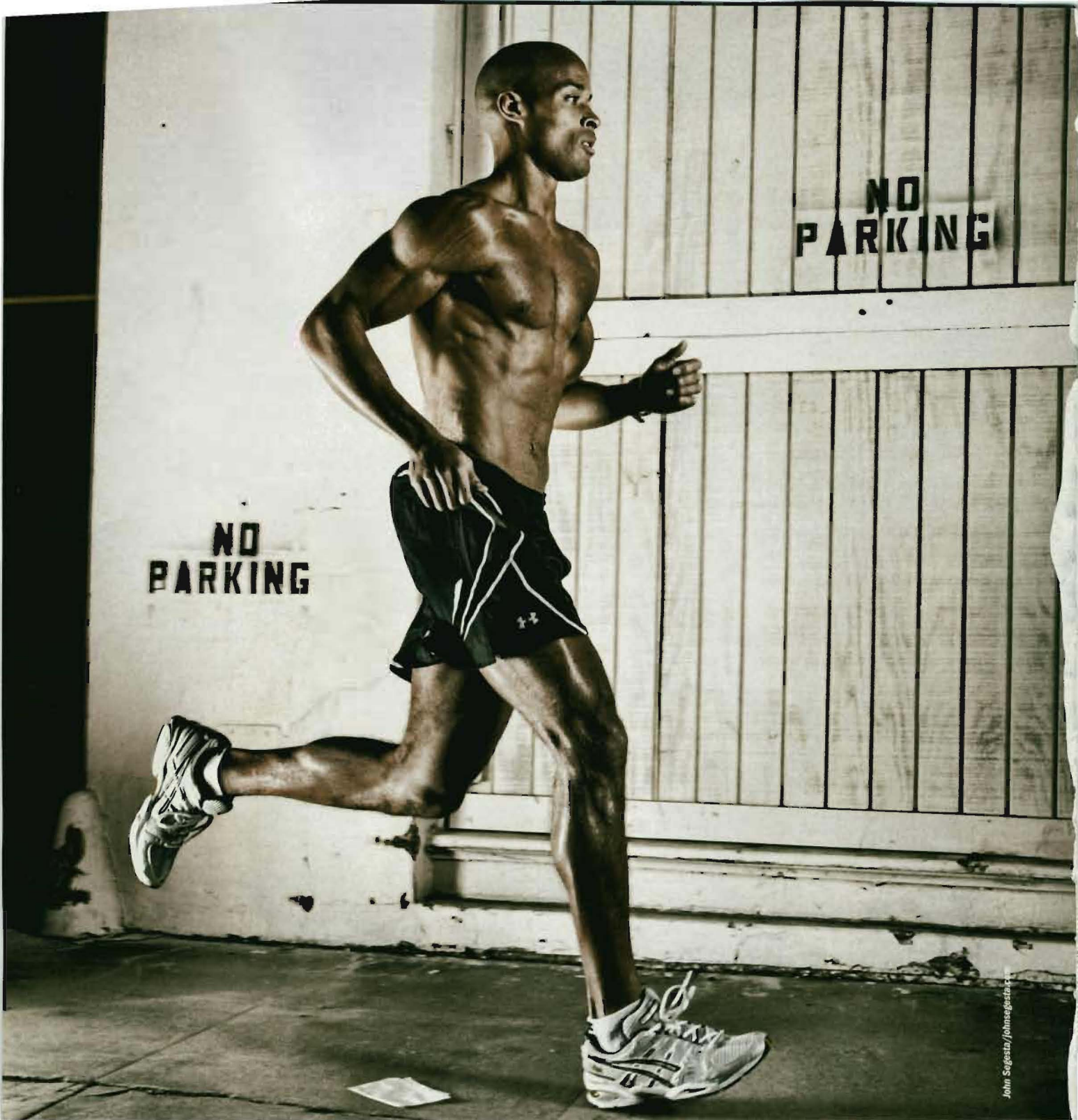


**THE
TOUGHEST
MEN
ALIVE**

BY JIM GOURLEY

Alan Sargent / John DeCassano



John Sogesta/JohnSogesta.com

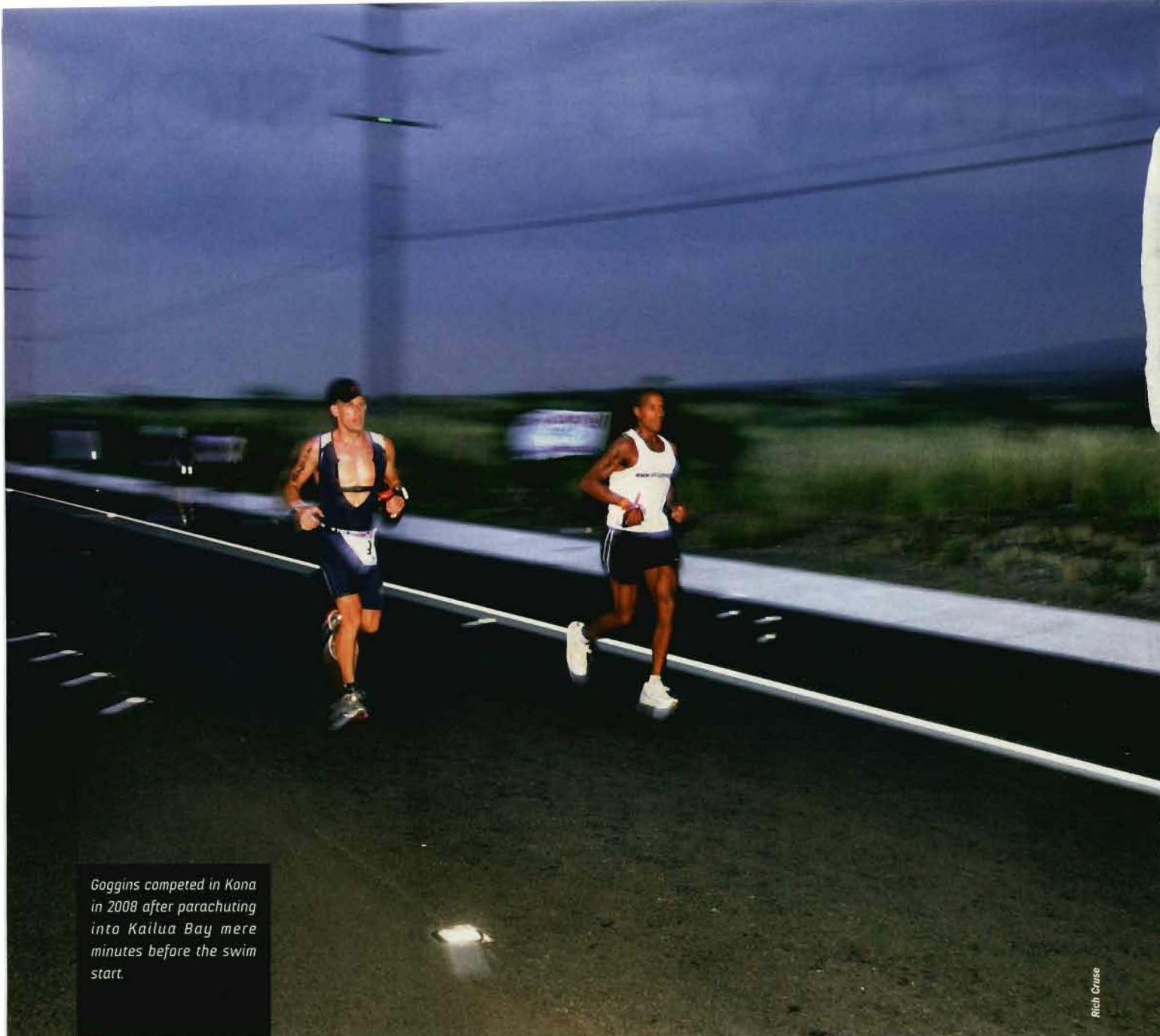
IN 2005 PETTY OFFICER FIRST CLASS DAVID GOGGINS' LIFE TOOK A TRAGIC TURN. Several of his fellow U.S. Navy SEAL(s) were killed in a helicopter crash during a mission in Afghanistan. To honor them, Goggins vowed to raise money for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, which gives college scholarships and grants to the children of fallen special operations soldiers. Goggins rationalized that to raise money, he would have to do something extreme, something phenomenal— something incredibly painful.

He decided to race ultramarathons when he Googled the 10 most difficult feats in the world. First on the list was the Badwater

Ultramarathon, a 135-mile footrace through Death Valley. He called the race organizers to inquire about entry.

Goggins had never participated in an ultramarathon before—he had never even run a regular marathon. However, the race organizers were sympathetic to his cause and said that if he completed a couple of ultras before Badwater, they would consider his race application.

Only four days after deciding to compete in Badwater, he was on the starting line of his first 100-miler. What happened to Goggins over the course of the next 100 miles might have been a life-changing event for many. For Goggins, it was simple affirmation. He broke nearly every



Goggins competed in Kona in 2008 after parachuting into Kailua Bay mere minutes before the swim start.

Rich Cruise

bone in his feet and suffered kidney failure. His wife, who is a nurse, feared for his life and urged him to go to a hospital. He refused. He called in sick to work the day after the race. In truth, he couldn't move. He began to wonder if he'd make it through the night.

"I thought I was dying," he says, "but I thought to myself that if I did, I'd be OK with that, because I'd done something impossible." He woke up the next morning happy to be alive, happy that he'd completed his first ultra, and even happier that he was closer to getting into Badwater. Two weeks later he ran in the Las Vegas marathon. He ran Badwater just six months after that—and finished fifth.

It was the start of a journey whose course no one could predict, not even Goggins.

He routinely makes the podium in some of the world's most challenging ultra-endurance races, yet he only takes enough prize money to cover his travel expenses. He was named one of *Runner's World* magazine's 2008 Heroes of Running, even though none of his goals involved running. He says that he hates to swim, hates to bike,

hates to run and still does them all on a daily basis—precisely because he hates to.

Over the past two years, Goggins has achieved numerous incredible feats of athleticism, confounding people who try to classify him. Is he an athlete? A stunt performer? A genetic phenomenon? A superhuman?

Goggins' life is one of profound focus and determination. When he was 13 years old, he attended a speech from a pararescue jumper of the U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command. Goggins never forgot that man's inspiring story of a parachuting accident that broke most of his bones and required a tracheotomy. Nonetheless, the airman pushed himself through rehab back onto active duty, and he was jumping again within a year. From that moment, Goggins understood what he wanted his life to be, as well as the resolve to not waste a moment in pursuing his goals.

After four years in the Air Force, and a few years of trying to make it as a professional football player, a 290-pound Goggins stood in a Navy recruiting center and proclaimed that he wanted to become a member of the SEAL(s). The recruiter told Goggins that a man of his

Ford



Rich Cruse

stature would never make it through training. Two months of intense dieting and exercise later, Goggins stood in the same recruiting office at 190 pounds. Goggins was forced through the SEAL(s)' infamous hell week twice, but finally achieved his goal in 1998.

From there, Goggins continued to defy the odds. He's the only member in the U.S. Armed Forces to complete SEAL(s) training, the U.S. Army Ranger School and Air Force tactical air controller training. He's also faced combat in Iraq.

Only three months after completing Badwater in 2006, he competed in the Ultraman World Championships triathlon in Hawaii. He placed second in the three-day, 320-mile race, cycling 261 miles in two days on a rented bicycle. Before training for that race, he'd never ridden a bike competitively. Goggins returned to Badwater in 2007 to finish third. Over the next two years, he competed in another 14 ultra-endurance races, with top-five finishes in nine of them. He set a course record at the 48-hour national championships, beating the previous record by 20 miles with a whopping total distance traveled of 203.5 miles and earning himself a spot among the top 20 ultramarathoners in the world. He became the subject of a *Runner's World* feature, and the Navy asked him to appear in a recruiting commercial.

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Notoriety, awards, medals, achievements. Other than the money he's raised for the Special Operations Warrior Foundation, none of these matter to Goggins. He's not trying to be number one in the world. He's not interested in how many races he's run. He doesn't keep track of the miles he's gone through. There's no scoreboard; there's no finish line.

At the beginning of our interview, Goggins said with fervent sincerity: "I'm nobody special." It's a mentality that's evident in his keeping with the military convention of referring to himself in the third person by his last name only. He's not the ultra-athlete David Goggins, or David Goggins or even Petty Officer Goggins. Just Goggins. Just another guy.

It's not a contradiction of terms. He doesn't live in denial of his accomplishments, but what he emphasizes—what is the essential fiber of Goggins—is that not a moment is wasted dwelling on them.

"Ultraman is nothing like Ironman," he says. "There's no huge crowd, or party or even an announcer. You hardly even notice the finish line. For people who do these races, it's not about that. Watch the video of me crossing the finish line at Kona," he says. "I'm not overwhelmed with the accomplishment. I'm looking down at my watch, and it's not to check my finishing time. I'm looking to see what time it is and how much time I have left in the day for another workout. I'm already thinking about the next thing. As of that moment, Ironman is done. It's time to move on."

Nevertheless, he's living the spirit of Ironman to the utmost, discovering just how much he can do. Every day, he's up and running by 3 a.m. After a 20-mile run, he bikes 20 miles to work. He runs at lunch, if he can. Then it's back home (on the bike, of course) to



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join his wife for weight training in the gym. He's in bed no earlier than midnight most nights. Don't bother re-reading to check your math: It really does add up to only three hours of sleep a night. When people ask if he uses supplements to help him train, he says that he takes a giant suck-it-up pill every morning and washes it down with a refreshing can of hard. This isn't boasting. It's military-speak for the hardest part of Goggins' daily regimen: getting out of bed.

Goggins takes his suck-it-up pill every morning because no matter how unpleasant it is to swallow, he's seen something that's even more unpleasant to contemplate as the alternative. He's seen "the look."

It was during one of his SEAL(s) hell week experiences that Goggins saw it. Running on only 15 minutes of sleep in three days, having gone through multiple obstacle courses and other punishing training events, his class had just been let out of the freezing cold water of Southern California. There stood Goggins and his classmates, shivering on the beach, when one of the instructors barked the order to get back in the water. The man beside Goggins turned and looked at him with a hollow gaze. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. "The look" said it all. The man turned and left the group. He quit.

Goggins views "the look" as a form of surrender, abandoning everything that he stands for. Surrender is never an option.

"Running is running," he says. "It hurts, but that's all it does. The most difficult part of the training is training your mind. You build calluses on your feet to endure the road. You build calluses on your mind to endure the pain. There's only one way to do that. You have to get out there and run."

Goggins stresses that he's not selling himself as some kind of model for athletic success. "I don't know if everyone should be doing this, definitely not the way I've done it," he says.

"I don't follow a training philosophy. If I'd gone at things slower and trained better, I'd probably be better now. But I just didn't have time. I had three years of non-deployable time; that was it. But I knew I could take the pain, so that's what I did. The body breaks, but it will heal back. It will adjust." Goggins' body has certainly made adjustments. The 290-pound powerlifter is gone, replaced with a lean 190-pound runner with 4 percent body fat.

Those adjustments didn't come without work, though. In the beginning, Goggins

and his wife were constantly finding creative ways to apply tape and cushioning to his feet and legs to keep him up and running.

He never took days off, and while the word "surrender" isn't in his vocabulary, neither is "recovery workout," so he spent a lot of time with his body held together with an array of wraps.

"We all have our own journey in life, I'm focusing on mine," Goggins says. His journey is one about his own limits and recognizing that life is too short not to get out there and enjoy everything the world has to offer.

"I remember watching this guy on television climbing Mount Everest without oxygen," he recalls. "Every movement just looked agonizing, but he made it. And I thought to myself, 'That guy is really living without regrets.' When I get to the end of the road, I don't want to be thinking about the time I wasted or the things I could have done with that time. This world has so many challenges, I have to keep moving on."

That spirit helped Goggins through one of the most difficult challenges of his life in May. During a routine checkup, his doctor discovered a birth defect known as atrial septum defect (ASD), or a hole in his heart, and it's only able to function at about 75 percent capacity. In "normal" people, this would prevent them from doing activities such as scuba diving or anything at high altitude, because the excess of oxygenated blood that is unable to leave the heart can cause the muscle to bleed out.

Only a few days after learning of the condition, Goggins had surgery to repair his heart and is recovering well. So well, in fact, that he started doing light workouts only two weeks after surgery. It will likely take six months until he is fully recovered and able to compete in endurance events again.

Many people have described Goggins as "an animal" or "a machine." He'll likely remain in the history books as one of the greatest ultra-endurance runners and triathletes, and his temporary absence from the multisport community is truly a loss. He'll still tell you he's nobody special. But one thing is certain: He is human.

Given what he's put himself through, for himself and for charity, for which he's raised more than \$300,000, and what he's given to us through his own continuing voyage of self-discovery, he may be more human than the rest of us. ▶