

## Powered by potatoes: Endurance athletes are chasing speed with spuds

More ultramarathoners and cyclists are turning to potatoes as a mild, carbohydrate-packed fuel option.

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By Kate Bernot

Professional ultramarathoner Tara Dower lived out of her Ford Transit van while training for last year's Hardrock Hundred Mile Endurance Run. The ultramarathon includes 33,197 feet of elevation gain, reaching a high point of 14,048 feet at Handies Peak, outside Silverton, Colorado. It takes the average participant just over 39 hours to complete — a day and a half of running, climbing and trying to stuff one's body with enough food to make it possible.

In preparation for hours-long runs through the imposing San Juan Mountains, Dower loaded up her hydration vest with a trusty staple fuel: canned potatoes. Her van's cupboards were packed with these potatoes, which she would exhume from their metal confines, slice in half, salt and smash into plastic bags for mid-run consumption. On a 20-mile training day, she would easily eat through an entire can's worth. They were tasty and convenient, but her spud snacks weren't winning any aesthetic prizes.

"By that point, they're like mashed potatoes," Dower says. "It's a great fuel source, but maybe it doesn't *look* the most appetizing in the moment."

Dower, who holds several records, including the fastest known time to complete the Appalachian Trail, is among a rarefied group of elite trail runners with extreme nutritional needs. Cheap, versatile and packed with carbohydrates, potatoes have long been a go-to for these athletes, both before and during ultramarathons. Of course, America's potato farmers are on board.

In 2018, Potatoes USA, the marketing board representing them, launched its "Potatoes Fuel Performance" campaign. A year later, a small study published in the Journal of Applied Physiology — funded by another potato industry group — found that russet potatoes performed similarly to packaged carbohydrate gels in their ability to improve endurance for trained cyclists. Potato marketers soon began reaching out to athletes of all stripes with a simple message: Spuds pack serious fuel. These promotional efforts — combined with athletes' famous appreciation of carbs — are changing some runners' perceptions of the humble potato.

The nutritional data helps explain why: According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, one medium potato contains roughly 34 grams of carbohydrates and more potassium than an average banana. Energy gels typically pack 20 to 50 grams of carbohydrates per pouch, along with other nutrients. They often take the form of glucose or fructose, which the body can rapidly absorb, making them a trusted nutrition option for endurance athletes.

But some athletes, like Dower, grow tired of swallowing the same sweet gels or gummies mile after mile. When a runner doesn't feel motivated to eat, it can have disastrous effects on their performance. Potatoes, by contrast, are savory and bland — in a good way. Plus, they're complex carbohydrates that include starches and fibers, which take the body longer to break down than simple sugars. Ideally, endurance athletes will consume both fast-absorbing and long-lasting carbs to keep their muscles pumping.

“Not everyone can keep fueling off of gels, chews, fruit cups or fruit squeezes. It gets kind of boring. I always recommend a combination of carbohydrates,” says Yasi Ansari, a certified specialist in sports dietetics and a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. “Potatoes can do the trick when it comes to tolerance and keeping athletes satisfied for a longer period of time.”

Eating enough to sustain peak performance is a battle for many ultrarunners. Kelly Newlon, a sports-nutrition-focused chef and the founder of Real Athlete Diets, finds that many runners struggle to take in the 300 to 500 calories per hour they need during a race. When she's assisting them on the course (a practice known as “crewing”), she often supplies them with instant mashed potatoes mixed with chicken stock or miso broth to form a potato soup. It's hearty, hydrating and — crucially — drinkable.

“If they've already been eating for 60 miles, they're sort of exhausted from chewing,” Newlon says. “This makes it easy to get in calories, carbs and sodium.”

Nathan Budziak, a hobbyist ultrarunner who lives in San Jose, says that, when he began racing a decade ago, a more minimal approach to fueling was in vogue. His competitors seemed to barely stop at race aid stations to eat or drink. Over the past decade, he has noticed a nutritional shift at the professional level: If runners couldn't train any harder, maybe more food would give them an edge over their competition.

When he's racing today, Budziak takes in three times as many calories and carbs per hour as he did a decade ago. He says he feels better for it. Salted, buttered mashed potatoes in individual zip-top bags are a perennial presence in his drop bags, the caches of gear and fuel runners are allowed to deposit along the racecourse. He boils and mashes the potatoes himself, an extra step compared to instant or canned potatoes other runners use. To Budziak, it's worth it: The potatoes fuel him both physically and emotionally. Unlike gels or hydration powders, they're comfort food.

“Having those potatoes makes you think, ‘Hey, I am eating something normal,’” Budziak says. “It makes you look forward to that finish-line meal. It gives you a bit of hope, maybe.”

As thrilled as Budziak is to see potatoes along the racecourse, the potato industry might be even more excited. In 2019, Potatoes USA began sponsoring Rock 'n' Roll marathons as the races' “official performance vegetable.” More than 10,000 runners were able to pick up boiled, salted potatoes at the 10-mile mark along the course's route down the Las Vegas Strip.

The trade group then took its campaign to the online masses, launching a group called Team Potato, which encourages people to eat potatoes as part of their active lifestyles. Team Potato has 1,700 members on Facebook and 300,000 people who have participated in its sponsored challenges on the fitness app Strava, collectively logging more than 27 million miles. Periodically, it sends spud-themed swag, such as neck gaiters and cycling jerseys, to its “community of potato-fueled athletes.”

Why are so many runners publicly enthusiastic about potatoes when there are plenty of other foods that supply carbohydrates and nutrients? Kayla Vogel, senior global marketing manager at Potatoes USA, says it goes beyond the vegetable’s nutritional value. It’s fun, and even counterintuitive, to be an endurance athlete who appreciates the quotidian, modest potato — a vegetable synonymous with lumps, starch and inactivity.

“It’s almost shocking to people,” Vogel said. “They’ve thought of them more in terms of a ‘couch potato.’ And that’s the image that we’re trying to overcome.”

Perhaps the most visible potato-powered ambassador is the annually selected Speedy Spud. This year’s runner, Ainsley Chapman, was chosen from a pool of 89 applicants who all submitted short essays about their love of potato-fueled fitness. (As a graduate student and a runner, she appreciates them as flexible and inexpensive calories.) In April, Chapman ran the Salt Lake City Half Marathon dressed as a potato in exchange for Potatoes USA covering her entry fee.

The costume, she says, is “actually very conducive to running,” with front and back panels that slip over her head, allowing her to run at a normal gait and in standard workout clothes. What’s less familiar to her are the stares she receives. “I by no means consider myself an influencer, and this is my first sponsored race, so when I told people I was being sponsored by potato farmers to run, I don’t think they believed me,” Chapman said. “But attracting attention so that people think about potatoes is the whole point.”

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