

In Search of Al Howie

*Author Jared Beasley was in the middle of writing a book on Al Howie when in 2016 the ultrarunner passed away. Here he recalls memories of Howie and the challenges he faced completing his book *In Search of Al Howie*.*

In 2016, two years of work on a book with Al Howie came to a sudden halt. The ultrarunner had passed away unexpectedly at Sunridge Place care home in Duncan. His condition had been improving, and there was hope he could get out. Now, there was a hole. I couldn't sleep for days thinking about him. Then, my appendix ruptured. As if things weren't bad enough, I received an email from Howie's sister in Scotland: "Why would anybody want to write a book about my brother?" Filled with doubt, I asked myself the same question.

Many have wondered if the Scottish Canadian ultrarunner was more myth than man. Who runs 1,350 kilometres from Edmonton to Victoria, then places 14th in the inaugural Royal Victoria Marathon? How could anyone run 2,225 kilometres from Winnipeg to Ottawa to enter a 24-hour race? Then win. And why? The documentation was extensive, the reasoning more elusive.

On Vancouver island's roadways, he was an apparition, a bone-thin, long-haired, shirtless hippie, that seemed to never stop running.



Al Howie at the start of his 11-day John O'Groats to Land's End run (North of Scotland to South of England) in 1988. Photo by Ron Hill.

When he did, he either had a beer, a joint, or a massive plate of food in front of his face. With a golden mane and a fiery beard, he exuded

a "bound-to-nothing" freedom. His truth, however, was more unique and complex than I ever imagined. And that, more than anything, was why I was determined to tell his story. He was just that different.

An early marriage in Scotland, marred by his wife's drug use, ended with Howie taking off with their four-year-old. Accused of kidnapping, INTERPOL finally caught up with him in Toronto. They found a three-pack-a-day smoker, working in foundries, and using fake names. Remarkably, the charges were dropped. Howie retained custody, and at 29 years old, he quit cigarettes and took up extreme running.

In 1979, Howie ran 820 kilometres to Prince George to race alongside Terry Fox. Both would find inspiration that day to run across Canada, and monuments at Mile '0' commemorate their efforts. Still, Howie's achievements and life remain aloof, harder to pin down. A 2:29 marathoner, his contemporaries were stupefied and frustrated by his talent: if he wouldn't run thousands of kilometres to races, he could be a

world-class marathoner. Fifty-milers and 100-milers said the same thing. He never listened.

Instead of kilometres, Howie thought in terms of days. It took four and a half days for him to reach 580 kilometres, circling Centennial Stadium 1,422 times, non-stop. It took 16 days 19 hours

to run 2,092 kilometres in Queens, NY, 11 days to run the length of Britain, and 72 days 10 hours to run from St. John's to Victoria at the age of 46. All were world records and many still stand today.

Howie was Victoria's own and epitomized an unplugged era in ultrarunning. Without GPS or gels or big sponsors, he became an endurance enigma, defiant of the world's

idea of what a runner should be and an epic yet cautionary example of what one could be.

In Search of Al Howie was published in 2019 by Rocky Mountain Books and is available at Russell Books, 747 Fort Street, Victoria – russellbooks.com

