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ULTRAGEEK On My Bookshelf

The Haywire Heart

REVIEWED BY STAN WAGON

Ultrarunners and other endurance athletes should pay attention to the main message of this fascinating book. Decades of intensive training and racing can cause long-term damage to your heart.

Years of high-intensity exertion can cause scar tissue to form in the heart and this tissue can conduct electrical impulses in a way that throws off the normal steady rhythm of the heart.

My flutter is under control and I can go months without getting it. I always monitor my heart rate (HR), but it is best to sense a potential onset and back off immediately.

To give an example of how tricky it is: For the first 10 days of the past Nordic ski season I got some flutter every day, often when my HR was at 125 bpm.

The book under review is by Chris Case, editor of Velo News, Dr. John Mandrola, a cardiac electrophysiologist, runner and cyclist who is both expert in and sufferer from heart arrhythmia, and Lennard Zinn, a former US National team bike racer.

The book alternates sometimes technical, but always interesting chapters by Mandrola with material by the others, which includes several highly relevant case studies (such as the death of Micah True).

From this book one will learn quite a bit about the chemical and electrical complexity that keeps the heart working steadily for about a billion beats.

Perhaps the bottom line question for younger athletes is: Should I do anything differently now to avoid problems later? This is a very difficult question.

The book fails to mention an important point. HR refers to heartbeats in a minute; but one often counts the pulse at the wrist. For almost everyone these are the same.

The book covers many types of fibrillation, but does not overly dwell on any single type; so it is not encyclopedic. But it does discuss in detail the large amount of research that convincingly shows that endurance athletes are at greater risk for heart arrhythmia.

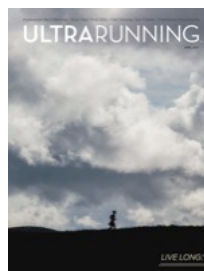
Let me end by quoting Endicott who, after much research, blames his own personality for the problem.

"Yeah, I did all this to myself - by personality. And if someone would have gone to me before this happened - and this is a key part of reality - and said you need to

back off because this is your future, would I have changed anything? Probably not. I would likely do the same activities, but I would rest and recover more.

Stan Wagon is a member of the trio that founded UltraRunning Magazine in 1981. A former math professor at Smith and Macalester Colleges, he now lives at 9,500 feet in Silverthorne, CO, and focuses on nordic ski racing, having completed one 100-mile ski race. That is a lot easier than running 100 miles.

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Dorian Momsen is small among her surroundings but large in running ability as she runs in her first 100k race and wins at Ordnance 100K. Photo: Let's Wander Photography

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