



FACES

BY MICHELLE CUTLER



Paul Bateson descends La Maroma (6788 feet).

New Directions

Ultrarunner Paul Bateson finds balance on the trails of southern Spain

Ultrarunner, race director and owner of TrailRunSpain, a company that hosts trail-running vacations, Paul Bateson clocks countless miles on southern Spain's Andalusian trails. "I live in a place where a loop includes forest, desert scrub and the highest mountain range in the area without any tarmac involved."

Bateson is 61, 5-foot-9, all lean muscle and bone, and rarely seen in non-running gear. The most striking feature of his kit, though, is the hearing aid and wired disc attached to his scalp from his cochlear implants.

Like bionic ears, cochlear implants are surgically implanted electronic devices that provide sound sense to a person who is nearly deaf. Without hearing aids, Bateson is 98-percent deaf and suffers tinnitus (a constant ringing in his ears) and balance deficiencies.

Says one of Bateson's training partners, Dr. Andrew Murray of the International Marathon Medical Directors Association, "Paul's ability to overcome a deficient sense of balance in technical terrain is remarkable."

Bateson's tinnitus causes a constant rhythmic white noise inside his ears. "It's like hearing a factory in the middle of the night," he says. "I never have peace and quiet. It's partially why I keep running."

Bateson, though, wasn't always like this.

➤ Veering Off Course

BATESON GREW UP AS an elite cyclist in Manchester, England, with Olympic and pro-cycling dreams.

When he was 17, a car struck him during an early Sunday morning ride on a country road. Bateson flipped over the hood, landed on his back and watched the car zoom off. He cycled home in shock, chalking up his pain to "nothing you wouldn't get in any race crash."

He was wrong. Sciatica, a result of the crash, significantly reduced the power in his left leg. He managed to race another 10 years relying on osteopathic treatments and physiotherapy and even made the Olympic training team. But the pain eventually became intolerable and in 1972 Bateson was treated for lumbar spinal stenosis, a condition where the spinal canal narrows, compressing the spinal cord and nerves at the lumbar vertebra.

He underwent surgery to remove a portion of the vertebral bone and allow the soft tissues within the spinal canal to decompress. The operation was a success, but Bateson had no clue he was allergic to Streptomycin, the antibiotic he was given to prevent post-operative wound infections.

Soon after he began to feel dizzy and off balance during training rides, gradual side effects of the allergic reaction. "The dizziness made me ill for days after riding," he says. "I'd keep getting back on the bike until one training day I was overcome with extreme dizziness after a half mile and had to dismount." Bateson stopped cycling for good.

➤ A New Direction

IN THE EARLY 1990S, Bateson began trail running discovering he had better balance with his feet on the ground. He fastpacked the entire Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc course before the race was invented, a course with nearly 31,000 feet of elevation gain in just over 100 miles. "I found if I went fast, the forward momentum kept me straight. When the trail was technical and slow, I

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drifted." Shortly after the trip, he says, "I started hearing 'factory' noises and had no idea where they were coming from." It was the start of tinnitus.

Undeterred, Bateson completed an adventure race that required night navigation and discovered that his sense of balance had severely diminished. He struggled through the dark. "I fell over the track edge a few times and couldn't get back up unless someone pulled me," he says. Still, in 2001 for his 50th birthday, he ran the Marathon des Sables (Mds), a six-day, 251-kilometer unsupported stage race in the Sahara Desert.

Bateson had traveled to Southern Spain to train in a hot climate, become obsessed with the Andalusian trails and decided to stay. Today, he is completely dependent on his vision and knowledge of the area, but is still able to race at a

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competitive level. And, to avoid night running, his self-imposed race limit is 80 kilometers.

Building a Business

IN 2000, Bateson met Barbara Price, an artist and former university administrator who was interested in promoting the beauty of the region. Bateson's racing background became the subject of their joint venture, Team Axarsport, an award-winning international sports event company that focuses on creating sustainable tourism in the natural parks of the Granada Province.

"When working with Paul, you forget he can't hear everything you're saying. His cochlear implants have made a slight improvement, but he can't lip read Spanish," says Price. "Somehow he's managed to befriend people of all languages through his obsession and knowledge of trail running in the area."

While running trails to develop Team Axarsport's training camps, Bateson dreamed up the Al Andalus Ultimate Trail (AAUT), a five-day, 230-kilometer stage race run in temps from 80 to 100 degrees. Now in its fifth year, AAUT is recognized as one of the toughest, hottest and most scenic stage races in Spain. Team Axarsport's second ultra, the Ultima Frontera, leads runners through two almost 50-mile mountain laps with a 30-hour cutoff. Bateson crafted every course himself.

After 10 years of running Andalusia's trails every day, Bateson claims he's the fastest he's ever been. In May, he plans to run clockwise around the boundary of the Granada Province in 25 days, a distance of approximately 1000 kilometers, to attract awareness of difficulties facing deaf and handicapped people, and to illustrate how they can be overcome through sport. As long as he can put on his running shoes, he can find balance.

Says Bateson, "If I couldn't run, I'd ask for a parachute and not pull the cord. Trail running is my way of traveling, and it's what keeps me sane."

Michelle Cutler is a runner, writer and filmmaker.



"It was a privilege to spend a week with an amazing group of runners who showed bullet-proof solidarity. If you want to see humanity at its best, it doesn't get any better than this."

"This was the hardest and most rewarding race of my life with personal records broken every day."

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