

# Cocodona turns into more adventure than just race

BY BEN LUCAS

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adopted home state had to offer.

Five years ago, if you asked me whether I wanted to run the Cocodona 250, I would have immediately answered, “No way.”

The idea of spending an hour hiking uphill or lying down for a nap while the race clock was ticking were not appealing elements of a running race to me. Yet, here I am in May 2026, a Cocodona finisher.

So, what changed? Well, a lot of things, but primarily I realized that Cocodona isn't a running race to be considered on the same criteria as any other ultramarathon. It is an adventure, an adventure that aligns perfectly with two traits fundamental to my personality: exploring the world through movement and challenging myself to do difficult things. With this framing, I found myself on the start line at Black Canyon City ready to experience whatever traversing 250 miles by foot across my

My first day was mostly in the Bradshaw Mountains, where we spent a long time climbing on rocky, eroded, double-track forest roads. The occasional downhill offered no respite either. I had to consider every step carefully to avoid ending my race before it had truly begun. I suggested later to my crew that some of the trails we used in the Bradshaws shouldn't be called goat tracks out of fear of offending goats.

The first 25 miles of this race are no joke: exposed, remote, and physically and mentally demanding.

Fast forwarding 50 miles, I arrived in Prescott late at night and was greeted with high-fives from my crew for the first time. I was lucky enough to have a crew of over 14 people and eight different pacers. The first night began on Whisky Row, included a little scrambling in the Dells,



COURTESY

The author crosses the Cocodona 250 finish line.

## RUNNING

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running across a pad-dock within a few feet of a sleeping bull, and finished on Mingus Mountain, where I happily laid in the back of our SUV for 70 minutes of sleep.

Day Two began with views of the Verde Valley from 7,000 feet (and also a voice telling me that the city I could just barely see in the distance — Sedona — was my planned destination later that day). The descent felt like the geographical opposite of the previous day. Initially it was forested and cool, but it then became an exposed gravel road, and, finally, I reached the sandy, alpine desert of the Dead Horse Ranch trail network.

Dead Horse to Sedona is the longest section of the race without seeing your crew (excluding the first section when you're still fresh/happy), and while I had a pacer with

me for this leg, once the sun began to set, I started to struggle. Even though I knew this section of the course, I found myself hoping every corner would reveal the trail-head and thus lead me to the Sedona aid station. And then it started raining. Finally we reached the aid station, and I managed to reset a little, warm up and head back out with my next pacer — my wife, Kylie — with the goal of climbing Hangover Trail and Schnebly Hill in the middle of the night.

I managed to get up the scrambling section unscathed, but then the sleep deprivation really hit me. I was tripping on a lot of large stationary rocks and stumbling on flat trail. So I took a nap in the dirt on the world famous Hangover Trail. About 10 minutes later I was up and moving again. I had never understood the restorative power of a sub-10-

minute nap until that moment.

We continued up Schnebly Hill and saw a headlight shining toward us, and as we approached we found a like-minded pacer-less competitor napping perpendicular to the slope of the road. He woke as we passed and described the hallucinations he'd been having prior to napping. Seeing someone asleep in the middle of a fire road in below-freezing temperatures convinced me that pacers should be mandatory during the night sections of a race this long.

I woke from my second proper sleep of the race — this time 90 minutes — and embarked on a solo leg from Schnebly Hill to Munds Park. My body felt horrible — so horrible that I was doing the math to work out how long it would take to walk the remaining 50 miles. But as soon as the leg ended, the day began

to warm, and I found another wind. I ran consistently for the rest of the day and approached Wildcat Hill, the final crew-accessible aid station, in the early evening. We decided to push through the night over Mount Elden — which turned out to be the only wrong decision the team made all race.

Within an hour of leaving the aid station, my body couldn't decide whether it was too cold or too hot, and I was fighting to stay awake. I continued moving but it wasn't fast. I know Heart Trail very well in the daytime, and yet I spent the whole ascent feeling like I was lost. And then my waist light went flat; luckily, I had a backup headlamp. Descending Elden Lookout Trail was a nightmare. My knees and ankles, which at this point looked like basketballs, had almost no stability left and every few steps

I found myself on the ground. And then my backup headlamp went out; luckily, I had a second spare.

I finished this descent, and with around 6 miles to go the sun was rising once again. My wife and friends met me at Buffalo Park to run the final 2 miles, but I couldn't even muster a jog. I tried to say, “That was the hardest night of my life” but choked up three words into the sentence. The emotions would have to wait until later. I finished at 6:30 a.m. and was greeted by yet more friends who had all gotten out of bed, despite the freezing temperatures, to see me finish my adventure.

I was right: Cocodona is not a running race. It is an experience. In just over three days, I lived through a lifetime's worth of physical and emotional highs and lows. I may have covered all 250 miles on my

own feet, but the race belonged just as much to my wife, crew and pacers. Without them, the journey would never have meant nearly as much.

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