 'Couch to 5K'. Did you do that? Or did you just kind of create your own training plan?

Ray

I kind of did my own thing. At that time, we were living in Middleburg, Florida, which isn't too far from where we're at here in St. Augustine. My daughter had karate every night 3 miles away from our house. So, I would walk a mile, try to run a mile, and then walk a mile. Then, I would try to switch it up and, maybe, run the first mile, walk the second mile, and then run. So, I would just try to change it up as much as I could up to the lead-up to the actual race.

Scott

Yeah, you can only do it a little bit at a time - that's the way to do it. How did your co-workers react to seeing you getting smaller and smaller?

Ray

It's funny because I've worked for the same company for over 15 years and I originally started working for the company in Pennsylvania, where I originally lived. We moved down to Florida about 6 years ago, but I had a lot of co-workers up in PA. When they came down on a business trip and saw me for the first time, they were just shocked that I looked like a different human being.

Scott

Yeah, it's always fun to have those interactions because you know they're gonna be shocked.

Ray

Yeah.

Scott

Alright. Tell us about your first 5K. How did that go?

Ray

It went better than I thought it was going to be. I finished in just under 34 minutes, so I was really excited. I ran the whole thing - that was one of my goals. I didn't really care how quick it was - I wanted to run the full 3.1 miles without stopping or walking. I was able to do that and got really excited about that. That's what hooked me on running. Then, in the following months, I think I ran 5-6 5K's through November and December.

Scott

Yeah. And 34 minutes is, like, an 11-minute pace. You definitely didn't come in last place, obviously.

Ray

Yeah, no. I think it was, like, 5th place in my age group, so I was really happy with the result.

Scott

Yeah, I think part of the key to a long process like this is having wins all along the way - that's what keeps you motivated.

Ray

Yeah. The one thing I always liked, kind of, when I first started running was seeing the progress and measuring it. I remember doing, like, treadmill training which, at first, I used to do a lot. Now, I enjoy running outside much more. At first, I remember, "Hey, I just ran a 10-minute mile. That's the first time I ever ran it." Then, I took a picture of the treadmill so that I can look back and say, "Okay, 2 weeks ago, I couldn't keep an 11-minute pace, but now I can keep a 10-minute and 45-second pace."

Scott

Yeah. It's obviously progress, for sure. What was your weight when you did that first 5K?

Ray

I think I was 220-ish. I mean, for my size, I'm just right under six feet - 5'11".

Scott

Alright. What happened after that?

Ray

At the beginning of 2019, the same coworker that challenged me to the first 5K said, "Hey, the Gate River Run is coming up. It's one of the largest 15K's. You should try it." Prior to that, I never ran more than 3 miles, so I was really hesitant. On the same day, they also have a 5K, so I was like, "I'll sign up for the 5K." She's like, "No, you got to do the 15K!"

Scott

You got to do three 5K's that day!

Ray

Yeah. So, I decided to give it a shot. I signed up for it, I think, at the very beginning of January. I started picking up my training and running a little bit more. At that time, I was running 3 times a week and doing 3 miles a run. So, I was doing 9 miles a week. The most mileage I did was, like, a week or two before the 15K. I had gotten up to, I think, 25 or 30 miles for the week - I think my longest run was 8 miles.

Scott

One of the things you got to watch out for when you're training and increasing your weekly mileage is injury. You could pull a muscle or anything like that. Did you ever have any kind of running injuries?

Ray

I've been pretty fortunate. I've only had one and it was way after I started doing a couple of ultra marathons when I had my first scare, but it wasn't anything too serious. I think I just rested for a couple of days then I was fine.

Scott

It seems like you have a natural gift for running. I mean, some people just have that built-in. I've done some Ultras myself, but I don't have that gift - that's why I'm so slow. What happened after the 15k? You finish that in a pretty decent time and you wanted to go even farther...

Ray

Yeah, so I finished the Gate in an hour and 26 minutes. At that time, I kind of realized that I keep the same pace for quite some time for longer runs. With the shorter 5K's, I would go to some of the small events and I would do okay. I think I came in, like, 3rd once or twice. I kind of naturally realized that I was never going to win a 5K pace with guys my age because some of them were doing 17-18 minute 5K's and I'm just not that fast.

Scott

Yeah, that's ridiculous.

Ray

I realized that I kind of enjoy this longer stuff - it's more challenging. So, after the Gate - I did the 15K - I said, "I wanted to do a half marathon." So, I was looking all over the place and I couldn't find one - everyone I found was either too far away. I found a 25K which was only, like, 45 minutes away from my house - it was the Angry Tortoise 25K. I tried to sign up, waited a day, and it was sold out, so I had to actually reach out to the race director and she graciously lets me join the race even though it was sold out, which is very exciting.

Scott

That's a 25K, which is 15.5 miles, right?

Ray

Yep. I figured, like, "Oh, if I was gonna do a half marathon at 13.1, what's a couple of extra miles?"

Scott

What's a couple of extra miles? Why not? Okay, so you did that one. Then, you went into the world of ultra marathons, which is anything longer than standard marathons - 26.2 miles. Then, you moved into the world of Ultras without even doing a marathon.

Ray

Yeah. The 25K was also my first trail marathon, which I really liked. It went really well up until the very end when I got some cramps and didn't stop at the aid stations - I made a bunch of mistakes. So, I kind of walked a portion of the end of the race and then ran it at the end. After the race, I was slightly disappointed in my result even though I finished it. I was happy with that,

but it wasn't necessarily my goal time that I wanted to finish. So, I almost immediately wanted to do another trail race. So, I found a 50K and decided that I was going to sign up for that - it was the 'Sweat, Swat n Swear!'. I want to say that it was May and that was, like, the hottest day of the year. So, I kind of got hooked on it from there.

Scott

So, you've done a 50k. You've done a couple of things that most people would look at and say, "That's impossible! I could never do that! You went from over 500 pounds and lost all that weight. Then, you've also gotten into and finished a 50K race, which is 31 miles. Did you ever think, "Man, a couple of years ago, you were a completely different person"? How did you process that in your mind?

Ray

It's kind of hard. It kind of fucks with your mind a little bit - excuse my language. When I was 500 pounds, I remember hearing all my friends and co-workers talking about running, and I would joke with them and say, "You guys are crazy. You must like to torture yourselves." But once I started running, it's kind of something that I found that relieves a lot of stress for me and something I really gravitated towards. It does mess with your mind a little bit to think about how much of a difference in lifestyle is.

Scott

I know ultra runners have a kind of different relationship with pain than, maybe, the typical person.

Ray

Yeah, it's funny. My toenails are all black and my wife would just look at me, shakes her head sometimes, and doesn't understand why I do it. For me, as I said, it's a challenge to see how far, how long, and how hard can I run.

Scott

Are you at your goal weight now? What do you weigh now?

Ray

I vary day to day. If I weigh myself in the morning, I'm about 195. Then, after I hydrate and everything after my run, I'm usually 200-ish. So, I'm pretty happy with the weight. At one point, I had gotten down to 182 pounds, but it wasn't healthy because I didn't do it the right way. Before I started really running hard, I kind of became obsessed with the number on the scale, which was kind of unhealthy. I would definitely dehydrate myself. I would hardly drink anything all day and didn't have the best relationship with food for a little bit.

Scott

Just to see how low that number could go?

Ray

Yeah, I wanted to hit under 180 - it's kind of silly - but the BMI body mass index for me to be a normal weight was 179 pounds. I wanted to get to a normal weight and I was doing it at any cost. It just got to a point where I was actually making my running harder. As I said, I was dehydrating myself and wasn't eating enough calories for how much I was putting out. Now, I'm happy with how much I weigh. I drink a lot more fluids and make sure I'm properly hydrated and have good nutrition.

Scott

Do you have a coach?

Ray

I do not. I've considered it, but there are a lot of resources online. I think, one day, I probably will look to have a coach but I have had a decent amount of success so far, at least, with no injuries and things of that nature.

Scott

Yeah, you're doing pretty well.

Ray

Yeah, I've looked into it, but it's not something that I've, kind of, pulled the trigger on yet.

Scott

So what's next? What kind of races do you have coming up?

Ray

I have a 50-mile race on November 2 - the Saint Sebastian. Now, they're only doing the 50 - they had a 100-mile event but I guess they didn't get enough people. So, I'm doing a 50-miler in November. I'm looking at possibly doing something in December. Then, in January, I have the long haul, which is a 100-mile race.

Scott

Do you have your training plan already mapped out?

Ray

My training plan is pretty much just to do what I've been doing. At this point, I've run 100 miles a week, at least. I've kind of been doing that since I signed up for those races. I've just kind of committed to doing 100 miles a week, at least.

Scott

Yeah, it's a big difference. I. It took me a couple of years of training to go from 50K to 100K. Well, actually, I trained for a year to do my first 100-miler. Then, situations would come up, like, the week before and I wasn't able to do that race. So, I had another year of training to do that same race the following year. You gotta respect 100 miles - that's a serious, serious distance.

Ray

Yeah. It was right after I finished the 50K in May - that Monday - when I signed up for the long haul and in Saint Sebastian. Right away, I realized, like, "I've got six months or so to train for this. To do it right, I have to get my mileage up." That's kind of where I had the injury scare. I went from doing, like, 45-50 miles a week to 69 miles, and then an 80 mile a week. I was having some pain in my right shin, but it was not where you would traditionally get shin splints. I thought it was a stress fracture, so I went to the doctor and had some X-rays taken. They said it was just a little bit of overuse. They told me to have rest for a few days and take it easy for 2-3 days. Then, I felt fine.

Scott

It's almost kind of hard to imagine that you were over 500 pounds just two and a half years ago. Now, in a few months, you're gonna be at the starting line of a 100-mile race. How would you describe how different your life is now?

Ray

It's dramatically different. When I think back about my life before, I was kind of a sloth. I just didn't do anything, and it impacted my kids and my wife. It just wasn't good. Now, I'm just more of an active person. I wake up at 4 AM every day just to make sure that I get my runs in. Then, from there, I go to work feeling energized. I come home and do a run - I do, like, a 3 or a 5 mile run every night. My daughter would come with me while riding her bike. So, it's just trying to be not only just more active but more engaged with my family. Some of the changes I've made have, kind of, really let me do that because it just wasn't possible before.

Scott

Now, you've got a better chance of seeing your kids grow up and growing old with your wife.

Ray

Yeah, exactly. That was, kind of, another very large motivating factor. It's not only about just stepping on the scale, but also taking a look back at the big picture and seeing how I was impacting my kids. One memory that sticks out is we went to Universal in Orlando. We were there for 40 minutes and I couldn't walk anymore, so we had to leave and the kids were devastated. They wanted to go to Universal. We spent all this money to take them to Universal, but I couldn't make it for more than 40 minutes.

Scott

Man, that's got to be, like, a punch in the gut.

Ray

Yeah, it really doesn't make you feel good about yourself. That was right before I had, kind of, started on a downward spiral where I was having more and more problems with just being mobile.

Scott

Well, you did it! Congratulations! You have really defied the odds. It sounds like you're the type of person that relishes a challenge.

Ray

Yeah. There is something about challenging myself. I know they, kind of, say "Race your own race" and things like that. I recently did the 6-hour Tiktok Ultra race. And

Scott

You may not mention it, but you did pretty well in that race, right? How did you finish?

Ray

I finished first, overall, in the 6-hour event. Going into the race, I had set some goals but I didn't really make it known to anybody but my wife. I said, "Hey, I'm looking at the last couple of years' results. I see what other people have done. I think I can do really well." So, I do get pretty competitive with myself. I knew how my long runs were going and I kind of targeted how many miles I thought I could finish - it's kind of the same thing with the 50-mile and the 100-mile. I

have some goals that I haven't told many people. I told one person about what I wanted to finish in my 100 and the guy just looked at me and said I was crazy.

Scott

Well, for your first 100, just finishing is a great goal - anything on top of that is just icing. Well, maybe I'll see you out there. I volunteered several times at long haul because it's right here in the Tampa area. So, if I get out there in January, maybe I'll see you out there. It'd be good to see you in person.

Ray

That'd be awesome.

Scott

Hey, it's Scott again with just a few thoughts before we wrap up this episode.

I want to thank Justin Radley for connecting me with Ray. Justin is a good friend and a race director for several ultramarathons here in Florida.

You just heard Ray talking about the St Sebastian race, which he ran on November the 2nd of this year, 2019. This race was his first 50 mile race, and in preparing for it, he went back and added up all of his training runs, and he calculated that he ran over 1900 miles in order to be ready for race day. Apparently it worked, because he WON that race. I'm not talking about winning his age group, which would have been impressive in itself. No, he actually came in first place OVERALL. Just unbelievable.

And as his wife Sarah posted on Facebook, Ray has now OFFICIALLY achieved ultrarunner status, because he has lost the nail from one of his big toes. Pretty common to lose toenails when you do these long races. So congratulations to Ray on this race, and I'm pretty sure he's still planning to do his first hundred-miler at the Long Haul 100 race in Tampa, this January. If you're in the area, come out and cheer him on.

And if you have a crazy story of your own, or if you know of someone who has a story that might be bizarre enough to be on this podcast, tell them to contact me. They can just go to the website at WhatWaThatLike.com and click on "Submit your story". If it's a good fit for the show, I want to hear it!

Thanks again for listening, and see you in two weeks!