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Ultra-Trail: inside the event community, nature and wildlife

An authentic trail running experience in Canada's wild backcountry

Plard Mathilde, Martineau Aurélien, 2022

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Abstract

Based on a case study of the Ultra-Trail Harricana of Canada (UTHC), this article analyzes the emergence and structuring of trail-running sporting events. The UTHC illustrates just how popular the practice is and a study of this event offers insights into the relationships that link the event with its environment, partners and the discipline more broadly. The research data (plural and mixed) will present the unique characteristics that define the event's evolution, the development strategies and the challenges and crises faced by its organizers. More precisely, it will highlight the UTHC's position at the interfaces of sports competition, sports tourism and the outdoor industry in Quebec.

Keywords: trail running; sporting events; outdoor industry; sports tourism; Quebec

INTRODUCTION - BACKGROUND

Existing research on running

From ancient times to modern day, running has always held a unique and significant place within society (Segalen, 1994). As a sport that “encompasses all of society”¹ in the words of Edgar Morin (2020), running has traditionally been an activity that humans engage in as a sport, even though it has undergone numerous transformations over time (Travers et al., 2019). Western countries have witnessed two main periods during which the number of those participating in the activity increased considerably. The first took place in the mid-20th century in the wake of the cultural revolution of the 1960s (Scheerder, 2015) with the advent of jogging as a popular recreational hobby, practiced away from stadiums and athletic tracks in a non-competitive environment (Waser, 1998). The second wave started in the early 21st century, when the phenomenon of “running” took off after a phase of stagnation during the 1990s (Scheerder, 2015). Since then, the number of those who run outside athletic settings has grown exponentially, and fans of the sport began running alone or in small informal groups. This phenomenon has spread beyond the USA and Europe; over time, running has become one of the most popular and most practiced sports activities globally (Gough, 2018): there were 50 million runners in Europe in 2010 (Scheerder, 2015) and 60 million in the United States in 2017 (Gough, 2018).

Against this backdrop, trail and ultra-trail running mark an interesting development as they enjoy a passionate following in the running community and take place outdoors. The modern iteration of trail running is said to have been born in the US, and the Western States 100-Mile Endurance Run is considered to be the first ultra-trail race (Urbański, 2018). By the turn of the 21st century, the discipline had grown substantially throughout the world. Large-scale events were thus created at the start of the 2000s, gradually gaining in popularity, such as the Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc in 2003 (ibid.). The number of those practicing the discipline and taking part in events has continued to increase, firstly in Europe and then slightly later in Canada at the beginning of the 2010s.

In response to trail running’s global rise, the main actors involved decided to come together to add more structure to the discipline, thus giving birth to the International Trail Running Association (ITRA) in 2013. This allowed trail running to be set up as a discipline in its own right and practiced on a global scale. The creation of the ITRA thus gave a voice to parties involved in trail running to “promote its strong values, its diversity, the safety of races and the health of runners, as well as to further the development of trail running and ensure a constructive dialogue between the national and international bodies” (ITRA, 2020a, available online). The ITRA also set out its shared values, implemented a health and anti-doping policy and defined trail running as “a pedestrian race open to all, in a natural environment (mountain, desert, forest, plain) with minimal possible paved or asphalt road (which should not exceed 20% of the total course). The terrain can vary (dirt road, forest trail, single track...) and the route must be properly marked. The race is ideally – but not necessarily – in self-sufficiency or semi self-sufficiency and is held in

¹ All citations have been translated by Nivene Raafat & Aurélie Labrosse unless otherwise stated.

the respect for sporting ethics, loyalty, solidarity and the environment” (ITRA, 2013, available online). The ITRA has also developed tools to evaluate trail running, whether it is a system to evaluate races based on their characteristics and level of difficulty (ITRA certification) or trail runner performance with the help of an index (Urbański, 2018).

The global governing body for track and field, World Athletics (formerly IAAF), officially adopted trail running as a discipline in 2015. It was important for World Athletics to recognize this sport that takes place away from stadiums and in the great outdoors given the inescapable interest garnered by the discipline, with close to 20 million trail runners worldwide (World Athletics, 2020). Today, World Athletics and the ITRA are partners and jointly manage trail running throughout the entire globe. World Athletics’ decision to acknowledge trail running has paved the way for the sport to aspire to a certain level of professionalization, evidenced by the creation of different international competitions, e.g. the World Trail Running Championships (since 2007), the Ultra-Trail World Tour (2013), the Skyrunning World Championship (2010), and the Golden Trail World Series (2018). Statistics published by the ITRA in 2020 illustrate and confirm that “trail running is now accessible to the masses” (Buron, 2020, p. 66). Similarly, the ITRA recorded 25,700 races in 195 countries or autonomous regions throughout the globe with over 1.77 million participants between 2013 and 2019 (ITRA, 2020b).

The object of this study

Our previous research focused specifically on what trail running, as a relatively new running discipline, brought out in those engaged in the practice (Auteur, 2019). This paper takes a different approach as here we examine **the emergence and the structuring of ultra-trail sporting events**. In fact, within the scientific literature, existing research on running and trail running is mostly centered on several main approaches: in the field of natural sciences, the focus is on physiological, biomechanical, and nutritional factors; in the field of sports psychology, researchers examine participant motivation and the beneficial effects of the activity (Bridel et al., 2016). Examining engagement in the sport (Buron, 2020) provided a useful entry point for researchers looking to explain why individuals took part in this activity, including that “the main principle is the demand for autonomy that our modern societies bring to bear on the individual” (Cubizolles & Lacroix, 2017). In the humanities and social sciences, however, less attention is paid to the emergence and trajectory of one or multiple ultra-trail events, with the exception of the work of Olivier Bessy (2005, 2014, 2016). In light of this, running is considered a research subject and a social reality that is best studied by examining those events where runners compete against each other.

The aim of this article is thus to study the trajectory of one trail running event that has taken place in Quebec since 2012: the Ultra-Trail Harricana of Canada (UTHC). This

event was chosen specifically because it illustrates the success that such sporting events have seen throughout the globe, and especially in Canada.

Our research was based on a number of initial lines of investigation: How can we explain the enthusiasm shown for these events? What strategies have been put in place by the organizers to help encourage its development? Which actors and partners are involved in the event? What links this sporting event with the area in which it takes place?

This article examines a range of research data and aims to share knowledge with actors involved in the running community as well as with other scholars conducting similar research. Ultimately, the objective is to understand how an ultra-trail event is structured and organized in time and space, and to turn these races and kilometers of courses into a tangible object that can be examined academically, giving rise to geographical and philosophical interpretations.

METHODOLOGY

The results of the research presented in this paper are based on the analysis of a range of qualitative and statistical data. An agreement has been in place since 2018 between the RUN Ultra-Trail research program and the Ultra-Trail Harricana of Canada with the aim of studying this specific sporting event. Since then, numerous discussions between the research partners have resulted in the collection of data and evidence for further analysis by the research team. Interviews were conducted with the executive director of the UTHC to discuss how the event is organized and run. In addition, our research team took part in the 2019 edition of the UTHC as volunteers in order to observe the event first-hand. This involvement as a “*participant observateur*” [participating observer] (Soulé, 2007) allowed our researchers to gain valuable insight into the experience of participants and organizers by being immersed in the action as volunteers (our team did not hide the fact that they were also there to conduct observational research).

The UTHC management team also provided us with official documents produced by the event (including different editions of the UTHC runners’ guide), as well as statistical data concerning the participants who had signed up for the event between 2014 and 2019. By structuring and classifying the databases, we were subsequently able to spatialize this information.

Further investigations enabled us to build on the information collected at the UTHC event by monitoring relevant information in the field (media reports and specialized websites) and by analyzing the event’s official social media accounts. Statistical data were also supplemented by the extraction and analysis of relevant data concerning the results of UTHC events held between 2013 and 2020. Data were collected from www.sportstats.ca. The entire body of evidence was imported into different software for analysis. Nvivo 11 was used to conduct qualitative data analysis, while Microsoft Excel and Tableau were used for statistical and geographical data.

RESULTS

I. Ultra-Trail Harricana of Canada: history and facts

The Ultra-Trail Harricana of Canada (UTHC) is one of the key events on the Quebec trail running scene. In the first section of this paper, we provide a portrait of the event. After offering some background details on how the trail running movement (also referred to as *course en sentier* in Canada) was born in Quebec, we will outline the history and creation of the UTHC before examining the statistical profile of its participants.

The emergence of trail running in Quebec

In Quebec, and more widely across Canada, running has undoubtedly become a highly popular sporting activity too. In 2016, running was the fourth most popular sport in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2019) and in the province of Quebec, the number of those participating in “jogging has risen from 635,000 in 2010 to 1,081,000 in 2015, i.e. a 70% increase” (Racine, 2016, available online). Subsequently, the sharp rise in those enjoying the sport has led to an exponential growth in the number of running events in Quebec, which has risen from 204 in 2006 to 1,025 in 2016 (Table 1).

Table 1 - Number of Running Events Held in Quebec
between 2006 and 2019 by Discipline

<i>Sports</i>	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007	2006
<i>Race</i>	491	550	600	614	581	517	383	289	247	201	165	144	138	128
<i>Trail</i>	98	108	116	104	93	85	51	45	24	15	12	7	3	4
<i>Obstacle</i>	69	79	97	108	93	66	22	7	4	1	--	--	--	--
<i>Triathlon</i>	65	73	71	69	67	68	53	43	44	45	39	36	34	30
<i>Duathlon</i>	45	45	46	40	40	42	37	32	31	30	29	26	24	23
<i>CaniCross</i>	32	35	33	29	22	18	8	4	2	1	1	--	--	--
<i>Cross</i>	28	34	37	37	41	40	41	33	27	23	22	22	20	18
<i>Snowshoe</i>	9	12	23	24	20	21	14	16	12	10	8	3	1	1
Total	837	936	1,023	1,025	957	857	609	469	391	326	276	238	220	204

Source: Iskio.ca. 2020

Since 2016, however, running has undergone a period of stagnation across the whole of Canada. Several analysts consider this to be a sign that the sport’s popularity may be plateauing after a period of growth led to a “saturation of the running market” (Handfield, 2016). A similar phenomenon can also be observed internationally (Andersen, 2020).

Although the total number of finishers of running races in Quebec has been falling, in line with the global trend, the number competing in trail running events has increased by 8,934 between 2015 and 2019 (Table 2 *near here*). Trail events have also grown in number, going from 15 events in 2006 to 98 in 2019 (iskio.ca, 2020, available online).

Table 2 - Number of Finishers Taking Part in Timed Races in Quebec
between 2009 and 2019 by Discipline

<i>Sports</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>2016</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2009</i>
<i>Race</i>	214,421	224,012	243,711	261,907	262,888	246,983	206,272	140,479	100,254	73,596	56,251
<i>Trail</i>	27,069	26,678	24,350	21,939	18,135	15,515	10,375	8,086	3,357	1,629	1,214
<i>Obstacle</i>	21,375	28,012	42,157	50,944	58,498	62,532	39,939	--	--	--	--
<i>CaniCross</i>	2,250	2,152	1,640	1,491	649	458	--	--	--	--	--
<i>Cross</i>	1,986	2,514	4,887	5,652	5,965	6,940	8,176	4,728	3,894	2,367	1,431
<i>Snowshoe</i>	373	369	515	623	746	787	724	503	506	187	83
<i>Total</i>	267,474	283,737	317,260	342,556	346,881	333,215	265,486	153,796	108,011	77,779	58,979

Source: Iskio.ca. 2020

The Ultra-Trail Harricana of Canada was created at the start of the 2010s during a period in which trail running experienced a marked uptick in popularity in Canada.

The history of the UTHC

In 2011, Sébastien Côté, Geneviève Boivin and Sébastien Boivin decided to launch a non-profit organization known as “événements Harricana” with the aim of creating a trail running event in Quebec. The creation of this event was mainly driven by the initial desire to support one of the UTHC’s founders in their efforts to raise funds for research into and treatment of multiple sclerosis following his own diagnosis.

“To transform a tragic event into a happy one”: that is the stated aim of this sporting event. This project also reflects the rising popularity of trail running that has been taking place in this part of the world since the 2010s. Until that point, there actually was less enthusiasm for the discipline than in Northern Europe or the United States. The founders chose the name “Harricana” in honor of an old snowmobile expedition, which covered a 2,000 km stretch from the city of Montreal to the town of Radisson in the James Bay region. The town of La Malbaie in Quebec, which is home to one of the co-founders diagnosed with MS, was chosen for the actual race.

When the event was first hosted in 2012, participants could take part in three different race formats: 5 km, 10 km and 28 km (Table 3 *near here*). For the second edition, in 2013, the Ultra-Trail Harricana of Charlevoix was created, offering a longer distance (65 km). In 2014, an 80 km event, taking place every other year, was added to the program, followed in 2015 by the addition of the UTHC’s showpiece challenge: the 125 km race.

Table 3 - Details of the UTHC Challenges

<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Distance (km)</i>	<i>Created</i>	<i>Positive Elevation</i>	<i>ITRA Category</i>	<i>ITRA Points</i>
<i>UTHC 5km</i>	5 km	2012	NR	XXS (0-24 km)	0
<i>UTHC 10km</i>	10 km	2012	NR	XXS (0-24 km)	0
<i>UTHC 28km</i>	28 km	2012	NR	XS (25-44 km)	1
<i>UTHC 42km</i>	42 km	2017	1,220 m+	XS (25-44 km)	1
<i>UTHC 65km</i>	65 km	2013	1,500 m+	S (45-74 km)	2
<i>UTHC 80km</i>	80 km	2014	2,220 m+	M (75-154 km)	3
<i>UTHC 125km</i>	125 km	2015	4,220 m+	L (115-154 km)	4

Source: ITRA 2020

The event was also renamed “Ultra-Trail Harricana of Canada”, signifying the international success of the race. In fact, on November 5, 2015, the UTHC was added to a list of races dubbed “Futures” on the international Ultra-Trail World Tour (UTWT) circuit. The UTHC’s introduction to the UTWT gave the race international standing (Racine, 2016). The event’s showpiece, the 125 km race, was incorporated into the Ultra-Trail World Tour official circuit in 2017, becoming one of the “series” races. It was in this year that the final challenge (a 42 km race) was added to the program, taking place every other year.

The UTHC races take place in the Charlevoix region in the middle of the wild Canadian forest, in a protected nature reserve. The geography of this region is unique, and the Charlevoix Biosphere Reserve is one of four Quebecois reserves to be included in Canada’s 18 UNESCO biosphere reserves. The trails are run on the cross-country ski paths of the Mont Grand-Fonds ski resort, cross Charlevoix as well as the Hautes-Gorges-de-la-Rivière-Malbaie national park. As the organizers of the event state, “the trails are dense and loaded with raw nature and wildlife” (UTHC, 2020c). The 125 km route includes four ascents: Mount Lac-à-l’Empêche, Mount Morios, Noyée Mountain and the Noire Mountain.

Each of the UTHC’s challenges corresponds to one of the trail running categories defined by the ITRA. The event thus comprises a category L race (125 km), a category M race (80 km) and two category S races (42 km and 65 km).

The event’s statistical profile

In this statistical analysis, the 2019 edition of the race is presented as our reference year. The 2020 event is not representative given the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. The global health crisis placed restrictions on the event, with organizers forced to limit the number of challenges (only three races took place: 125 km, 80 km and 65 km) and the number of participants (637) in order for it to go ahead.

The number of UTHC participants has grown rapidly since its creation. At the first event, held in 2012, there were three races and 137 participants signed up. In 2019, this had risen to 1,859 participants taking part in one of the six challenges. In fact, between 2012 and

2019, a total of more than 8,900 individuals applied to take part in one of the UTHC's challenges.

Figure 1 - UTHC: Evolution of the Participants in the UTHC by Running Races from 2013 to 2020 Source: Iskio.ca. 2020

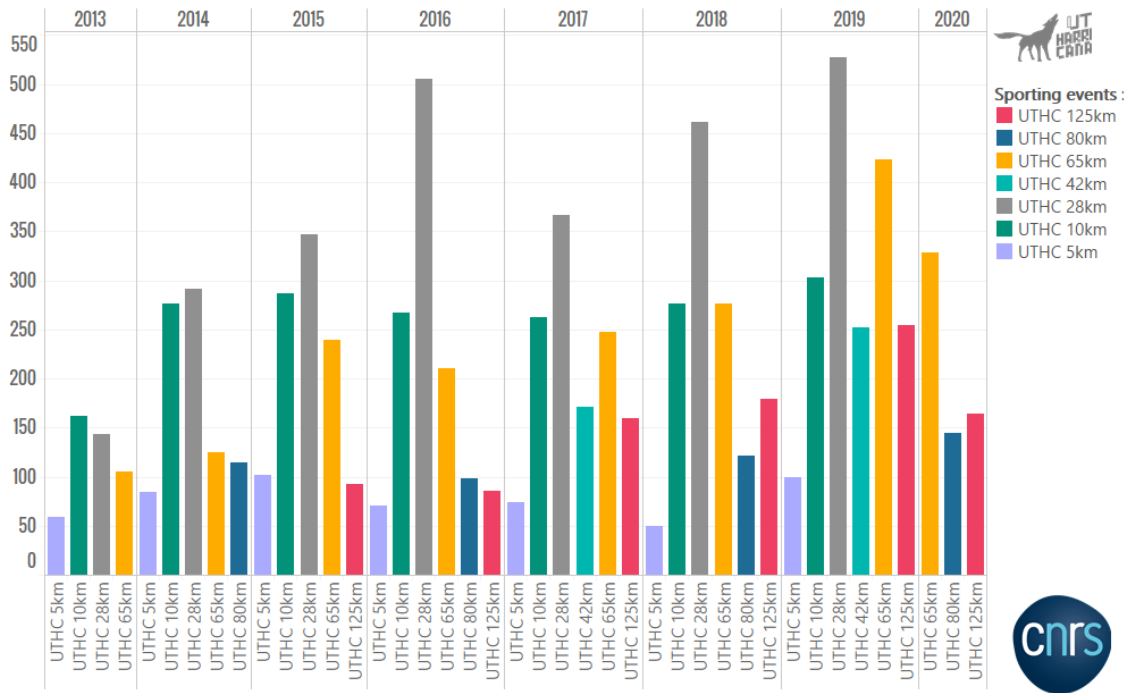
UTHC : Evolution of Ultra-trail Harricana participants by event from 2013 to 2020 from Sportstat.ca online data.

Total number of participants: 8 815

Total number of women: 3 368

Total number of men: 5 421

Total number Neutral: 26



Source: Iskio.ca. 2020
Production: Plard, Martineau, 2020

While the 125 km ultra-trail is the UTHC's main event, the 28 km trail was most popular, in terms of the number of participants, between 2014 and 2019 (Graph 1). In 2019, 28% of all applications were for the UTHC 28 km compared to 14% for the UTHC 125 km. In terms of the runners' stated gender, on the whole, the percentage of women taking part in the UTHC remained relatively stable between 2013 and 2018, fluctuating between 38% and 41%. In line with developments observed in the wider world of running and trail running, the general trend is that the percentage of women taking part decreases as the length of the race increases. Indeed, between 2013 and 2020, 88% of those who signed up to compete in the UTHC 125 km were men while 63% of those participating in the UTHC 5 km event were women. However, it must be noted that the absolute number of women signing up to compete in long-distance challenges continues to rise.

The organizers of the Harricana have also managed to retain a solid base of participants, who return year after year, while attracting a new cohort of runners. Between 2013 and

2019, 1,478 individuals competed in at least two editions of the UTHC, i.e. 25% of the total number of participants during this period. Runners appear to be most loyal to the UTHC 125 km race: between 2013 and 2019, 16.4% of participants signed up to at least two different editions.

The average age of UTHC participants has risen slightly over the years, increasing from 36.8 in 2014 to 38.2 in 2019. There is no notable difference with regard to gender, with an average age of 37.3 for women and 38.8 for men. Differences in the age of participants are more marked when we examine the individual races: the average age for runners competing in the UTHC 125 km was 39.5 in 2019 compared to 30 for the UTHC 5 km. Lastly, we examine the geographic origin of runners as stated by the UTHC participants. Unsurprisingly, the event has a sizeable reach in Canada and most participants are from Quebec: 94% of those who signed up to compete in one of the UTHC challenges in 2019 were residing in Canada and 86% were residents of Quebec. In terms of the origins of these participants, the data confirm the event's mainly national (or even regional) appeal. The number of overseas participants remains small, comprising a mere 4.4% of participants between 2014 and 2019. However, according to the executive director of the UTHC, the number of international athletes competing in the event is growing: in 2019, 134 international athletes from 25 different countries competed, with around 40 different nationalities represented.

II. Analysis of the UTHC's standing and unique characteristics

Continuing our statistical analysis of the UTHC, we need only put these figures into context to understand the event's level of success. Indeed, it has evolved to become "the main trail running event in Quebec" (Berg & Berg, 2015, p. 263). We will examine the five main findings of this research in more detail, **which attest to the evolution of the UTHC's structuring and its standing since its creation, as well as the characteristics that make it unique as a trail running event.**

The UTHC as an inclusive, non-profit event

Like many trail running races throughout the globe, the UTHC was created independently of sport governing bodies and sports clubs. This sporting event is run by a non-profit organization, and having this status allows the UTHC to achieve one of the project's core objectives. In fact, despite being one of the biggest names on Canada's trail running scene today, the UTHC has never lost sight of its initial aim. Since 2012, the organization has raised \$240,000 for the Quebec Division of the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada. Today, the event is highly regarded by runners and traditional sporting institutions. In 2019, the UTHC was named the best cross-trail competition organization of the year by Quebec's athletics federation. This success can partly be explained by the fact that the UTHC is inclusive in several ways. Firstly, the UTHC has created new challenges over time that have been adapted to suit different runners and to accommodate the growing number of participants (new distances and levels of difficulty). French ethnologist Martine Segalen also speaks of an "event package, to use the sports media jargon", to

describe the phenomenon of running events diversifying the races they offer (Segalen, 1994). Adapting races to incorporate different levels (with races between 5 and 125 km) seems highly common among trail running events and constitutes one of the unique characteristics of the field of running. In such events, “elite” international runners mix with amateurs, allowing these races to be called “participative” (Bessy, 2014).

Being inclusive also means promoting activities during the event itself and all year round so that it becomes more than just a sporting challenge. Here the UTHC proposes a range of activities, celebrations and cultural events to complement the trail runs. “The competition, although real, is, in some instances, a pretext to take part in a festive gathering, to discover a new location and to experience the joy of movement” (Racine, 2016). Since 2015, the organizers have selected a theme each year (Table 4 near here), which forms the core of all the events and activities (including awareness raising for the chosen theme and performances). Running parallel to or outside of the sporting challenges, these activities are intended for both the participants and any family and friends attending the event to offer their support (e.g. a 1 km race for children).

Table 4 - List of Themes for UTHC Editions Between 2015 and 2020

<i>Edition</i>	<i>Annual UTHC Theme</i>
2020	Solidarity: “Together we go farther”
2019	Health: “Finding balance”
2018	Youth: “Rite of passage”
2017	Nature: “In symbiosis”
2016	Women: “Female ultra-trail racers”
2015	Relations: “Quebec–France”
2014	No specific theme
2013	No specific theme
2012	No specific theme
2011	No specific theme

Source: Plard

Equally, through their non-profit organization “Évènement Harricana”, the UTHC team organizes activities and events all year round, such as the *Portrait de Loup* podcast, a trail running film festival that tours internationally (*Trails in Motion*), and stays to explore the area, learn about forest survival techniques, etc. Together, all of these activities complement the sporting event and also offer opportunities for the UTHC community to connect and build friendships away from the event.

A participative and immersive outdoor experience

The UTHC is intricately linked to the area in which it is held: the natural backdrop to the race provides not only the scenery but is also a factor worthy of consideration in this analysis as it determines the feasibility of the challenge. For example, the organizers have to prepare the route before each edition to ensure the path is clear for runners (Côté, 2012). The environment and nature are not considered solely as a product, as mere resources at

the organizers' disposal, but as a key element that needs to be preserved and respected in order to limit the environmental impact of the UTHC. As Bessy reminds us, "these sporting events do not take advantage of the space, treating it merely as a playground. They are not artificially implanted in an environment but are, in fact, shaped by it" (2014, p. 42).

The UTHC's organizing team thus offers participants a unique experience in the great outdoors. Runners are indeed "immersed in an environment where they are subjected to climatic variations, as well as topographical and time constraints. They must contend with extremely steep sections and complete the race within a set period of time" (Travers et al., 2019, p. 3). The trail and ultra-trail events thus add a sense of meaning by giving participants the opportunity to "immerse themselves in a natural world that is wild and sometimes hostile (desert, ocean, mountains...), a source of endless rejuvenation and a place to exist in harmony with the elements, but it is also a place to conquer" (Bessy, 2014, p. 42).

This immersive experience in the wilderness is one explanation for the success of trail running events (Perić et al., 2019). The UTHC embraces this and the material used to market the event focuses heavily on the opportunity for participants to embark on this challenge in the heart of Canada's "wild and remote lands". This call to nature is what is promised to participants as they are invited to "Free your wild" by the event's slogan (UTHC, 2020a). The UTHC logo features a howling wolf and the participants are symbolically associated with the creature during the race. The experience gives participants the opportunity to become part of a group, to join "the pack", in keeping with the symbolism of the event.

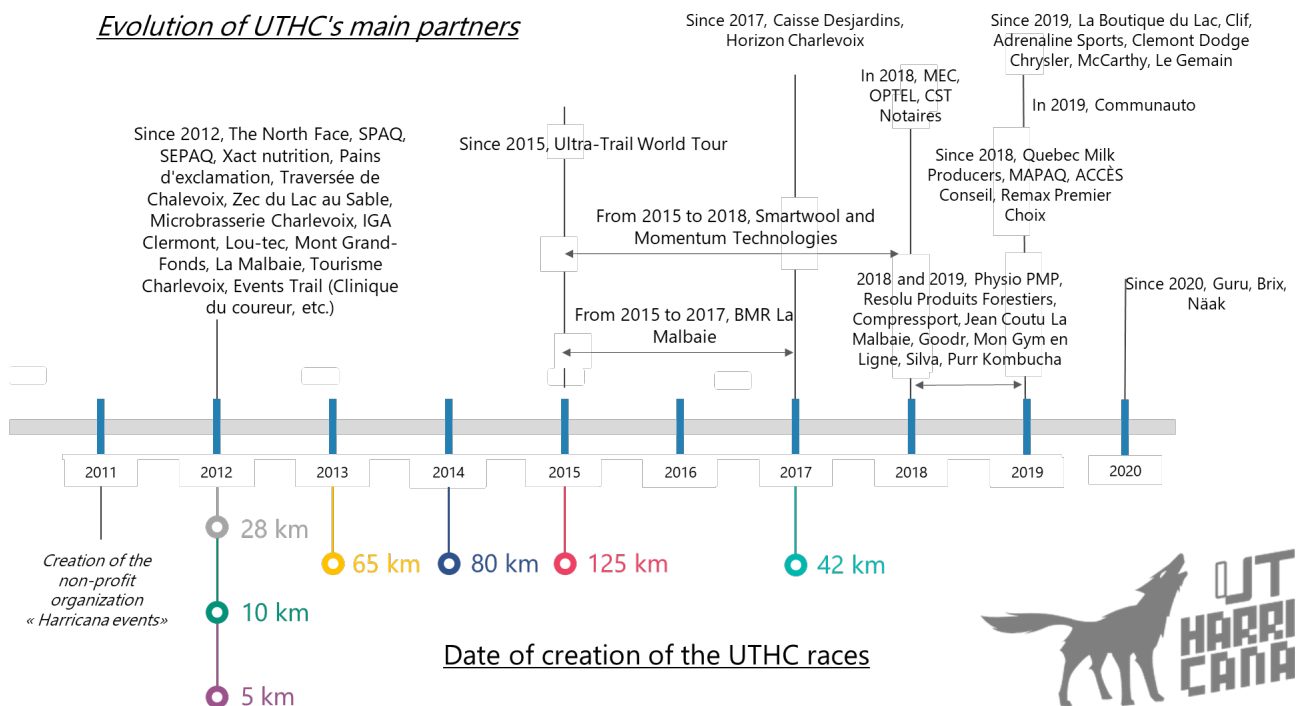
Sports volunteering and a network of diverse actors

The UTHC's organizers are mindful of the relationships that have been built over time with the local area and the relevant actors. The event relies on local financial resources and volunteers. Successfully running an event of this kind requires a high level of logistical planning and manpower. In addition to the roughly fifty employees mobilized during the UTHC, volunteers represent a vital human resource that helps bring the competition to life. Each year, just under 300 volunteers are involved in the UTHC not only before but during and after the races, and in a range of organizational activities: from communication to security, to manning the refueling stations along the route. The UTHC's hundreds of volunteers are thus crucial to its very existence, and this type of volunteering forms the core of the event's economic model (Massardier & Vasquez, 2019).

Although the event has a direct influence on the local area, it also has an international presence with partnerships at the local, national and international levels. It is possible to argue that the UTHC follows a multi-scale approach in this regard. Over time, the UTHC has consciously chosen several different partners to help promote and sustain the event,

be they government, community, economic or media actors (Figure 1), the latter evolving at various scales. The list includes stakeholders or brands both active internationally (The North Face) and nationally (association of Quebec dairy producers) as well as local partners and artisans. The event’s website lists 51 partners for the 2020 edition, including six major partners (UTHC, 2020a). The program for the 2020 UTHC included statements of support from Quebec’s Tourism Minister, the National Assembly member for Charlevoix-Côte-de-Beaupré and the Mayor of La Malbaie (UTHC, 2020b, p. 5). All of these illustrate the increased support in promoting the event at all its various levels.

Figure 2 - Evolution of UTHC’s Main Partners



Source: Synthesis of UTHC Organization Reports 2019.
Conception: Plard, Martineau, 2020.

For the organizers of the UTHC, the networking opportunities and synergies that its partners provide help boost the event’s influence and grow its reputation. The partnerships and collaborations take on myriad forms, ranging from financial support and product donations, to providing services and sharing resources (UTHC, 2020a).

Among the UTHC’s most influential partnerships are those with renowned athletes from Canada and around the world, who are the event’s elite competitors (22 athletes in 2019). Employing celebrity marketing is a strategy frequently used in the world of running and trail running (Lassalle et al., 2016): “The organizer invites a competitor who is known to the public for the purpose of using this celebrity to promote their event” (ibid., p. 227). Specifically, so-called “headliners” do not pay registration fees and receive several benefits (paid accommodation, activities) in return for competing in the UTHC (UTHC, 2020d).

The UTHC has also partnered with the Ultra Trail World Tour (UTWT) and prestigious trail running races. As Racine summarizes, for the UTWT, “introducing this challenge into the illustrious trail running circuit ensures considerable media attention for the region and the province” (ibid., available online). In terms of race partners, the UTHC is a qualifying race for the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc and the Western States 100 (i.e. obtaining points by participating in the UTHC allows runners to qualify for the two other events). The creators of the event hoped to achieve such international standing right from the start. According to its president and cofounder, their aim was to grow the event’s reputation so that it would be listed among the world’s best races to “make it more appealing to European participants and entice them to come and run in Quebec” (Stab, 2012, available online).

From the outdoors industry to sports tourism

Organizers of ultra-trail challenges sometimes deliberately look to incorporate a tourism element into their event. In addition to wanting runners to feel a sense of personal achievement by taking part in the challenge, participants could be open to “the charm of the local area” (Mahmoud & Massiera, 2012) and to the tourism activities offered by the region. In fact, sporting activities are “increasingly integrated into tourist products. Sport has become a way to encourage tourism and vice versa” (ibid., p. 97).

Like other trail running events, the UTHC markets a service that allows runners to take part in a competitive sporting event in a particular natural setting. This approach allows the UTHC and the other trail events to be considered a form of sports tourism: “Sport tourism, as a special type of tourism, provides tourists with extraordinary active (referring to active participation as a competitor) or passive (referring to passive participation as a spectator) experiences. Regardless of the type of involvement (active or passive), sport tourism is all about the interaction of activities, people and places” (Perić et al. 2019). The event is a valuable addition to sport and regular tourism in the Charlevoix region, which promotes the UTHC as “an authentic trail running experience in Canada’s wild backcountry” (Tourisme-Charlevoix, 2020, available online).

Sport or adventure tourism is embedded within the outdoor industry, a market experiencing growth, especially in Quebec, and which encompasses the UTHC and other trail running challenges. In fact, the Transat Chair in Tourism at the School of Management Sciences at the University of Quebec in Montreal considers trail races to be among second-level outdoor activities, i.e. those that are “niche or emerging” (Transat Chair in Tourism, 2017, p. 27). Trail running is deemed an outdoor sport by the Quebec government. According to the race director for the 2014 edition, the notion of “outdoors” is central to the event’s DNA: “a passion for the outdoors is what brings the Harricana community together” (UTHC, 2014, p. 4).

The trail running sector is thus part of Quebec's outdoor industry and contributes to the wealth generated by the sector's economic activity. The latter is crucial for the development of the province as well as its economic and touristic appeal. In 2016, wealth created by outdoor physical activities rose to almost \$2.2 billion in Quebec (ibid.). Although trail running races are shown to have a positive economic impact, no study has yet been conducted to verify the economic impact of the UTHC. To give an example of the potential trail running events may offer, in France these races can generate sometimes substantial economic benefits that amount to thousands or even millions of euros when it comes to the largest ultra-trail events. For instance, the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc generates €7.5 million and the Festival des Templiers €3.5 million. This sporting event certainly has a positive economic impact on Charlevoix and the support politicians and institutions offer to the UTHC illustrate the beneficial and reciprocal relationship between the event and local actors.

Eco-responsibility, creativity and organizational flexibility

The values, creativity and organizational flexibility of the UTHC form the lifeblood and the structure of the event. Since its creation, the organization has continuously strived to evolve and to adapt to the issues emerging in society and in the world of sport. Most notably, the events examine how to respond to changes imposed by the climate crisis and how to evolve their practices (Gouguet, 2015). Moreover, a growing number of trail running events and athletes (e.g. Kilian Jornet and Xavier Thévenard) are looking at ways to act or initiatives that they can be a part of to encourage the preservation of the environment.

The governing body for trail running, the ITRA, has inscribed sustainable development into its vision for trail running to encourage the sport to be practiced in a way that respects the environment (ITRA, 2017). What are the impacts of ultra-trail events and what mark will they leave on the (or their immediate) environment? As for the UTHC, the organizing team started implementing a sustainable development policy in 2017, which describes its various commitments (UTHC, 2017a). Since then, sustainable development has guided the UTHC's decision-making and action plans. Their commitment can also be seen in the collaborations with various partner organizations and brands, and their efforts to encourage participants to behave responsibly towards the environment (choosing local distribution networks and local products and services). For Marline Côté, the UTHC's approach to sustainable development includes the need to control the event's growth (ibid.) and also to achieve the right balance between the benefits it offers to participants and the local area and the possible adverse consequences.

Unfortunately, the event recently had to face a new crisis as the world was hit by the global Covid-19 pandemic that has severely affected the sports event industry. This crisis has been an opportunity for the UTHC to demonstrate its adaptability and its solidarity. After the Quebecois government announced that sporting events would be canceled until August 31, 2020, trail race organizers in Quebec came together to look at possible

solutions (e.g. potential changes to ensure the health and safety of participants). The UTHC supported the event's local producers and partners by encouraging the Harricana community to buy their products online during lockdown. The organizers came up with innovative proposals in the field of event management. In this way, they managed to combine physical activity with virtual competition by encouraging runners to take part in a summer challenge by completing part of the course between June and September 2020.

This initiative supported Charlevoix by publicizing the region and its forestland as a summer tourist and sports destination. Unlike other races, most of which were canceled in 2020, the UTHC was able to run in September. During the 2020 edition, to show their solidarity, the organizers invited the other trail running events in Quebec to participate in the race and to promote their events at the refueling stations around the course. These adaptations and innovations demonstrate the organization's eco-responsibility, their creativity and their flexibility.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this article is to make a contribution to literature on the subject of running by presenting a study on the UTHC. The event's history and evolution over time are rooted within a wider context of the growth of trail running, both in Quebec and around the globe, and stand as a useful example in a number of respects. The event has developed gradually since 2011, e.g. by offering new races and a host of non-sporting events. What is striking in the results of this research is the consistency of the UTHC's standing over time and in relation to its initial ambition and the values it promotes around the sport of trail running. The organizers are constantly seeking to strike a balance between developing the event and managing its growth. Its status as a non-profit organization, the key role played by volunteers and its associated partners are elements of the community that has taken shape around the UTHC.

The UTHC is participative, inclusive, fun, environmentally responsible, international and supportive – the list of adjectives to describe this sporting event is long. The event is also located at the interface between competitive sport, sports tourism and the outdoor industry. Its position within the outdoor industry must be reinforced and a further study on the event's economic benefits for the province would make its contribution more apparent.

The findings presented in this paper highlight the creativity and the organizational flexibility the event has shown in the face of crisis. Indeed, the global crises we are currently facing are those that the organizers had to adapt to in order to ensure the event's future. For instance, the organization of the 2020 edition of the UTHC in the midst of a global pandemic was, according to the executive director, "the most stressful thing I have ever experienced [...]. We wanted to do the right thing, give joy and create something positive" (Côté, 2020). The objective that guides the evolution of the UTHC project is to stay the course, to not ignore current challenges and to promote a positive approach to

events that take place throughout our lives. Another challenge is the future: only time will tell if the current popularity of trail running will continue or stagnate in Quebec, or even begin to fade, as was the case with road running. Finally, in terms of the development and the appeal of certain activities, the event will perhaps have to innovate in order to keep up with emerging trends within the discipline. It could perhaps look to the current phenomenon of individuals taking on challenges outside of organized events to run an FKT (the fastest known time run on a set route) (L'Equipe.fr, 2020) or the growing popularity of virtual race events or challenges (Lefèvre, 2020).

Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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