

Podcast 119 : Ultramarathon chat with Seanna Fallon

{INTRO:

S: I remember we were all following you in the running club on your dot, and I think you messaged the group saying that you'd fallen, and then I think we all saw your dot go get lost as well at one point, and we were just all rooting for you, but you did so well to make it 30 miles.}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

For a variety of reasons I'm a week late with this podcast, conceptually, but also, this episode was going to have additional content about my second attempt at an Ultramarathon, which I did last September but never got around to talking about. I've written a lot of that already so all I'll do is publish that next week, and then I'll be back on schedule. This also means I'll do a housekeeping update then too, to save this episode being too long.

I'd been trying to schedule in a chat with my friend Seanna for pretty much exactly a year, originally in conjunction with my original Ultramarathon episode, but life happened for both of us and it's taken this long to get together. I'm aware my last episode was also a one-to-one chat; don't get the expectation this will become a regular thing, but I think it is more interesting doing this than just having pre-recorded contributions.

Bear in mind I am not, of course, Michael Parkinson or David Letterman.

{section separation jingle}

Me: Yes, so I have got with me. It's another interview time. Another interview time. I'm getting used to this. I have with me my friend, Seanna. Seanna has been on the podcast before. They have done in my, when I used to have a travel podcast. I have had them record many things, but this is the first time I've had them actually on the podcast properly because they're a very difficult person to tie down. So, Seanna, if you'd like to tell us, tell everyone who you are, what you are, what you do and say something interesting about yourself.

S: Yeah, so I am Seanna. My pronouns are they, them, and I, yeah, I'm really glad to be on this podcast after so long trying to get together. And yeah, I guess the premise of this is we were going to talk about ultra running. I am indeed an ultra runner, although sometimes I feel a bit of imposter syndrome around saying that, but I have run ultras, hence I am an ultra runner. I've been on kind of a journey with running for a long time and yeah, just kind of like trying to live an intentional life full of adventure while also navigating that around ADHD, mental illness and lots of the hard stuff. And yeah, just that is, that's kind of my general vibe, wanting to do more of the good stuff and lead a more aligned life. And then something interesting about myself, which is the fact I always crack it out when asked about this, like in a icebreaker or whatever, is that when I was a teenager, I was a cheerleader and I competed internationally at competitions and was part of the first ever UK team to compete at the World Championships in Florida.

Me: Nice. How did you do in those World Championships, by the way? Better than we do at Eurovision?

S: I don't actually watch Eurovision, but probably about the same from what I've heard. We got through to the second day, so we did qualify for the finals, but we did get a trophy, but it was like a 10th place trophy or something.

Me: Yeah, it's not a sport that I really see a lot in. I mean, British schools, British sports, we just don't do. So I imagine the USA's would have had

S: a lot better.

Me: Basically just wiped the board with everybody, I'd imagine.

S: They do, but also UK cheer has grown a lot since then. That was nearly 20 years ago and the team I was on

then are amazing now. They're not US standards because they've got decades and decades more behind them in America. But yeah, it's cool. It's great. It's grown as a sport.

Me: Excellent. So cheerleading is one of those sports that doesn't look like a lot when you're watching it, but when you're doing it, it's really intense. It's really energetic. Do you think that's why you ended up getting into running? Because you had a background in energetic power type sports?

S: Well, actually, I guess there was a lot of crossover, but I ran before I did. I grew up running quite a lot, but not competitively. But my dad used to kind of push me and running quite a lot and say I had a lot of potential to be a good runner. And I enjoyed running, but I did actually feel like quite a lot of pressure from my dad around running, which sometimes takes the fun out of it. And then once I was out and I saw cheerleaders throwing stunts and they were looking for people to join the team. And I was like, that's the exciting shiny thing that sounds a lot more fun than just running around in circles. So my teen years, I spent a lot of time cheerleading and I wasn't the best, but I loved throwing stunts. I was quite strong. I wasn't very good at the coordination side of it, cos I'm dyspraxic. But I was strong and I could throw good stunts. And then running sort of took a backseat then and I ran a little bit in my teens. I ran 1500 metres in athletics, but in my school, it was with my school. My school was very cliquey in sports and because I wasn't in the team sports and I wasn't in everything else, I just sort of didn't really get invited to the competitions very much. But when I did run 1500 metres for the borough, I was borough champion, I won. But then they just never asked me to come back to another competition because I wasn't one of the coolest sporty kids. And then I did kind of a little bit of recreational running, growing up. And then when I was 19, I decided to run a marathon. I think it was that classic thing of like, I'd been watching the London marathon and was like, oh, I want to do that with no idea how hard it is to get into the London marathon. And then I was like, oh, I can't do that. And then I was like, oh, I'll just pick a different marathon and sign up, which I did based on how convenient the date was. But it was a trail marathon and I'd never run on trails. I didn't know there would be hills. I had no idea what I was doing. I turned up and all these people there who'd run hundreds of marathons were like, you're doing this as your first marathon and you're 19. So it was a bit of a shock to the system, but I got round and I had a good time. And then running sort of took a backseat like into my early 20s because I got very unwell with psychosis and mental illness and got in a bad lifestyle.

Me: Yeah, well, I mean, we'll talk a bit more about mental health and running later, I think, because it's definitely an important topic to look into. I mean, I'm intrigued by the fact that your first proper run was a trail marathon. That's sort of going in at the deep end, isn't it?

S: Yeah, and I had no sense of what training should be. I think I did maybe three long runs and that was my training. No speed work, no shorter runs. And I just had the I mean, obviously I was doing cheerleading and I was lifting weights a little bit, but I had no idea what I was doing, but I had the the win of youth on my side where I was like, oh, I can just rock up and see how it goes. And it was hard. I was fine. I got around.

Me: Do you think that's where you got your desire to do ultra marathons from? Because I know you've done a couple of ultra marathons.

S: Yeah, I've done I've done a few and now ultra running is my favourite type of running. And it didn't. I don't think back then I even knew what ultra running was. I didn't. I don't think I knew it was a thing. And it actually, I think the ultra side of things came about. I think I've always been drawn to things that are a bit extreme like, you know, the the feel like, oh, I don't know if I could do that. And I had for a long, I can't remember exactly when, but there was a period after I'd kind of gone through quite a severely bad time with my mental health. There was a period where I just was like, right, things have got to change. And I am going to start setting myself some goals and try and turn my life around a bit. And I've been in sort of complete self-destruct mode and in a really bad place. And I just like it was a new new years of 2013. I was like, I'm going to just start writing down things I want to achieve in my life. And I think it was then I, I one of the I had like more realistic goals. But at the time I wrote down that one day I want to run a 100 K ultra marathon. And I guess in some ways that this was just the pinnacle of like what I thought health and fitness was. And I was so far from that. But I did then take up running again more consistently. I started with a road half marathon. And I did quite well. I ran well, like for someone who hadn't trained that much at the time, I ran a sub two hour half marathon. And that was like off the back of I just given up smoking and I've been smoking like 30 a day. And, you know, I was really surprised at that. But again, youth was still on my side. I was like 25 maybe then. And yeah, so I just sort of like planted the seeds of running. And then I was I was road running over the next few years, inconsistently doing park runs, just dabbling and really getting a lot of joy from it. And there was a lot in my life that was still not very aligned. And yeah, like I'd made some changes, but I was still struggling. I was drinking too much. And I was struggling with my mental health. And then in 2014, I got a charity place to run the London Marathon for Mind, a mental health charity. So I was fundraising for that and training and I was actually injured by the time it came to race day. So I didn't have the race I hoped, but I had an amazing time. And yeah, it was another thing that was like, you know, I'd run a marathon before, but I'd gone through all this terrible period of not looking

after myself, just abusing my body. And then I was running a marathon even with an injury. And even then it had that kind of slightly extreme nature of like, I knew I was injured. There were medical people being like, well, you can carry on, but you should probably stop. I was like, no, I'm absolutely finishing this. And then after that, I didn't run for quite a while, probably quite a few years because of the injury. And I had an Achilles problem and I just I'd never went to physio. I was just like, I guess I can't run at the moment. And then I just picked it up again a few years later because I signed up for the New York Marathon, another road marathon. So trails hadn't really entered. I mean, despite having done a trail marathon before, I didn't really understand that whole world and that it was kind of a separate sport. Did the New York marathon ended up not training for that either. I'm not being sure if I was going to do it, but I had a great time and got round. There's a bit of a theme here. And then it was a couple of years later. It was when we went into lockdown. So start of 2020. I got quite, you know, we all had lockdown obsessions and I got quite into just like obsessing over fitness. So I was watching all these YouTube videos and during that window of time, we were allowed out to not be in our homes. I was living on a tiny boat at this point as well. So really needed to get out a lot. And I would go for a run, usually just a short easy run, no goals. But at that point, I had had it in my mind that I really wanted to train for a sport that I was like really pushing myself to the top of my capability. And I was watching at the time a lot of CrossFit and bodybuilding videos at the time. And I thought this might be the route that I was going to go down. So I was just running really to supplement that because I thought CrossFit and bodybuilding. I saw people online training very hard and often starting and getting to competition quickly. Not necessarily doing that well quickly, but that journey often working with a coach. I really liked the idea of working with a coach and how that would make me feel like I was an athlete working for goals. I just liked that whole concept. So I actually went down the bodybuilding route. And for people who don't know, bodybuilding is not just about getting strong. It's a very aesthetic sport. It's about, you know, you've got people getting on stages in bikinis and they're like literally assessing exactly how your muscles look and your overall look. And I'm not a very aesthetic person. Like I don't make a lot of effort with how I look. So it was also quite edgy in terms of like, I would have had to get on stage in a bikini. And it's not like I had body shame, but it was just like, that's not a world I can understand. So that actually felt kind of interesting. But I went down that process. I got really fit, really strong. I was doing consistent running, like easy running, no goals for the running just to support my fitness. But then that whole journey took me on a bit of a difficult road with my relationship with food, because it was all very, very controlled in like what you could eat and your macro breakdown and how much you can eat and cheat days and how much more you can eat on cheat days is basically the sport is essentially competitive dieting. And that was not for me. And also during that time, I was starting to become more aware of my gender identity and feeling into the fact that I was non binary or didn't feel in the gender binary in some way. And that's something that had been with me since childhood to varying degrees. But it was becoming more prevalent and bodybuilding feels like a very, very gendered sport. Women get on stage in bikinis, men like look a certain way and wear the tiny little things. And they just felt so gendered just at the time I was feeling like I was wanting to move away from things that are gendered. So I actually quit bodybuilding before I even competed, which I was really glad to do. But I was like, I do need another sport to really put my all into. And I said, I want to work with a coach like I had with bodybuilding. And then right around that time or shortly afterwards, I saw an advert on my Instagram for a running club called Queer Runnings, which is an online running club for the LGBTQIA plus community. And they were offering a kind of introductory training camp program like a virtual training camp where you train for maybe it was a 10 week period at the start of the year. And do, you know, you receive coaching and you work towards a goal and you have strength sessions. So I signed up for that. And that was the point when I was like, I think this is the year I want to run an ultramarathon. And I've had that 100k that I'd written down on the back of my mind for a really long time. And I was like, okay, I'm just going to start very easy. 50k. I mean, 50k is not very easy, but in ultra terms, it's generally the shortest ultra you'll have. And I signed up for the Thames path ultra, which is along the Thames path in London going from like, Fulham way up to Runnymede. And then if you did, there's 100k as well that goes on to the end Oxford somewhere like that. And so I signed up for the 50k and started working with queer runnings with my running coach who I work with now Sophie. And I just absolutely fell in love with that world. I, I found queer community that I hadn't really had and felt such a sense of belonging within that but then also had the accountability of a coach had the support of a community to actually feel like those goals. And had him in the back of my mind for so long, could be within reach. So that was, that was how I got to the ultra stage but it had been through a lot of like failed training attempts all these marathons that I'd done and not really trained properly or something had gone wrong. That taught me like, I do need extra support to get this done and then finding that was like, okay, I can set my sights a bit bigger.

Me: Did you find it difficult because obviously queer runnings, that's online isn't it?

S: Yeah,

Me: It's sort of virtual. Do you think that makes it more or less difficult to train with if you haven't got someone

there physically pushing you on, if it's all virtual do you think that's a different way of training do you think that's harder to

S: For me, it's not because my problem was generally getting out the door and like, I don't really need pushing once I'm out. Or like, yeah, there's points where you know, I feel like quitting and whatever, but my problem is structuring my time getting it done and that having having a coach who's like sending me reminders helping me plan my week so I can figure out when I'm fitting runs in and also the just the sort of building in a community of people who struggle with the same things and have similar goals. It like, it meant I started building my world and my identity around running which made it easier to factor in. And I had run with groups before I was in London front runners when I was living in London, which is another LGBT plus running club and I never really felt a sense of belonging there. I met some lovely people but it felt it was very cis male dominated and in general was very fast paced and I just felt out of my depth there and never really felt like I could be myself there. And then when I found queer runnings, it just felt different. It felt like it was for the misfits and that online space really actually I think benefited me because a lot of because I do struggle with a lot of the executive function and the logistic stuff, physically getting myself to a running club can sometimes be hard, but like just having the people that a coach or a community that'll support me to be to get out and just get my training run from my front door. That is absolutely always changed my whole life, I suppose.

Me: It's nice to have a community, it's nice to have that, what's it called? I'm going to say peer pressure, but it's not quite peer pressure is it?

S: Accountability, I would call it. It's supportive, I wouldn't call it pressure. But yeah, it's just that concept of everyone gets it and they want to help you reach your goals because they know what those goals feel like. And I will say I still haven't made it to 100k yet after that being my goal, but this year is going to be my year.

Me: I'm going to talk a bit about queer and non-binary and sexuality and running shortly, but I just want to talk about ultra specifically first. You say you've done three ultras, which is admittedly one more than I have.

S: Yeah, I've done three in race conditions, but if you count like ultra distances in training, I've done quite a few more than that, but like actual racers only three.

Me: For the purposes of my listeners, Seanna is the person who I screen-shotted an extract from a conversation where they said something to the lines of I'm just going to go out for a 50km training run.

S: That was last weekend, ended up being 55km.

Me: Nobody, nobody in the real world does 55km training runs.

S: But I'm training for a 36 hour race, so it's just a fraction of what I'll hopefully be doing. But yeah, it is quite an extreme world.

Me: Yeah, I have entered two ultras, I have finished one of them. So on that basis, how did you feel during your first, how did you feel doing it? Were you comfortable doing it? Did you have any regrets after you'd finished?

S: Well, yeah, so it was 50k and it was flat, and I'd picked a flat one as my first one because I thought it would be easier. And I lived in London at the time, so I didn't really have the capacity to train on hills. And I mean, I would say it didn't go to plan in a lot of ways, which I think is often the way. But because it came at the end of a lot of lockdowns, I was very susceptible to getting Covid, and I think I'd had Covid three or four times by that point. And that had both affected my training, but also it had slowed me down quite a lot by that point. I don't know if it wreaked some sort of havoc on my respiratory system, but I still don't think it's impacting me now. So it meant I was slower than I'd have liked to be, and I employed a bit of a run-walk strategy, which, yeah, it worked well for me. I think I was doing like 10 minutes jog and then one or two minutes walking or something like that. And then that was my intention to do the whole way through, and I started it from the start rather than just walking later when I needed to. And the walking did increase the longer I went with it. But it was great, like it was a fantastic entry into ultra running. I don't think I'd have had the confidence to get out on an ultra in the hills, especially when I was living in a flat area. But also I do now having run a couple of hilly ultras and living in Devon now where everything is hilly. There's no such thing as a flat run nearly. I actually think that I find flat running for that long harder in many ways, partly because it's the same muscles being used over and over again. Whereas, you know, on a longer ultra generally you walk on an uphill, you're employing different muscles, you're taking it all. It's all a bit of a fun day out, whereas running on the flat along the river felt... It was a very inclusive race, like there were lots of people walking it. But I think I came with more of a sense of I should be going faster because I was on the flat. So I wouldn't change anything about choosing that as my first ultra. I think it was a great gateway into ultra running in the sport, but I don't think I would choose a race like that again unless I had a speed goal or something like that. which I don't think I ever would because that's not really my style and more about the experience and running for joy and all of that.

Me: Yeah, I mean, there's an ultra. Literally the only flat bit in Calderdale is the canal that goes from Manchester to Sowerby Bridge, and there's an ultra that does that. It's 32 miles and it's a canal, so it's not flat flat, but it's certainly flat. And I've walked along most of that canal and it's nice and it's pleasant. I think running

it would be dull. Also, it's not very wide, so you sort of get stuck behind someone that's going slower or you hold someone up and I think it would just get frustrating after a while.

S: Yeah.

Me: So, oh yeah. I was going to say, have you got any sort of learnings from that first ultra that you passed forward to your next ultra's or anything that you'd sort of suggest anyone doing an ultra for the first time might want to bear in mind?

S: Yeah, I think that I think my guess learnings were around fuelling. I mean, I'm not sure how much I took them into future orges, but I was fuelling mainly through gels and sweets and things like that. And then at the halfway aid station, there was a sandwich available as part of what the race were offering. And I felt quite unwell after I ate that and it kind of made the second half really tough. And eating in ultra's is my greatest joy. So it actually just, I mean, my learning from that was that I needed to train more with real food and not just with gels and to eat more. And I think that I've taken that away and I'm pretty good at eating in ultra's now and managing gut issues and things like that. And I will say that the sandwich they gave me, I think I was vegan at the time. I'm lapsed now, I'm vegetarian, I've fallen off the rail, but they had like a separate vegan whip at the society for you and it was some kind of a like spicy bean paste. And spicy bean paste is probably not what I would give to an ultra runner. Like, I love spicy food, I'm sure it was delicious. But when you're in an ultra, you just kind of need plain, stodgy food. And yeah, so I think the nutrition side was a learning for me.

Me: I was going to ask about that because I didn't know you were a lapsed vegan. I knew you were vegan for a lot of the time. That kind of makes a difference in terms of what you can, having seen some of those ultra checkpoints and all of the mass demands of cake and things like that that are at them.

S: Yeah.

Me: I just wondered if being vegan was affected your ultra in any particular way.

S: Yeah, so that's the only ultra I've done where I was vegan. I lapsed maybe a couple of years, like yeah, like when I went traveling, which was that later that year. And so and that was, I mean, I guess that was, you know, the food that there was put for vegans. Like there was plenty, it was a really well organized race and there was plenty of food that was like fruit and sweets and they'd marked things really clearly. I'd also brought lots of gels that I checked all the labels and things like that. But I guess it is that thing of like if they're providing a sandwich or something like that, there are maybe fewer logical, plain, ultra friendly foods that are vegan and that's why they gave me a spicy bean paste. I mean, maybe plain hummus would have been a better decision.

Me: I mean, I've certainly heard people saying, you know, cold roast potatoes that.

S: Yeah, that kind of thing is great. Yeah, just solid carbs. But I think and also I did the Lakeland 50 once I wasn't vegan anymore, but they do cater really well for vegans and label things. So that like that's a quite a good one for people who are vegans. But last year my race, my A race was in France, it was UTMB Nice and I didn't finish. But the aid stations I did really struggle at even as a vegetarian because, you know, France still struggles with vegetarians a little bit. Like it's a lot better than it used to be, but they don't fully understand it. And there was a lot of things like cake and biscuit, nothing was really labelled. Lots of fruit, all of that. But the savoury food and I'm always craving savoury food in ultras once it's further along was basically cheese and meat. So obviously the meat was off for me. But the cheese also I had had gallstones at the time that have been really affecting my training and was getting into absolute agony. So I had to not eat the cheese because I knew that could aggravate it, which meant I basically had no savoury food. And I was also really near the back of the pack and they kept running out of well, it's not running out. There was like enough food that I could eat, but it wasn't all the things that they started with. So there weren't that many options and it was a lot of the like boring leftover cakes and biscuits. So I do think if you're vegan, you probably have to be quite selective about what races you run or just commit to bringing your own food. Or like running races that have drop bags that you can prepare stuff for yourself to pick up at aid stations.

Me: I've got one more question about Ultras before I just talk about things like mental health and queerness. It's just simply on your altars, what have been your highest and your lowest points? And I don't mean an altitude.

S: Yeah, so my highest points have been intertwined with low points. And I think one of the things I love about ultra running is how side by side joy and suffering can sit. And I guess one of the things I love most about ultra running is the feeling of overcoming something really hard and the sense of achievement that brings. And I think I just remember this moment when I was running the Lakeland 50. So it's 50 miles in the mountains of the Lake District. So that's 80K for people who think in metric. And it was the longest I'd done and by far the most mountainous running I'd ever done at the time. It was really tough. It was near the end and I probably had like 6K to go or something. I'd been running through the night and I just stopped at the final aid station where they give you a toasty. I had a cheese toasty and that brought me a lot of joy. But I was so battered by that point. I had really bad chafe and I started doing the, I think it was the final major climb. My body was so battered and then the sunrise was just coming up. The sky was stunning. And I knew I only had five or six

kilometres to the end. My body, I was like, the chafe was terrible. Like I was waddling. It was awful. And I just had this really intense moment of this is what it's all about. Like I'm in this beautiful place. The sun's coming up. I just had a wonderful toasty. I'm suffering so much. But this is like what I absolutely dreamed of when I set this goal of like overcoming all the things I thought I wasn't, wasn't sure if I'd be able to do. And I'd signed up for that race as well when I was recovering from emergency surgery after an operation that I'd had to have. And I couldn't even basically get out of bed. And then I signed up to a 50 miler when, when I was there. And just that whole journey of that year of like, I trained for this training hang on to plan. And here I am nearly finished. The sun, the sky, the toasty, the mountains and the pain. It was just all like this whole moment of just clarity and joy. And then my lowest point in an ultra. Oh, it like it gets me even now. So that was last year when I was running UTMB Nice. So that's 100 K race, but it was actually 107 K because they like to joke about these things. And this has been very much part of my journey to with UTMB races. You have to collect what's called stones at qualified qualifying races. And the more stones you collect, they are lottery entries to the UTMB finals in Chamonix. And my ultimate goal was to get into the, the UTMB finals to run CCC, which is 100 K race in Chamonix. And so I was really relying on completing this race in niece as one of my qualifying races. And I'd had a pretty strong start and I was a little bit ahead of where I thought it was going to be on time at that time. And then I had a section to get to the next aid station that was about five hours up a mountain constantly, relentlessly. Some of the terrain was so hard. There was like sheer mountain drops. It was getting dark. Like a morale was really low during a lot of that period. And at first I thought I'd have no problem making it to the next aid station before the cutoff. The cutoff was midnight. And it was coming like probably the hour before that I was starting to realize that I might be cutting it fine. But I didn't know the exact distances between aid stations. There was a lot of maths and remembering altitude and all of this. And I was trying to do the maths and work out if I could get there. But I think there was a point where I thought I should have covered the distance to be at the aid station by then. But I still had a long way to go. And there was just a moment where I was like, I don't think I think there's a good chance I'm going to miss the cutoff. And just the drop in morale after pushing so hard. And then the moment that I would say it was the lowest moment in any ultra was hearing the clock strike midnight in the town. And I knew midnight was the cutoff and I could hear the town where I assumed the aid station was was quite far away. I was still halfway up a mountain. I had this tiny glimmer of hope that maybe they weren't that strict on time boundaries. But I was like, I am quite far away. And it was just everything I was like, I have given so much not just in this race in the last 12 hours or whatever I've been out. But the whole year, my whole year built up to it and knowing that I wouldn't get to finish. I wouldn't get to run down the promenade dongle in Nice and run across the finish line the next morning. Yeah, it was heartbreaking. Really, really tough. But yeah, I've made my peace with it.

Me: Got one final question about running that suddenly occurred to me when you were talking about your highest point. I've never really ran in the dark. How does it feel running in the dark for you, especially sort of when you're sort of like 40 kilometres into an altar and you're a bit knackered and then you can't see what you're doing. Is it kind of exhilarating or is it really challenging, do you think?

S: I think I expected it to be awful. So Lakeland 50 was the first race I'd done that. And I had done a little bit of training in the dark with my head torch and I didn't like it. I get quite anxious out in the dark, particularly on my own. But when I was out in the race, I enjoyed it a lot more than I expected. And I think I felt very safe. I mean, obviously you're in the, it's safe, but just the kind of the mind playing tricks on you when you're in the dark. Because there were so many other runners around, it's quite a busy race. I never felt scared. And then I think with the dark and just the head torch shining in front of me, I definitely slowed down quite a lot at that point, but I got into quite a meditative state where I just was plodding away, putting one foot in front of the other. It kind of, because all you can see is that tiny patch ahead of you that's illuminated by the head torch. You don't have all this around. Yeah, just it felt quite meditative and I would say quite pleasant in a lot of ways, like in an unexpected way. So I think in Nice, it did feel different because I was on some quite scary mountains at points. And it was like, oh, am I not going to see a sheer drop somewhere and just run off the mountain? But for the most part, I actually enjoy running in the dark in races.

Me: I mean, you mentioned it earlier that you have it as well. One of my issues is that I am incredibly dyspraxic and there's a whole host of people on what used to be travel Twitter that were running almost like bets on how I would fall to my death by tripping over a pebble in the Peak District and things like that. So does that kind of thing concern you being dyspraxic as well? Just not really, knowing is the wrong word. Not really being able to visualize where you are and always knowing that you're not quite as aware of your surroundings as most of the other runners. Certainly when I'm running and I've noticed this, even my training runs, even with the training group, the quick group I do running with occasionally on a Wednesday in Todmorden, I'm not very good at running down hills because I'm just very conscious that I will slip and fall over far easier than perhaps I actually will.

S: Yeah, it is something I do worry about and I do fall quite a lot. And I've been lucky that I've never had a fall

so severe that I've broken something or broken my teeth or anything like that. And I know people who have, I just, I tend to have quite a lot of quite small falls and slips and trips and things like that. And going down hills, I actually have gotten a lot better at that the more I've done, but I don't feel in control when I'm doing it. I kind of just let the momentum take me and try and trust my feet to do what they do. And I do fall a bit, but yeah, I would say over time it's gotten better, the kind of trust in my body. But I also know my body can do really silly things. And I think when I was in Nice in particular, and I was quite scared because it did feel quite edgy, I just reminded myself that you just don't hear that many stories about people falling off mountains. You do hear some, but like in races and things, it's not something that comes up a lot, even though people are doing it all the time. And there are loads of dyspraxic people probably out in every race. I mean, it's not obviously a huge part, but statistically, I basically logically try and tell myself that, well, most people don't die doing this, even if they're dyspraxic. So hopefully I'll be all right.

Me: Yeah, I mean, my mitigation is just going down very slowly, which does mean that, you know, I'm not as quick. I'm more likely to miss a cutoff point. And one of the reasons why I did not finish the Calderdale Whale Trolls because I think it was about 18 miles in, and I tripped up and really badly scraped my knee, ended up with a limp for about a mile and a bit, and then got to the next aid station quite a bit behind schedule and went, should I carry on? And then I carried on and got lost twice, and that was just the end of it. But on that note, running in mental health, I mean, certainly for me, I mean, getting out of the flat is good for my mental health, getting out into the countryside. One of the reasons why I'm happy to live up here in Calderdale is because there's so much countryside around me, most of it is, very hilly, but I have so much countryside around me, like I can hear cows from my bedroom, and it certainly does me good to get out and run, and I'm running and I'm pushing myself. I don't think about all of the bad things in the world, I don't think about all of the bad things in me, I'm just out there and I'm just going. I am one of those people that does not run with headphones or anything like that, which I think is interesting. But running has always been good for my mental health, and running has always been, I know if I'm feeling a bit dour and I'm feeling a bit grumpy, in myself, I know if I go out for a run I'll probably feel a lot better doing it and afterwards. I mean, obviously running has helped your mental health. Do you want to say something about how you felt?

S: Yeah, and I would say when I took running up again after quite a difficult period with my mental health, and I started setting goals and started running, I was fully running without headphones then, and I would not switch off from my problems, I would use that time to think over and over and over and over, all the bad things that happened to me, just get like, but at the time I would be like, I wasn't going to therapy at the time, I was like, well this is therapy, I'm like exploring all the issues. It was only later when I kind of went into like therapy, I spent two months as an inpatient in a trauma clinic, I realised that I had not been thinking all those thoughts therapeutically, I had been ruminating and causing myself to relive and dwell on very unhelpful thoughts constantly. But then after doing therapy, and I'm still doing therapy and I really believe in therapy, I do find it's a lot easier to go out and switch off on a run now, I don't really ruminate on my runs very much anymore, unless there's something very current that is playing on my mind. And I do tend to run with headphones now, I often listen to audiobooks, although I do make it a priority to occasionally schedule in runs without headphones, because I do think it's good for the soul. But I think we often hear the term running is therapy, and I think running has a lot of therapeutic benefits, but it's not therapy and it cannot solve your problems or like inherent things that you struggle with in the same way, but it can make you feel better. And I would say now, I am 100% aware of how much running helps me feel better, yet I still struggle if I'm feeling bad to get myself outside and across the threshold to start running. And whenever I do, I feel amazing. And this is again, where having a coach is very useful, because she will remind me that it makes me feel good. I'm like, I can't run because I feel bad, I just feel too. I'm far too depressed for all of that, I'm very miserable, I mustn't run.

Me: It's raining.

S: Yeah, all the things. And actually, it is funny because I am so aware that it helps. My brain doesn't, or it cannot in the moment, often make that connection of like, just go for a run and you'll be all right.

Me: Yeah, and I've heard many people say things like, the first mile is the bedroom mile, it's getting out of your house, it's getting out of your bed, it's getting off the sofa, it's getting out, it's the hardest of all the miles you will ever run.

S: Yeah, exactly, just getting your socks on.

Me: Yeah, well indeed, maybe. Yeah, I mean, certainly for me, and I've spoken to this about, to my therapist as well, it's once I have got my running gear on, then I've kind of committed to myself. So the hardest thing for me is getting the running gear on. Once I've got that on, my brain goes, well, I've got the gear on now, it seems a waste not to go running in it.

S: Yeah, and sometimes I don't know if it's the same for you, but I know this, but I have a resistance to putting the running gear on, because I'm like, but then I'll run, and that might be hard. And there's a kind of like, oh no, that's a trick, it's a trick, you just want me to run, and I just want to sit here and feel sorry for myself. But

yeah, getting the gear on is the hardest part, because then once you're there, you're like, well, I've just got no reason not to run. And often within like, you know, sometimes it takes me a kilometre or so to feel good once I've started, but often it's within 10 seconds, I'm like, oh, this is nice.

Me: Yeah, I've got a regular route that I jog, that the first kilometre is mostly flat, and I'm running it, and I'm feeling, oh, this is, you know, I'm just starting now, I'm just sort of, oh, everything is aching, oh, I'm going too fast. Then the hill comes. Once the hill comes, my brain goes, bloody hell, this is a hill, and I just kind of switch off everything else just to get up the hill. Once I'm at the top of the hill, it's like, oh, I'm running now, it's fine, brilliant, and then I just plop away. So I think the hill, I don't like getting out of my flat to go running on the hill, because it's a hill, but once I'm there.

S: eah, it's like, you know that's coming, yeah.

Me: I can't really avoid it. There is literally nowhere I can run that at some point does not involve me running a mile up a hill, which is ridiculous. You think I'd be fitter than I am.

S: You're probably fitter than you think. I joke, I make jokes that I run ultras because I'm too lazy to run five and 10 Ks. You have to run so fast. They're really hard.

S: They are. They are. I don't train them.

Me: My least favourite of all the athletic distances, my least favourite is 800 meters, but I have, I have distinct disdain for anything that's run on an athletics track because athletics is boring. Going around in circles is very boring. But five K, even Parkrun and five Ks, I have to, it's a feels like a lot of effort to do a five K.

S: Yeah. Well, with the running around in circles, I've always been quite intrigued by these ultras where you just run around a track for hours and hours, like 24 hours. But I'm not doing that. But my A race this year will be running around in circles. It's a 36 hour race with five mile loops and you do as many five mile loops. So obviously it's a lot nicer than a 400 meter athletic track, but I think it'll be that same like this is a bit relentless by the end of it.

Me: You've never fancy doing the tunnel?

S: It has crossed my mind, but I think it's probably not the one for me.

No, yeah.

S: Is that the 200 mile one?

Me: That's the 200 mile one.

S: Yeah. I'm actually thinking because there's an there is the two tunnels ultra that's in the same tunnel, I think there's only 50 K. And that's the one that I thought of. I'm absolutely not interested in 200 miles in this tunnel. Thank you.

Me: One thing I have noticed about ultras and especially because the BBC did an article on the tunnel about four years ago. When you did your first ultra, you were sort of young and fresh. But what I've noticed is that ultras tend to be quite, they're dominated by people in their 40s and their 50s almost a lot of the time. So ultras seems to be something that you grow into. And I think that's possibly mental as well as physical.

S: I do. I think there is a lot of theory behind that around that like when you get older, people tend to be a bit more patient and like be able to grow out for longer. But I do also think that there's a physical side in that like a lot of the people who might perform really well in ultras might have run shorter distances quite well. But as they age, they can no longer perform so well. So they like turn to ultras because it's more about the endurance and all of that. And older bodies are more geared to it. But yeah, it is also a sport that a lot of people take up later in life and they have not necessarily run throughout their young years, but they find themselves just being quite good at it. And I think a lot of ultras, particularly in the longer ultras, it's a lot more about how well you can manage yourself and manage your stuff and manage your nutrition than it is about like how fast you can run. Because obviously you're not running fast over that period, but most of the reason people's ultras don't go to plan is because of glitches in how they're managing themselves and managing their gear, particularly when you're getting over 100 miles, 200 miles, that kind of thing is really a lesson in self-management.

Me: Yeah, I remember when I was hiking the Pennine way, we got overtaken by the leaders of the spine race. And what's the name? Sabrina Verjee, when it that year. And when she passed us on the Cheviot Hills, it looked like she was just jogging a parkrun, but she looked sort of really fresh and fit. And she'd already done like 240 miles at this point. And if you calculated her average speed, it was like three miles an hour, which is slower than my walking pace.

S: Yeah, but then you're factoring in sleep and food and rest and all of that.

Me: It's slower than my walking pace for 10 miles. It is not slower than my walking pace for 250.

S: Yeah, exactly. And it is also something that draws me to the sport and does make me a bit intrigued about the longer distances. Although I don't feel, I really want to get to 100K, but I don't know much beyond that. But because I have ADHD and I really struggle with executive function and organizing, and it's the bane of my existence, it also does make me kind of want to master those things. And I love running ultra as I love running a long way. And I feel like that is a really nice and also safe environment in terms of like, it's a sport. It's a

hobby. It doesn't like nothing's riding on it. It's not a career decision. But like, if I could get to a point where I did feel able to do that, I feel like that would really help with my confidence in managing my ADHD symptoms.

Me: It would also, I mean, I think it also helps self confidence in general, because you can just say, I've done this. I have challenged myself and I have done this. It's good for self-esteem almost. It's like, I've done a thing.

S: Yeah, although I don't know if you have it, but I definitely have a bit of a, what's it called, shifting baseline syndrome, whereas I feel that accomplishment for a while. And then I go on to like, oh, what's next? And then like the bar of what I feel proud of keeps changing.

Me: All I will say is that in 2019, I hiked across the entirety of Great Britain and I never talk about it. I was kind of, oh, it's done now. I've done that. I will do something else. And everyone says that I really should talk about it more because it's a huge achievement and I'm going, yeah, I've done it.

S: Right.

Me: I have one or two more final questions to talk about. But they're all sort of, well, queer related.

S: Yeah.

Me: So one of my questions is, I mean, you've mentioned it before, is that you are in a queer running community that helps you. Do you think that the running community is very open to queerness? We will not talk about parkrun. I mean, certainly in the, in the ultra sphere, do you think, do you think there's some, there's good sort of, not so much queer representation, but queer knowledge? Do you think it's comfortable being openly queer in such an environment?

S: I think for the most part, like as a general picture, no. I think particularly, I mean, maybe for gay, lesbian, bi people a bit, but for gender diverse people, for trans and non-binary people, for intersex people, I don't think. I think there are particular races and particular people within the running community, even that are not part of the queer community, that are great allies that are doing it really well, that are voicing like the need. But I would say, you know, in terms of non-binary inclusion, as like even having a category that people can race as themselves or a space they can participate is really limited. And when it does exist, it's rarely on their website. So it does mean that every time I enter a race or consider entering a race, I have to email them and say, am I welcome? Sometimes I get some responses that are positive. Sometimes I get, oh, it would just be too much admin or it wouldn't be fair on everyone else. You know, really quite awful responses. And for trans people, particularly trans women, like their existence in races is seen as political and it's like, I just want to turn up and run. And I think it's actually pretty abhorrent and whether that's races either not being explicit about inclusion or not making it clear they will keep trans people safe or, you know, having a policy but not really standing by it when anything is questioned or when someone is being targeted because obviously we know it's something, an issue that faces a huge amount of online trolling. You know, things like races not having inclusive, you know, if the toilets are all gendered and there are no gender neutral toilets or even things like some races will provide sanitary products in the port-a-louse, which is great and like should be applauded but they might, you know, UTMB Nice actually had female specific port-a-louse that had sanitary products in them but there are non-binary people who menstruate. There are trans men who menstruate. They're just the lack of like bigger picture inclusivity and yeah, I think there's just such a long way to go. And also, yeah, I mean, races that have really vague policies or you can just tell they're trying not to tread on anybody's toes but they're not standing for inclusion, that really winds me up I think because it's like, okay, mainly I just want to be able to race and I want people, everyone, that's the bare minimum, we should all be able to take part. And this also thing we see of people saying things like, yeah, trans women can race as long as they don't win, sort of. Not that that's explicitly said a lot but there's an argument of like, well, it's fine because when you look at the science, trans women are actually at a disadvantage once they've been on Oestrogen for a certain amount of time. But then, you know, the argument is, well, we're not seeing trans women dominating podiums but then it's that thing of like, okay, but if there was a trans woman who won with that then invalidate her participation. There's just, yeah, so many things that I feel that just aren't really approached in the right way when ultimately this sport should be about everybody being able to get to run and get the joy from it and the accomplishment they get from racing and just being able to be themselves. So there are some races doing it really well that are explicit on their websites, inclusion first, but it's few and far between.

Me: Yeah, the ultramarathon that I did in Northumberland, I entered as non-binary. I was the only non-binary person that turned up as far as I'm aware. So technically I was the leading non-binary runner in that race.

Didn't get a trophy for it.

S: Yeah.

Me: Forgot to ask, actually. What was the point?

S: Yeah, I had the same experience at the Lakeland 50. So it was the first year of them having a non-binary category and I absolutely didn't need a trophy. I wasn't in it for, I was, I was the only non-binary participant in the 50. I do not need that for myself, but what, when it started really bothering me was when it got to the

awards, which was like this lovely inclusive event, supposedly, and they start freezing out all the awards in the categories, and there were other categories that had only one participant, like, you know, women over 60 or whatever, and they were all getting to come up to the front and get recognized. And they even went in the 100 miler over 70 male, or I think, or maybe it's female, maybe it was 100 mile over 70s general, they had no one enter that, but they still read out the category and were like, we didn't have any participants in this, but they acknowledged it. But then there was no mention of the non-binary category. I didn't need a trophy. Of course, that thing's lovely. I don't need that, but what it bothered me, what bothered me about it was that any non-binary person who was there and didn't even know they could enter as non-binary didn't get to see that. And it was about visibility and representation. I definitely have an element of self-consciousness about being out and vocal in public places about my gender identity. But at the same time, I'm like, this is for all the other non-binary people, or people who might be questioning their identity and wondering if there's a place for them in this sport. And that's what makes it, I just think it's really unfair that other categories are recognized with one person. And I think that I got the impression at that late in 50, because I know there were some issues the following year in the Lakeland that there was a lack of recognition. I think it's like, we want to do a bit of inclusion. We want you to be able to take part, but we don't want to face any backlash or people making snide comments about gender identity. So we're just going to pretend it's not there. So it was a great race in general, and they had queer flags around at the start line, but it was like, are they really walking the talk or whatever?

Me: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I'm slightly, because I was born and raised male, I am very conscious about being perceived that I'm only defining as non-binary to get a trophy, because I wouldn't be able to if I was like, you know, male and entered the male's race.

S: I think if anyone even glanced in your direction, they wouldn't. You've got very, very, very not cis male energy. I don't think they would think that you were just entering for a trophy. I think it's quite clear you're not just a cis male. I think your gender is wild and wonderful.

Me: My gender is purple. It's great.

S: Yeah, exactly.

Me: In terms of the generic community, the racing community, do you think the racing community itself, like other runners, do you think other runners are queer friendly?

S: I think it's mixed. Like, I think there are some who are great. Like, after the Lakeland 50, I had prominent runners messaging me saying, well done on your win and stuff like that. At the same time, when I see comment sections in the running, you know, in the running community on posts on Instagram or, you know, I think, you know, the running community is, you know, so many facets of it. It's not a homogenous thing. And I think there are some really amazing advocates. And I think there are some absolute trolls. And I think there are enough people working to make it inclusive that we're seeing progress and I hope to continue to see progress. But in general, I think for a lot of particularly gender diverse people, it doesn't feel safe to be their full selves or they might have to ask questions about when it's okay to speak their truth.

Me: Would you be in favour of a, for example, a 30 or 50 miler, entirely queer ultra?

S: That would be wonderful. I think, I mean, I, yeah, I think, I think that would be absolutely wonderful. And I think, I don't know how much of a market they'd be for it because it's, you know, the queer community is X amount and the ultra community is X amount. But I think it would be a wonderful thing, you know, even as an informal thing. Yeah.

Me: I did work out on the, in terms of mathematical probability, I did work out that being an arrow ace non binary ultra marathon runner, I am one of only about 1200 people in the entire world.

S: I mean, you're almost talking to one of them.

Me: I think that's all I have to say. So thank you for coming on my podcast.

S: Thank you. And if you want to follow me on other platforms, I have a YouTube channel called Sean's World. So please do check that out. I share running videos on that.

Me: So my last question then is, what is your next running plan? Don't tell me you're going to be the first NB to finish the spine race or anything like that.

S: Well, my goal this year is to do that 36 hour race I mentioned, which is as many five mile loops as I can do in 36 hours. I definitely want to make it to at least 100 K because that is that goal that's been lingering on me. And I part of the reason I entered a time race was because it gives me plenty of time to cover that distance. And I also have a very top secret distance goal in the back of my mind with that. In a dream world, like if everything went so swimmingly, that I would like to achieve, but I'm not telling anyone that, not even my coach. And then I also have a potential goal for next year, which I also haven't talked to my coach about yet, but it's in the back of my mind.

Me: She might be listening to this pod, you know?

S: Maybe. I turn 40 next year, so I wanted to do a big, scary, exciting race to celebrate turning 40. And I've wanted to do a desert ultra for a while, and there are a few kind of multi-day desert ultras that I have my eye

on. But so far, my attempts at multi-day running have not been amazing, and that's not even in desert. So I am holding that as a possibility. I'm looking at potentially ultra X in Jordan, which is dependent on current global affairs, of course. But yeah, I think I would really love to do that race next year if it's possible, but I just don't know if it's a bit beyond my capabilities. So feeling into that.

Me: Excellent. Well, good luck, and I hope you achieve all your goals.

S: Thank you, likewise.

Me: Thank you. I haven't got any, but I will let you know.

S: Yeah, I will be there to celebrate them when they come along.

Me: Maybe 50 miles has always been kind of... It's a bit far, but who knows?

S: Who knows?

Me: Maybe you're going to peer accountability me.

S: Yeah, I'll try and do my best.

Me: Thank you very much for turning up. Speak to you again soon.

S: Thank you for having me.

Me: It's a pleasure.

S: Bye.

Me: Bye-bye.

{end pod jingle}

Well that's about all for this pod. Join me next time when I'll continue on this topic by talking about my second Ultra. The one I finished. Because I don't seem to have done yet. Until then, remember, we're here for the non-binary race, and if you're feeling off-colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, tell your friends that I rocked your socks. If you wear socks when listening to my pod; that's your call not mine. And don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Show-notes are available on my website: barefoot-backpacker.com.

Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}