

## One man's role in a 6,000-mile run through North America

### Level 3 • Advanced

#### 1 Warmer

Why do people run marathons? Exchange opinions with other students.

#### 2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then find them in the article to read them in context.

elder	assault	shady	indigenous	plant	process
quadrennial	ancestral	determined	staff	terrain	myriad

1. living in a place for a very long time before other people came to live there \_\_\_\_\_
2. occurring every four years \_\_\_\_\_
3. belonging to someone who is related to you who lived a long time ago \_\_\_\_\_
4. a factory or large building where industrial labour is carried out \_\_\_\_\_
5. an older and more experienced member of a group who gives advice and makes decisions  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. a stick that is carried or used on special or formal occasions \_\_\_\_\_
7. an extremely large number of things \_\_\_\_\_
8. an area of land that has a particular physical feature \_\_\_\_\_
9. a physical attack on someone \_\_\_\_\_
10. potentially illegal or dangerous \_\_\_\_\_
11. decided \_\_\_\_\_
12. work through something (especially a problem) and decide how to deal with it \_\_\_\_\_

## One man's role in a 6,000-mile run through North America

### Level 3 • Advanced

#### Spirit Journey: one man's role in a 6,000-mile run through North America

*When Noé Álvarez joined an extraordinary ultramarathon, he tested himself physically and mentally while also connecting with his heritage*

Rich Tenorio

30 March, 2020

- 1 While jogging on the spot, Mexican-American runner Noé Álvarez showed his passport to the border agent in Nogales, Arizona. Álvarez was participating in the Peace and Dignity Journeys (PDJ), an ultramarathon for runners of indigenous background like him. His group had run 3,200 miles from the Arctic to the US border with Mexico. They still had miles to go before their destination of the Panama Canal, but for Álvarez, the crossing into Mexico had extra meaning – it was the homeland of his parents before they immigrated to the US. The border agent, a fellow Latino, jokingly asked if he was running in the wrong direction.
- 2 It's an emotional moment in Álvarez's memoir, *Spirit Run: A 6,000-Mile Marathon Through North America's Stolen Land*. The book chronicles not only that epic run in 2004 but also the background of the author and his immigrant parents.
- 3 And what a run it was. The PDJ is a quadrennial event intended to reconnect indigenous participants with their ancestral lands. The 2020 event was postponed due to the Covid-19 outbreak. In 2004, Álvarez's group was heading south to rendezvous with another group running north from Argentina.
- 4 There were unexpected difficulties – an encounter between Álvarez and a mountain lion in Oregon, stone-throwing motorists in Mexico and tensions between some of the runners. And he didn't quite finish the way he intended to.
- 5 Álvarez grew up in Yakima, Washington, the son of Mexican immigrants of Purépecha heritage. His father worked in an orchard, his mother at an apple-packing plant. As a teenager, he worked with his mother at the plant, describing the days as physically demanding; he said his mother is starting to lose sensation in her hands from overwork. He also started to run, although he grew up thinking of it as a way to keep one step ahead of immigration authorities.
- 6 He received a full scholarship to Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington but says he felt "cultural shock on all sorts of levels. I had difficulties. There was the shame of failing – I could not save my family." He learnt of the PDJ from "a friend of a friend of a friend".
- 7 He joined one month in, after the group had started its journey from Alaska. Their paths crossed in British Columbia. Fellow runners collectively represented nine indigenous communities.
- 8 "It was interesting to see how fluid and multi-layered our identities were," he says of himself and his fellow participants. They included runners of Mexican heritage living in Canada and "an elder, our spiritual guide, from the Arctic". He noted that there were "some former gang and military members and others completely living off the land", and women runners committed to "female energy, healing power, balance".
- 9 PDJ runners start and end each day with a ceremony and carry feathered staffs during the run. Daily destinations are indigenous communities across North America. At each stop, community members share an important cultural story with the runners, giving them a feather representing the story to add to their staff. Sometimes they also shared running traditions, including running as a group in the Tohono O'odham territory in the Arizona desert.
- 10 Álvarez, who had never run more than ten miles in a day, would receive myriad tests. The PDJ takes place relay-style, with each runner committing to a certain amount of mileage each day while others wait their turn while travelling by motor vehicle. He learnt to eat on the run, finding that a hard-boiled egg stuffed into his pocket might not be the wisest nourishment with wildlife around. He and his fellow runners slept in all manner of places, from campgrounds to casinos, and encountered varying terrain, from the forests of Canada to the deserts of Washington and Arizona and the jungles of Mexico.
- 11 "It was not just running blindly," Álvarez says. "It's a story about why land is important to people." He noted that in the Canadian forests, trees were being cut down for the skiing industry and the Winter Olympics, while more arid areas were suffering from drought.
- 12 "We honoured the land that a lot of people depend on," Álvarez says. "We were physically

## One man's role in a 6,000-mile run through North America

### Level 3 • Advanced

- walking, running and connecting with it every step of the way." In Oregon, he made an unexpected connection – a mountain lion waiting for him atop a peak.
- 13 "I was completely unprepared," Álvarez recalls. "I couldn't run back. I had to keep moving forwards." He says that when he joined the run, "one guy, a really good friend and spiritual guide, talked about how to be thankful for the presence of an animal that decides to notice you; sort of take it as a message, an opportunity to reflect."
- 14 In the book, Álvarez describes the mix of gratitude and footwork that helped him escape the big cat. "Luckily, I'm still here," he says. "I studied up on what you're supposed to do, and you're definitely not supposed to run. It's probably the dumbest thing I've ever done."
- 15 After the group crossed into Mexico, they encountered a different kind of danger: people who threw rocks from cars. Female runners were also at risk of assault.
- 16 "We came across situations with real shady encounters: people trying to force you into a vehicle, throwing rocks at you, people who didn't want you there," Álvarez says. "We adjusted, ran in pairs. Some territories were extremely unsafe. If you didn't want to run, you didn't have to. Others took on the miles."
- 17 Ultimately, it was a familiar runner's story – injury – that determined Álvarez would finish his run in Guatemala before he could reach the Panama Canal. He calls it "the toughest decision, probably, I'd ever had to make."
- 18 "I didn't want to stop," he says. "But knowing when to stop was part of the lesson."
- 19 This lesson has stayed with him ever since, as has the border officer's question about whether he was running in the wrong direction. "I no longer think about the wrong direction," Álvarez says. "I now have a ritual of asking the questions I need to." And, he says, "Running is the way I process things now."

© Guardian News and Media 2020

First published in *The Guardian*, 30/03/20

### 3 Comprehension check

Answer the questions using information from the article.

- Where did Noé Álvarez join and leave the PDJ ultramarathon?
- Where had he planned to run to? Why didn't he manage this?
- Where did Noé Álvarez cross the border from North to Central America?
- What do you know about the relay running system used in the PDJ?
- What dangers did the runners encounter on the way?
- What are the reasons behind the PDJ?

### 4 Using the key words

Answer the questions.

- What is your **ancestral** land?
- Who are or were the **indigenous** people in your country? What do you know about them?
- What other events do you know of that happen on a **quadrennial** basis?
- How would you describe the **terrain** in the countryside around your town or city?

## One man's role in a 6,000-mile run through North America

### Level 3 • Advanced

#### 5 Discussion

- Talk about why you think participating in the PDJ ultramarathon was a spiritual journey for Noé Álvarez.
- What do you think might have caused Álvarez to suffer from cultural shock when he started university?
- Why do you think Álvarez used the words *North America's Stolen Land* in the title of his memoir? What do the choice of words tell you about his attitudes?
- Why do you think running helps Noé Álvarez process things?
- What activities help you to process things and deal with life's challenges?

#### 6 Webquest

- a. Find out more about the Peace and Dignity Journeys and what the groups are doing in 2020 to honour their heritage instead of running the ultramarathon.
- b. Find out more about one of the indigenous groups mentioned in the article or another that the runners might meet on the way from North to South America. In particular, try to find out how they feel connected to the land.
- c. Turn your findings into a five-minute presentation for the class.