

ROBERT LIPSYTE

Running With a Goal of Ultra Equality

Ann Trason is enthralled by the current interest in women's college basketball because it seems to be all about women. "No one is comparing Rebecca Lobo to Michael Jordan," she said, "no one is wondering how UConn would do against the Bulls. It's so much better than hearing, 'Well, yes, women can run fast, but compared to men. . . .'"

Trason has been hearing that for years, even as she inexorably moved up to the head of the pack in what is certainly one of the most demanding and purest of competitive sports, the ultra marathon or ultra running, catch-all titles for endurance trail races of 50 to 100 miles, for track races that last 24 hours or more. Trason holds most of the women's ultra-running records, and often finishes only minutes behind the male leader.

Is she a "freakish woman" or a front-runner of the Title IX generation come to claim its mandated equal share? Is ultra a freakish sport in which so-called male assets are less important than female or gender-neutral assets or is it a glimpse of the future? And is 1996, an Olympic year in which women's sports traditionally get their quadrennial boost, going to be the breakthrough year promised since Billie Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in 1973, the Year of the Woman?

Consider the year we have just come through: Julie Krone can beat men, given the right horse, and women can probably beat men, given the right America's Cup yacht, but the mounting of women's pro leagues in basketball and softball and the renewed interest in women's figure skating, gymnastics and other sports seems to indicate that male performance and records are no longer considered the athletic standard.

And consider that this June, Ann Trason, all 105 pounds of her, might very well win the Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run, a premier ultra event. The women's winner seven years in a row, she came in third over all in 1992 and 1993, second over all in 1994 and 1995, the year she was a mere five minutes behind the winner.

Trason seems uncomfortable talking about beating men; she wants to talk about recognition and equality for women. Four months ago, in the Netherlands, she set a women's world record for 100 kilometers (7 hours 47 seconds for a little more than 62 miles). The male winner's time was 44 minutes faster, but no record. Nevertheless, he got all the media attention.

"Even more symbolic," said Trason in her soft monotone the other day from her Kensington, Calif., home, "the leading men all got metal trophies, the women all got flowers, which didn't even last till we got home. That doesn't help when you want to reach out to all those young girls who need encouragement to come out and do sports."

Trason is 35, the child of northern California teachers. Typically for her time, she ran on the boys' team in high school. She graduated from Berkeley with a degree in biochemistry, in June 1983, and celebrated with friends in a campus bar, where she met Carl Andersen, who had graduated the year before. He was a runner, too. Andersen now thinks the beer was talking when Ann, nor-



Audrey Shehyn for The New York Times

Ann Trason, who holds most women's ultra-running records, training in Berkeley, Calif.

mally shy, said, "If you're a real runner, what are you doing in a place like this?"

They made a date for 10 the next morning, at the Berkeley Fire Trail. That 10-mile conversation runs on. Andersen said he didn't realize until later that he had been running faster than usual. They were just running buddies until one Sunday four years later she called him at his office to describe the view he was missing from a look-out point on Mount Tamalpais. They ran together the next Sunday, and were married in 1990.

Frustrating symbolism: The men got trophies; the women got flowers.

Andersen, a full-time certified public accountant, has also become a running wife. He has cut back his own racing to "crew" for her, pacing the late stages of a race, running along the trail to hand her bottles of Cytomax, a carbohydrate drink, every half-hour, and a 100 calorie gel, Gu, every hour, and telling her that every other competitor is also feeling bad.

"At best, I'm a good runner, but she's off the charts," he said. "By letting her quit her teaching job, by acting as her agent, by crewing for her, I can help her achieve some significant goals."

Trason is already the only ultra runner whose Nike deal includes cash, and one of the few who can also run shorter distances; she has qualified for next month's Olympic trials in the marathon.

"People think ultra is some kind of spaghetti-eating contest for people with no talent to do anything else," she said, "but there's a lot going on. I break it down into the physical, the mental and endurance. Physical is the only gender-specific area; men have more muscle mass, the strongest man is always going to be stronger than the strongest woman. But I think the physical is only a small percentage of ultra.

"The mental part includes preparation, strategizing, problem solving. How do you deal with 22 miles through snow, then overheating? How do you avoid allowing someone to lure you into running their race? You have to learn how to run over rocks downhill without trashing your quads; it's like skiing or dancing.

"And then endurance. An ultra is not about pain — I think a marathon is about pain, about intensity — but it's about hanging in through tiredness and about staying nutritionally fueled. There is some evidence that women may use fat more efficiently. And you have to want it, you have to have the passion, you have to willing to take risks. You can never be sure you'll finish."

Trason's ultra model has been Ted Corbitt, the 76-year-old New Yorker who calls her "the greatest, a great fighter when the going gets rough." While Corbitt thinks that "freakish" women will come along to beat men now and then, male strength will win in the long run. But that's not the issue, he said: "Women's events are exciting on their own and should be judged on their own. Integrated events are O.K., but we want women champions, too."

Trason said: "I know things are changing because I see what's happening off the trail. I used to be the only woman in the race and Carl would be running alongside with the wives. Now there are other women running with me, and other men with Carl."