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THIS WEEK'S TRAIL NEWS & UPDATES

What's In An Index?

Welcome to this week's ETT Edit

Sara Alonso during the Acantilados del Norte @ Skyrunning Instagram

Course Records Fall at Acantilados del Norte & Hundred Hills

Last weekend's women's races saw records fall in La Palma and the Chilterns alike, with Sara Alonso winning the third race in the Skyrunner World Series and Fiona Pascall showing top form at the Centurion Running Hundred Hills 50k. Manuel Merillas won the men's Acantilados del Norte after a masterful overtake on the final downhill. Mark Darbyshire won Hundred Hills.

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The UTMB Index Is Getting an Upgrade. Why It Matters.

by Alecsa Stewart

Last Saturday, I attended the second edition of the *Data Players* conference organised by Enduraw in Chamonix. This event brings together actors from the

trail running world who work with data – coaches and data scientists, but also product testers, platform developers, and therapists (we had a cryotherapy outfit showcase their findings about full-body immersion... more on that another time). Among them all, a surprise visitor: Fabrice Perrin, UTMB Chief of Sports, Communities and Sustainability, introducing the "UTMB Index 2.0."

Until now, runners' UTMB Index and race by race score have felt like a black box, with some numbers coming out and raising eyebrows. There's been scrutiny on many platforms, and we've even done a deep dive into UTMB and ITRA and their indices in a previous [ETT blog](#). It turns out the UTMB has been listening and working on new algorithms to make these scores and indices more reflective of race difficulty and hopefully, more relevant to a runner's actual ability.

I've given a very brief update on the actual changes on our [Community Chat](#). Here is some more detail, followed by a reflection on why these numbers matter after all.

Changes to score calculations

After working through multiple changes and updates to the existing scoring model, Fabrice explained that the new one improves how a score is calculated for every race:

- the race will be compared with similar ones (other years of the same race or other similar profiles) – apparently this is already done but has been "refined"
- a new method has been devised to calculate your expected score and add "stability" to this
- a reinforced "asymmetric regression" model takes into consideration plausible progression (i.e. how it makes sense that a runner has progressed from one year to the next – no huge jumps up or down in performance presumably -), competitive density of a race, altitude, and the total vertical ascent & descent

Expected scoring

For every runner, the model will now calculate an expected score – and with it, your expected finishing time, in a more specific way than before. They will not just be looking at your historic finishing times, but cumulate:

- Historic performances overall (your best results)
- Filter for recency, similarity (have you done a race similar to this one or are your very fast times all from a much flatter event, for example), whether you have results in the same event in the recent past
- Race qualities (i.e., how difficult this race is considered, looking at the altitude, ascent/descent, but also things like DNF rates per year etc.)

This then gives you a theoretic score ahead of the event taking place, which will also feed into the "ghost table" you can get on the website or on the Livetrail app to help put together a pacing plan.

Once you finish the race, the theoretical score is compared against your performance and you get a final score, also taking into account how your performance relates to the rest of the field.

Impact on UTMB Index

Naturally, changing how the scores are calculated, and updating them, will have an impact on a runner's UTMB Index. This will continue to be based on the top 5 scores in the last 36 months on a rolling basis, and on condition of scoring at least once in the last 24 months. There's a layer of gradual degradation of the index, i.e. it will decrease with time if you don't race, and they are aware of needing to make adjustments for people going on maternity leave, for example. The plan is that all existing scores will be updated in the next month (approximate timescales), with a new index being published as a result. I may be overly optimistic, but the examples they showed when analysing some past top performances were mostly increasing the race scores, so I would imagine all our scores and indices would move slightly upwards. But there are no guarantees! Another impact we'll see is that the shorter races under the UTMB 20k category will get a more reflective score, according to Fabrice. He admitted that the old method seemed to favour longer races, but with the new model looking at technical difficulty and competitive density, this should bump 20k scores up quite a bit. Good news for those racing more in the Golden Trail and Skyrunner World Series! We may even see the top 5 of world's best runners change slightly...

Why does it all matter?

You might be tempted to think this is all frivolous, unless you're an elite athlete and your sponsor has somehow linked a bonus payment to your scoring over X points in a race or achieving a specific world ranking. But there's a lot more riding on the UTMB Index, and it can affect everyone, regardless of their level:

- **Pacing & race strategy:** A largely irrelevant UTMB Index can create an over- or underestimation of your "ghost table" with estimated times at aid stations. For some, it's an ego boost or a source of panic. For many, it can lead to poor pace planning, running out of fuel or water because their index suggested they'd reach the aid station earlier, or even a DNF linked with discouragement if they don't believe they'll make it within cutoffs (I've finished at least two races where the expected times suggested I wouldn't make the first cutoff!). Depending on how much external advice you have access to, or what other pacing models (if any) you use, it could also cost you a good result in the end.
- **Security concerns for race directors:** When planning aid station opening times and crew deployment, race organisers can understandably rely on some modelling from the UTMB (in particular, races in the UTMB World Series network). Whether they have access to a model from the UTMB Index team or they look at a generalised "ghost table" for the whole race cohort, they can then make decisions that can massively affect runners' safety, course change decisions, or even profitability and sustainability of the race over the long term.
- **Identifying talent.** The way in which race starting waves are determined for those events that need them, within the UTMB World Series, is to use the runners' UTMB Index. If this is not reflective of their true abilities (let's say someone has done extremely technical events only, and as a result has a much lower index than someone who has been "rewarded" for fast times on more runnable courses), they can see themselves relegated to a later wave and unable to truly race to their potential. This impacts both waves negatively (surely, the most competitive runners want to pit themselves against their most competitive adversaries too)

adversaries, too).

• **Anti-doping controls.** Julien Chorier, UTMB Sports Director, shared his hope that this new method will help better reveal up & coming athletes that should be on the UTMB anti-doping radar. In a sport that's growing fast worldwide, it's difficult to know all the top players – an index that the UTMB Group has more confidence in should also provide some useful insights in this area.

It goes without saying that determining world and country rankings is also relevant at the top end. Athletes who make a living from the sport will be the first to be impacted by how their performances are perceived. And, in an extremely variable sport, where no one race is the same (including the same race year on year), it is almost impossible to establish a barometer of performance. An index won't solve this conundrum, but can bring us closer to a more reflective, relevant metric.

What do you think of the efforts to improve the UTMB Index and race scoring? Worth it or not?

Leave us a comment on the Community Chat story and we can continue the discussion.

HAVE YOUR SAY

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If you're accessing the ETT Runclub only through your computer browser, you're missing out! Download the Circle app to log in and chat directly from your phone, see who's commenting or liking your posts, and even get notified when we're going live. You can also follow live or recorded events on the phone – perfect for background listening when doing your indoor rides or treadmill sessions!

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What an eventful week, from racing to conferences! The trail running world won't stop evolving and, even if it's a small ecosystem compared to the broader sporting world, it's only getting bigger. One of the public debates at Data Players asked the question of how many external brands and/or actors would be impressed by an athlete saying they've won the UTMB, or even know what that is.

I think the UTMB Group's marketing efforts, combined with the growing reach of some of the biggest names in the sport (Kilian Jornet obviously springs to mind, but there are also athletes crossing into trail who are bringing new fans with them, such as American Olympic marathon runner Molly Seidel), are definitely making more of an impact each year.

Do you think our sport is becoming better known externally? Drop a note in Community Chat if you fancy a debate!

LET'S CHAT

Have you entered the ETT Giveaway?

This month, together with our partners TrailSkin, Ugoku Projects, and Nduranz, we are offering a prize bundle worth £100+ to those who subscribe to the Premium ETT Runclub (supporting the team for £5 a month and getting access to lots of other perks!):

- A TrailSkin Endurance Bundle (with NEW soft anti-chafe salve)
- A Limited Edition Ugoku ETT Cap (designed by the ETT athletes)
- A selection of Nduranz gels
- A free ETT training plan of your choice

Upgrade to be in with a chance to win all this, while also getting access

Upgrade to be in with a chance to win all this, while also getting access to:

- All past live Q&A recordings
- Exclusive webinars and presentations
- Ask the Experts space to put questions to ETT Performance Panel
- Weekly 1:1 office hours with me
- More member discounts for our partners and for ETT training plans

UPGRADE

First Premium payment of £8, following monthly payments of £5. All proceeds support the Elite Trail Team.

Have a great week,
Doug
