

172 RUNNERS  
STARTED THIS  
ULTRAMARATHON—  
21 OF THEM  
NEVER CAME BACK

Racers started their 100K through the stark and steep landscape of the Yellow River Stone Forest in China's Gansu Province.





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Shepherd Zhu Keming shows the cave where he sheltered six runners.

night before the race—when the race briefing was held—the county’s Meteorological Administration issued a warning

that sustained winds between 27 and 32 mph were possible over the next 24 hours, along with large temperature drops possible across the province.

That afternoon, however, temperatures in Jingtai county, where the race was being held, reached almost 80 degrees.

By the race’s start, the edge of the cold front was just starting to descend on the course—perfectly timed to meet runners head-on as they climbed to CP3. Heat and pressure differentials across the front’s edge were causing strong winds, and by 8 a.m., gusts were reaching 25 mph. Temperatures began dropping steadily. But these changes had only just begun at higher elevations; their extremes hadn’t yet moved down into the lower parts of the Yellow River Valley, where the race began.

By 10:30 a.m., an hour and a half after the race started, thick clouds had begun forming as warm, high-pressure air from the desert floor rushed into the sky and cold, low-pressure air from the vortex plummeted down the mountainsides.

The winds and rain grew strongest between CP2 and CP3, as runners climbed higher, into the descending cold front. At this point, as the lead runners were climbing to CP3, temperatures were dropping as much as 7 degrees Fahrenheit per hour. In Jingtai county’s lower elevations—5,200 feet, about the elevation of Denver—temperatures reached about 44 degrees. But at the race’s higher altitudes, during the climb to CP3, which reached 7,200 feet, temperatures approached freezing. As warm and cold air rushed across the most dramatic pressure and temperature gradients, winds likely reached between 40 and 55 mph. The resulting wind chill made the air temperature at higher elevations feel more like the mid-teens. Together, the temperature, wind, and rain were enough to cause hypothermia, with most runners wearing little more than shorts and a T-shirt.

It is not clear whether race organizers followed the polar vortex, or were aware of the alert, and most forecasts didn’t reflect the severity of the front headed toward Jingtai county. The night before the race, Yan had seen forecasts predicting colder-than-usual temperatures, but nothing especially alarming: in the morning, a light drizzle and wind around 12 to 18 mph, with temperatures ranging from the low 40s to high 60s.

Colder temperatures had never impacted the competition, and most athletes ignored the late change to the forecast, if they even saw it. Yan was one of only a few runners to pack warmer clothes. Most had opted to leave their extra layers at home.

to fuel up, eating cherry tomatoes, water, and bread. Ahead of her lay the third checkpoint, five miles up the 2,900-foot climb, the race’s most challenging ascent.

The rain was drenching now, and far below her, the river was raging a deep brown yellow. Along its banks, the loess soil was loose and thick. Yan took out her jacket. Her other layers were soaked through, and sand and gravel had filled her shoes. More runners passed. At least half were now ahead of her, starting the climb. Ten minutes later, around 12:00, she set out, head down against the gale.

Meanwhile, the lead runners were barely moving. Wind and freezing rain were pummeling them, slowing their progress to a shuffle. About halfway up to CP3, hail began to mix with the raindrops, slamming into Zhang, numbing his face and blurring his vision.

Zhang had just come across two racers in trouble. One was shaking and trembling, apparently on the verge of hypothermia. Zhang tried helping him forward, wrapping his arms around the runner and walking together. But the trail was too slippery and not wide enough for two people hanging on to each other side-by-side. The wind

gusted so hard that they kept falling. Eventually they decided to separate.

Gazing up the mountains ahead of him, Zhang tried to scramble up. *Keep your head, get over the mountain, and everything will be fine*, he thought to himself.

He didn’t make it far. Wrestling the wind, Zhang fell at least 10 more times. With the two runners he’d tried to help behind him, Zhang was sitting in fourth place—higher and farther into the course than almost anyone. His felt his limbs growing stiff, and hypothermia began settling in as the fog thickened. Soon, he lost control of his

body. He fell once more and couldn’t get up. In his last moments of consciousness, he managed to pull out a space blanket and wrap it around his body, and send out an SOS signal on his GPS.

ON MAY 20TH, two days before the race, an enormous cold front had pushed down from Siberia to the west of Gansu, where temperatures plummeted close to freezing. The polar vortex was moving southeast, and weather stations in the area began alerting the public. On May 21st, the

YAN’S CHEEKS WERE becoming numb. She was ascending to the third checkpoint and rain lashed the trail, buffeted by gusts of wind. The rock trail was slick as ice, and led perilously close to sheer cliff edges. Visibility was only 15 feet, rendering trail markings invisible, and signs of people had mostly vanished. So when Yan bumped into a runner nicknamed Ke Le, they teamed up, and decided to try to head down the mountain.

“We were just circling ourselves without any sense of direction,” Yan says. Whenever they paused, she could feel her heart racing. Her breathing increased. She started to lose feeling in her feet and hands. She was certain that she was about to freeze to death.

As Yan and Ke Le were trying to descend, they spotted a cave dwelling. The discovery was a deep relief. Among many groups stranded between the second and third checkpoints, there had been rumors circling of caves near CP3.

A shepherd from a nearby village, Zhu Keming, was standing in front of its entrance, beckoning them inside. He was already sheltering another runner, wrapped in blankets and lying on a kang, a bed made of packed earth.

Trembling, Yan sat on the kang and took off her socks and shoes. They were soaked through. “I was like, I’m almost done. I was just too cold,” says Yan. She tucked her feet under the first runner’s hips for warmth and wrapped a dusty space blanket around herself. She asked Zhu to call for help—he already had, and none had arrived. She was sitting close to the other two on the kang, but still trembling.

“I am not gonna make it,” Yan told Zhu. “Is there any chance you can set up a fire?”

Zhu ventured out. About 20 minutes later, he returned with kindling and started a fire next to the kang in the cave. Yan threw her wet clothes close to the flames. Slowly, she began to recover.

Two more runners showed up at around 2:30 p.m., 45 minutes after Yan had reached the cave, and reported that athletes were lying on the ground all over the course. “Almost all of the runners are either in hiding or dropped out,” one of them told Yan. They’d checked some for pulses, often without finding any. Another runner they passed was cramping on the ground, but they couldn’t carry him over.

Zhu went out to look for him. At around 3 p.m., he came back and reported that he’d found the cramping runner, as well as three others who appeared to be dead. The survivor was mumbling, “I’m in fourth place.”

It was Zhang Xiaotao. By then, he’d been lying on the ground for more than two hours. His distress signal had gone unanswered by rescuers.

Zhang could barely move, and Zhu called Ke Le to help carry him inside. To keep the smoke away, they placed him just inside the entrance.



HE FELT HIS LIMBS GROWING STIFF. HYPOTHERMIA BEGAN SETTLING IN AS THE FOG THICKENED.

Zhang was still dizzy, fixated on the competition.

“I’m in fourth place,” he repeated. “I fell seven or eight times. I want to race.”

With the others’ help, Yan removed Zhang’s wet clothes and placed them near the fire.

She ordered others not to put his hands and feet too close to the flames, or massage his limbs. Yan worried cold blood might circulate to his heart and kill him. She pulled out water, an unopened Snickers bar, and some energy gels. Slowly, Zhang began eating. He couldn’t extend his left hand’s fingers, which were going numb, but he insisted on rejoining the race.

“Mentally, I was still just carrying on in the race,” Zhang recalls of recovering in the cave. Eventually, though, runners calmed him down,

and convinced him to drop out. “Then I realized it was a matter of life or death. I was so muddled.”

At around 5 p.m., local villagers arrived at the cave with quilts, thermos bottles, and paper cups, but Yan sent them back outside, to search for runners on the hillsides. A half hour later, the group wrapped towels from the villagers around themselves, and decided to head down the mountain before nightfall. The storm had died down. Thick clouds remained, but it felt much warmer now, and descending wouldn’t be so dangerous. Zhu, the shepherd, led them down a shortcut off the hillsides, following a goat trail.

The trek downhill took over an hour. Along the way, they saw villagers carrying more quilts

and hot water uphill. A group of doctors and nurses passed with first-aid kits. A bulldozer followed, clearing a route to deliver medical supplies up the mountain, with all-wheel-drive vehicles behind it.

Yan arrived back at her hotel after 8 p.m. and went to dinner with other runners who had made it back. The meal was somber, filled with speculation about who had survived. Liang Jing, the top ultrarunner, hadn’t been found yet. Others were missing as well.

By the next morning, 18 were confirmed dead. Three were missing. Headlines were spreading worldwide.

OF THE 172 runners who set off in the race, 21 died and eight were seriously injured. Most if not all the deaths were from hypothermia. In the lead group of six, only Zhang had survived. Liang Jing’s death was especially unnerving. He was no stranger to extreme races—his win at the Ultra Gobi 400K took place in another corner of the Gansu Desert with extreme temperature fluctuations.

In the postmortem, the race was deconstructed endlessly. Was the weather a freak event? Should the

Rescuers search for missing runners on May 23rd, a day after the race.

organizers have been more cautious and prepared? Whose fault was this? That the organizers hadn’t followed the cold front—or had at least dismissed it—was negligent at best. Still, many pointed out there were contingencies in place. Runners were required to have GPS—as well as other bells and whistles one could expect an ultra race to require—and a way to send distress signals. But many of the runners, Zhang and Zhu included, had called for help and never received it. The distress signals had reached rescue teams, but by the time the rescuers arrived, it was too late to save many of the athletes.

Discretion and weather awareness—skills that come with experience—were perhaps in shortest supply. Many wondered why the race committee hadn’t held racers at the second checkpoint. By then, the weather had already turned bad.

The Chinese government’s response to the tragedy lacked nuance. Almost immediately, the government banned ultra races, as well as other “high risk” outdoor adventure sports, the range of which was left vague. The Chinese Communist Party’s disciplinary organ—which, among other things, punishes and investigates officials for corruption—was tasked with looking into the disaster. In the weeks following the race, Jingtai county’s party secretary, Li Zuobi, committed suicide by jumping off a building. He appears to have known what was coming; soon after, a harsh judgment came down from the government’s Party provincial committee, naming almost everyone connected to the race—organizers, sponsors, or others connected to them—as potentially liable.

Around China, race organizers were chilled. So far, 27 officials have been punished or charged, with sentences not yet rendered, while the magistrate of Jingtai county was fired. Other organizers are watching closely, some leaving the industry altogether.

MONTHS LATER, THE runners are still working through trauma and injuries from the storm. Zhang’s left index finger is still numb from nerve damage, preventing him from helping his family with their harvest. He prefers not to talk much about the race’s psychological aftermath. After he published an account of the competition, commenters began harassing him on social media, and Zhang suspended his account. Since then, he’s mostly shut the world out, taking time to heal.

For Yan, the experience has haunted her dreams for months. She has had trouble sleeping—flashbacks to the race woke her up almost every night in the first weeks afterward—but has kept in touch with Zhang and other survivors, for mental support, as well as Zhu Keming, the shepherd. Recently, she’s been mailing him specialty snacks from Chengdu. One day, she hopes, the cave-dwelling crew would reunite at the site

One of China’s top ultrarunners, Liang Jing, would die during the Yellow River Stone Forest 100K. Here, he starts the 2020 Panda Trail by UTMB.

of the race to thank Zhu in person.

After the race, Yan and Zhang both took a break from running. Eventually though, they returned. About a month after the tragedy, on a cloudy, cool morning with a gentle breeze, Yan set out on an eight-mile jog in a wetland reserve. The break from exercise made her pace slower than usual, but speed was the last thing on her mind. The reserve was her favorite place to run in Chengdu, and soon the happiness the sport brought her came flooding back. And partly, she explained, she was running for the spirits of the deceased.

“They are no longer running in this world. So no matter what, I’ll keep running, for them and for myself,” Yan says. “I’d dwelled on little details in the past. But eventually, you feel that just being alive is good. Really good.”

Back in his hometown, in Henan, Zhang had taken even less time off. Just 10 days after returning from Gansu, with the blessing of his doctor, he put his running shoes back on. On a bright, 85-degree evening, he donned a white, long-sleeve hoodie, and set out running through the countryside. Three miles later, his life was feeling intact again.

“I’ll carry on, keep running, love everyone beside me, and shoulder their unrealized dreams,” Zhang says. “Ahead, there’s a long, long way to run.”

