A man with a blue cap and a white tank top is running through a river. He is smiling and holding a white water bottle. The background shows a river and mountains.

CABALLO BLANCO'S FINAL RUN

A GROUP OF CANADIAN ADVENTURE RACERS HELPED SEARCH FOR MICAH TRUE ("CABALLO BLANCO"), ONE OF THE STARS OF *BORN TO RUN*. HE DISAPPEARED ON A TRAIL RUN IN NEW MEXICO.

By Simon Donato

» Micah True smiles while crossing the Urique River during the 2010 Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon in Urique, Chihuahua, Mexico

Photo: Ryan Heffernan/Aurora Photos



Photo: Marcos Ferro/Aurora Photos

» Micah True after finishing the 2009 Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon in Urique, Chihuahua, Mexico



Top left » Micah True with girlfriend Maria Walton

Above » Micah True and Scott Jurek in 1996 in the Copper Canyon, Mexico, holding a bag of Tarahumara pinole corn, a food for the Tarahumara Indians

Far left » Micah True's dog, Guadajuko

Left and below » Micah True in Orcutt, California, in 2011

ON SUNDAY MORNING, we decided to go rogue. Micah True had already been missing for over 100 hours, and we were discouraged by the pace of the search and how we were being deployed. The previous day, Tim, Caleb and I had been assigned to spend the day with another search team, walking through territory that had already been searched the day before. Most of the trails in the area had been searched twice. With the chances of finding True alive dropping with every hour, we knew it was time to stop thinking like search-and-rescue commanders, and start thinking like trail runners.

Micah True – better known as Caballo Blanco, or “white horse” in Spanish – had disappeared while out for a solo 12-mile trail run in New Mexico’s Gila Wilderness on the morning of Tuesday, March 27. When the news got out, runners from across the continent raced to New Mexico to help look for him – a testament to the many lives he’d touched, and also to the unique place he’d held in the running world ever since he was immortalized in Christopher McDougall’s 2009 bestseller *Born to Run*.

I first met True back in 2010, when I travelled to the race he organized in Urique, Mexico, the Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon. That’s also where I met Tim Puetz, from Atlanta, and Caleb Wilson, from Jacksonville, Florida – the four of us remained friends and stayed in touch after the race. Like most people, Tim, Caleb and I had first heard of True from reading *Born to Run*, which painted him as an elusive, canyon-dwelling, ultrarunning guru who generally shunned contact with the outside world save for an annual race he organized, which pitted top North American ultrarunners against

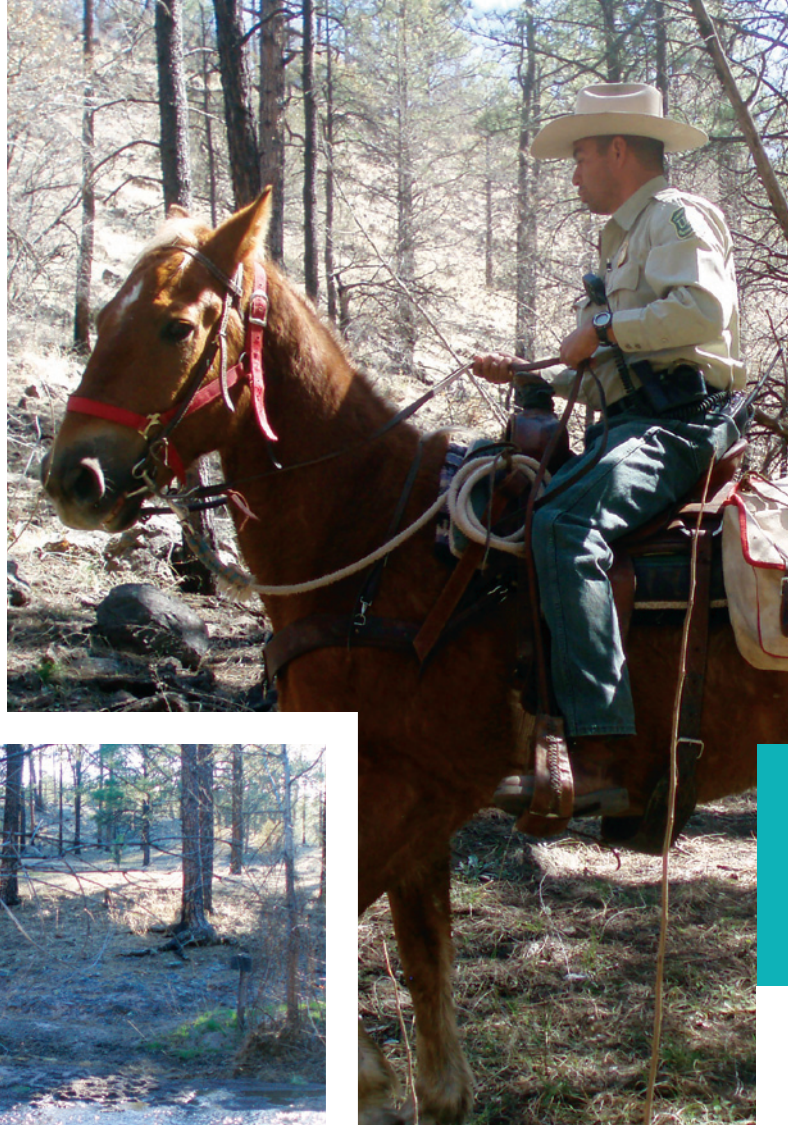


Photos: Micah True Collection (Micah and Maria), Luis Escobar



Photo: Ryan Fleck/Anadolu Agency/Photo

» A group of Tarahumara Indians and other runners scout the race course before the 2010 Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon, a race Micah True spearheaded



Top left » Tim Puetz (left) and Ray Molina (right) by the campfire on the shore of Little Creek in the Gila Wilderness, near Silver City, New Mexico, where Micah True was found

Above » A park ranger with the Gila National Forest Gila Wilderness, Micah True was carried about one mile to the waiting horses

Centre left » A canine member of the search and rescue team

Centre » Simon Donato and Tim Puetz hung glow sticks at the West Fork Trail intersection with Little Creek in the Gila Wilderness, to let the recovery teams know where to enter the creek

Bottom left » Tim Puetz, an ex-army ranger, on a scouting run along West Fork Trail in the Gila Wilderness

Opposite centre » The New Mexico State Police plan the search

Opposite bottom » Micah True was found in Little Creek in the Gila Wilderness, and would have run past this sign along West Fork Trail on his return to his starting point



Photos: Simon Donato, Scott Leese (canine)



local indigenous Raramuri. The reality was more complex – but even once you knew him, True was a difficult man to know well.

Even Micah True wasn't his original name – he was born Michael Randall Hickman in 1953, and grew up in Northern California. He had an unremarkable career as a middleweight prizefighter (career record: 9-11) then supported himself as a furniture mover while racking up miles as a budding ultramarathoner. Eventually, running became more about exploration and introspection than competition. This was the quality that shone through in *Born to Run*, and it's what eventually attracted Maria Walton, who contacted him in

the famous Cliff Dwellings. It was a spot True had loved to visit, and it was on a well-established trail that might easily fit into a 12-mile loop from his starting point.

We'd been running for nearly 30 minutes, exploring new areas from the trail as we ran, when Tim spotted two runners coming toward us. It was Ray Molina, a close friend of True's who'd met him while leading mountain biking tours in the Copper Canyon years ago and Jessica Haines. They were out of breath, having been running hard for nearly an hour, leaving their third team member several minutes behind. "We found him," I heard Ray say. "He's dead, and he's lying in the creek... on his back."

"WE FOUND HIM. HE'S DEAD, AND HE'S LYING IN THE CREEK." – RAY MOLINA



2009 to ask for advice on running ultras and ended up becoming his girlfriend. She saw a gentle, caring and patient companion who found joy in living simply, without material possessions.

True had come to the Gila Wilderness to visit his friends Dean and Jane Bruemmer, who owned a small wilderness lodge there. On Wednesday morning, a day after he'd headed out for what should have been a relatively short run, leaving his dog behind, they reported him missing. By Thursday, the media reported on the story, and I saw the news on Facebook. The initial shock was succeeded by a flurry of e-mails and phone calls, and before I knew it I was in a rental car with Tim and Caleb, speeding from Phoenix airport toward New Mexico to help with the search.

On Sunday, the three of us headed out for our rogue search – but by 4 p.m., we were back at the search headquarters, along with most of the other search crews, with no new clues to report. Helicopters and airplanes still flew overhead, but with only a few hours of daylight left the search was basically over for the day. Tim, Caleb and I had travelled too far to stop after only six hours, so after reviewing the map showing what had been searched that day, we decided to try our luck in an area near

With fame, True's life had become more complicated. He got an agent, Scott Leese, and went on speaking tours – True in Europe was like *Crocodile Dundee* in New York, Leese joked – and had the opportunity to spread his message and help the Raramuri. But he also complained about "los zopilotes" – the vultures – who now circled constantly. He was eager to help but uncomfortable in the spotlight. He didn't like being defined by others and shunned the moniker of guru, but at the same time he had an incredible story to share, and desired the respect and love of people. In London, over 300 anxious fans lined up for him. There was a documentary film being shot, as well as a major motion picture in the works. His star was about to glow even brighter.

Instead, he was now lying dead in a cold creek in the wilderness. The rest of the crew returned to the trailhead to alert the authorities and comfort Maria, but Tim and I decided to head to True's resting place to keep watch over his body overnight. We waded into the icy melt water of Little Creek and started running in the direction that Ray had indicated. There were submerged boulders, but the water was seldom more



Photos: Scott Leese, Simon Donato

than knee-deep, so we made quick progress. After following the creek for a couple of kilometres, we finally saw the body.

He was lying peacefully on his back, legs in the water and torso out. His water bottle floated beside him. His body didn't seem real to me. His skin was waxy and pale, and he had blue bruises on his knees and one finger, as if he had fallen. Judging by the position, though, he probably just sat down to ice his legs and then lay back. The autopsy report suggests arrhythmia ultimately felled him, a consequence of heart disease that ran in his family.

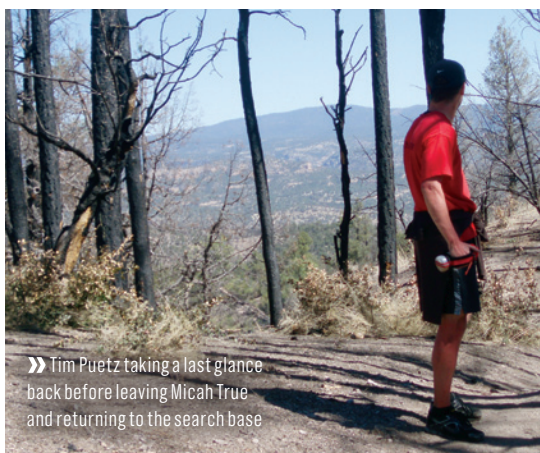
After a few silent minutes with our own thoughts, Tim and I built a fire and began collecting wood, as we were in for a very long and cold night. We shared an energy bar for dinner, and spent the next few hours huddled close to the fire, as the temperature plummeted from a daytime high of 30 C to below freezing. Around midnight, I heard voices in the distance: the first recovery team had arrived, including Ray Molina. They brought extra clothing, a stove, and coffee that made the night much more comfortable than it would have been with the two of us sharing one emergency blanket. Exhausted, I drifted in and out of sleep for the rest of the night, listening to Ray's stories about Copper Canyon, True, and the good times they used to have.

True's legacy will continue without him. The next edition of the Copper Canyon Ultra Marathon will take place on March 3, 2013. The documentary and the movie will carry on as planned. Maria will take loving care of True's dog, Guadajuko. But the most powerful part of his legacy is what he was just beginning to realize – that he had the ability to inspire others through his words and actions. It took a book and legions of fans to convince him, but he was doing it all along for those he loved, long before *Born to Run*.

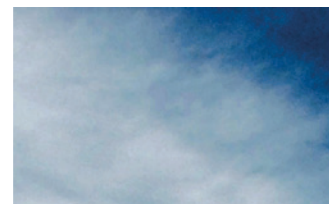
Maria remembers when he paced her through her first 100-mile race, in 2010. "At mile 97, I was very weak, uncertain I could continue," she recalls. He said, "Give me your hand, honey. We can make this final climb together." Crying all the way, overcome with emotion, she made it to the finish line. "I guess you'll never do that with me again," she said to him. "You're right, honey, I won't," he replied. "Because I love you too much to ever see you in this much pain again. And the last time I ran some guy in for the final miles of his ultra, it ended up in a goddamn book."

In the morning, we started our run back to the ranger station. On the way out, we met the recovery teams coming, including the horse that ultimately carried True off the mountain – a white pony. It was a beautiful, hard run, and suddenly we noticed that the trail was lined with white flags, which had been there since before True disappeared but hadn't seemed important. It now seemed appropriate: we should have known right from the start to follow the white flags to find the "White Horse." **R**

Simon Donato is a geologist and ultrarunner in Calgary. He thanks Doone and Tim Watson, Keith Szlater and the Calgary Trail Trash crew for their generous donations to assist with trip expenses.



» Tim Puetz taking a last glance back before leaving Micah True and returning to the search base



HE WAS HONESTLY FLOORED THAT IN LONDON, OVER 300 ANXIOUS FANS LINED UP FOR HIM.



» Micah True in Orcutt, California, in 2011

Photos: Scott Leese, Simon Donato, Luis Escobar