

Ultramarathons Make Me A Better Lawyer

By **Dan Oakes** (April 2, 2026)

In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys discuss how their unusual extracurricular activities enhance professional development, providing insights and pointers that translate to the office, courtroom and beyond. If you have a hobby you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

On June 27, 2025, I accomplished one of my biggest life goals: completing the Western States Endurance Run.[1] Western States — the world's oldest 100-mile foot race — is considered one of the ultimate endurance races in the world.

Over this hallowed course in California, and in the scorching heat of summer, runners traverse nearly 40,000 feet of elevation gain and descent as they make their way along the Western States Trail. The route starts near Lake Tahoe, goes through the Sierra Nevada mountains and finishes in the gold rush town of Auburn.[2]



Dan Oakes

Before gaining entry to the race, I spent years completing qualifying races and earning tickets to become eligible for the Western States lottery. When I was finally selected, I knew this would be both a huge opportunity and a huge challenge. The run would prove to be tougher, more humbling and more rewarding than I ever imagined.

Though the preparation for and struggle of a long-distance race may seem disconnected from the practice of law, my running has reinforced and refined the qualities necessary for success in my profession, making me a better lawyer.

As I reflect on my day at Western States, I believe the determination and discipline I learned on the trails taught me crucial lessons for my career in antitrust law.

Parallel Paths: Endurance Lessons From the Trail

Success in ultrarunning relies on many of the same principles as success in the practice of law. Major results come from steady, consistent effort over months and years. With running, endurance gains compound from repeatedly showing up with effort, as there is no substitute for putting in the necessary miles — you cannot arrive at the start of a 100-mile race without training.

In the legal profession, no serious lawyer would appear in court without preparation.

When I started running again after several years of practicing law without prioritizing exercise, my goal was to improve my health. The more I got back in shape, the more I wanted to push myself and see whether I was capable of completing an ultramarathon.

As an antitrust partner at Axinn, my day-to-day is busy, which means I have to be regimented about how and when to fit in my runs. Over the last several years of training, I learned to balance the demands of high-stakes legal work with the benefits of running by managing my time efficiently, including early wake-ups and nighttime miles, but always

with the end goal in mind.

People are often puzzled at how anyone could run 100 miles at once, and when considered that way, it does seem daunting. But a long-distance run can be broken down into a series of smaller bite-sized efforts, as a runner moves from one milestone along the course to the next. Similarly, lawyers need to break down complex legal matters and problems into manageable pieces. To succeed in a legal career, lawyers must reduce problems into discrete, digestible chunks, which can shrink an almost unfathomable effort to something quite reasonable.

Beyond consistency in training, a runner's success on race day is often determined by the strength of his or her support team. Though running is often viewed as an individual sport, on the trails, nothing could be further from the truth. The crew behind each runner keeps them fueled, focused and optimistic even when the race gets tough. The same holds true in the practice of law, where collaboration and collective experience are essential to achieving the best possible outcomes for our clients.

Endurance races often have aid stations dotting the course, staffed by volunteers and crew members who provide nutrients and offer encouragement to continue as runners progress to the finish line. In antitrust law, working with a team of partners and associates is essential to tackling complex investigations, litigation and multijurisdictional merger deals.

Our work simply cannot be done as individuals; it's all about the team. By combining years of experience, lawyers, like crew members, can approach new challenges from different angles and reach optimal solutions.

Building Resilience One Step at a Time

During my Western States experience, runners faced a day of excruciating heat. High temperatures in the canyons section of the course reached nearly 100 degrees Fahrenheit during midday. I packed my sleeves and hat with ice to keep my core body temperature cool, but this led to an unexpected problem. As I approached mile 55, I realized my feet, which had been wet for hours from the ice dripping into my shoes, were macerated. I approached the aid station and had to assess what could be done to finish the race.

As foot care specialists patched me up for nearly 45 minutes, I had to rethink my strategy for the second half of the race. I was losing progress and hope with each passing minute.

Then it hit me: I needed my pacer.

A pacer is another runner who joins a racer to run the course, provide motivation and work together to maintain a steady pace. Pacers are often permitted in longer races, when day turns to night, the miles become grueling and decision-making is taxed. As I began the second half of my race, my pacer joined me — earlier than originally expected — to help me better manage my efforts and thereby reduce stress on my body and feet, as well as offer encouragement to make it to the end.

I was struck by the parallels between this midrace predicament and my legal career.

First, ultrarunners — like lawyers — are problem solvers, trained to stay calm, assess challenges dispassionately as they arise, and pivot when new solutions are required. As lawyers, we have to be able to address changing circumstances in real time, so they do not hurt a case in the long run.

Second, it reminded me that a consistent pace is everything. Slow and steady forward movement is the name of the game. Law is a demanding, time-intensive career. We must remember to lean on our teams and to avoid physical, mental, and logistical burnout.

Finally, being able to rely on team members to add perspective and help get through the hardest miles, is vital both in long-distance running and in law. The crew working on a legal matter can make all the difference when litigations and investigations in antitrust law can stretch years. Having trusted team members that can bring a methodical and analytical approach is key to building a resilient strategy over time. Rigorous planning and preparation are essential, whether I'm navigating a high-stakes case or the steep climbs of a long-distance race.

Every Mile Shapes My Legal Mindset

In my view, we can, and should, leverage our passions and skills from our hobbies in our legal careers. Ultrarunning has helped me become a better lawyer, bringing many benefits that I've applied to my work. By pursuing fitness and excellence in my personal pursuits, I've sharpened my ability to adapt to the evolving nature of antitrust law and strengthened my resolve to handle demanding, unforeseen challenges.

And like achieving a huge team win for a client, little else compares to crossing the finish line of a hundred-mile race, as all the effort and dedication pays off in accomplishing something truly extraordinary.

Dan Oakes is a partner at Axinn Veltrop & Harkrider LLP.

The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of their employer, its clients, or Portfolio Media Inc., or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.

[1] <https://www.wser.org/>.

[2] <https://www.wser.org/WSCourseMap.html>.