

Title: Death On The Tracks: The Deadly Ultramarathon And The Chilling End Of 21 Runners

Reference Article:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/26/survivors-and-bereaved-look-for-answers-after-21-deaths-in-china-ultramarathon>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gansu_ultramarathon_disaster

Reference Video:

Word Count: 2045

Instructions to VO Artist:

1. Don't voice any part in red or blue. Only voice the parts that are written in black.
2. Take short breaks (about 3 to 5 seconds) between transitions. Transitions are blue.

Instructions to Video Editor:

1. Follow the instructions throughout the video; they are italicized, red, and in [brackets] like this.
2. Include a mix of footage from the incident, interviews, and relevant images throughout the video. I have provided pivotal ones for you. You'll source the rest.

Death On The Tracks: The Deadly Ultramarathon And The Chilling End Of 21 Runners

Twenty-one runners ran a simple yet deadly 100-kilometer race that completely sentenced them to death in a rush. The last minutes of their lives were chilling, harrowing, and extremely scary. This is the story of the 2021 Gansu ultramarathon race, one that was outrightly identified as deadly.

"It's never the fall; it's the sudden stop." *[Show the words on the screen and use the "sudden stop" Logo]*

On May 22, 2021, 172 runners were set to run a cross-country 100-kilometer marathon. This was no easy race, as the participants would have to run through hilly terrain. Unfortunately, things took a different turn when casualties occurred, with 21 runners dying.

What started as a seemingly organized and harmless event turned out to be the deadliest marathon of all time. It was a disaster that could or could have been prevented; who knows? But what really happened? Why would runners simply die in the forest just like that? Was there more to it? And was anyone at least held responsible for such a catastrophic turnout? I bet these are some of the burning questions you have and need answers to. So, let's find out.

[Show clips of a group of runners running]

Stick around to the end because we have very interesting details about this story that will finally give you a better understanding and picture of what really transpired on that day.

The race, officially launched in 2018, was annually organized by the Communist Party Committee of Jingtai County and the Baiyin prefecture-level city sports department. However, the Yellow River Stone Forest Administration was the on-field coordinator of the event. From this, it would seem the event was on lock, and everything was put in place to ensure the safety of the runners, but that wasn't the case. Every year, the marathon had different routes in which the runners would race. For the year 2021, the 100 km race was to take place along the Mijiashan Hill of the Yellow River Stone Forest.

[Show animated clips of the map indicating the Yellow River forest]

The race started and finished in scenic locations, with a large loop through the mountains. Marathon runners began at 1,595 meters above sea level, and the highest point at the third checkpoint was 2,230 meters. Participants were given 20 hours to finish the course, meaning they would spend the night on the trail before continuing the race.

[Show the words on the screen and use the "sudden stop" Logo]

Moreover, the second and third checkpoints were rough and narrow and could not be accessed by car. Thus, one would have to hike for about two hours to get to the nearest road. These factors would make the marathon quite challenging; as such, the organizers were expected to make plans to ensure that they avoid putting the runners at risk in the event of terrible weather—they didn't. The

carelessness and lack of planning just got worse. The weather forecast by the Jingtai County Meteorological Bureau should have served as a heads-up for potential adverse weather. However, since the previous three years had witnessed hot and sunny days on the marathon day, they paid little to no attention to the weather forecast, which suggested yellow dust and wind in the Gansu province.

[Show clips of adverse weather including storms and lightning]

At 9:50 pm the day before the marathon, the city's meteorological center issued a low-grade wind warning, predicting that over the next 24 hours, strong winds would carry yellow dust and sand across the area. They also noted that gusts could reach high speeds. Additionally, the provincial weather center issued a notice warning of significant weather changes between May 21-22, including strong winds, a temperature drop, and some rain. They cautioned that the atmospheric conditions in May were often unstable, which could lead to sudden storms, hail, lightning, and gusty winds. All this information about potential danger riled the organizers, as the event was important for the province. As such, they were pretty much standing on business and refusing to postpone the marathon date. After all, no other source confirmed the temperature drop information, so there was no need to cancel the event based on one report, right?

[Show clips of people running in the woods under adverse weather including storms and lightning]

On Saturday, May 22, 2021, the 172 runners set out to the woods for the life-changing race. At 9 a.m., the 100-kilometer cross-country race began in Jingtai County, Gansu.

[Show clips of racers preparing for a competition]

Just an hour before then, a photographer had noticed the increasing change in weather from his lens.

[Show animated clips or images of a person looking through a lens]

The high-altitude section of the 100-kilometer race, which was between 20 and 31 kilometers, began to experience strong winds and freezing rain. Other areas, like the third checkpoint of the race, also experienced a drop in temperature. However, all these were unknown to the racers as the sun was still shining there at the start point of the race where they were. But as they began running and progressing into the mountain, they began witnessing a series of signs that pointed to looming danger. For instance, at the start of the race, a heavy wind blew and threw off some of the caps of the runners. This was the first sign that they ignored.

[Show clips of adverse weather including storms and lightning]

The weather was only getting increasingly colder and the rain got intense. Unfortunately, most of the runners weren't dressed up for the weather as they had thought it was going to be a hot and sunny day. They had shorts and T-shirts on. Although they had kept some warm clothes in a bag which they were going to pick up at the sixth checkpoint, they weren't clothes that would have helped them withstand the freezing cold and moreover, they were still 20 miles away from their location. Over the years, racers had dealt with heatstroke, not hypothermia as such it didn't occur to them to pack layers. *[Show clips of racers wearing light summer gear to run]*

For context, here's a picture of just how chaotic the weather became. At 08:00, the temperature fell by 5–7 °C (9–12.6 °F) over five hours. Rain and gusty gusts with graupel posed a greater threat, nevertheless. There were gusts of up to nine miles per hour and an average wind speed of six to seven. These winds transported a precipitation of 3-5 mm. At the first and second checkpoints, the temperature felt like 7 °C (45 °F) at 09:20, but by 10:50, it had plummeted to 3 °C (37 °F). At the third checkpoint, which is situated at a height of 2,230 meters (7,320 feet), the temperature felt like 1 °C (34 °F) at 10:00 and plummeted to –5 °C (23 °F) between 11:20 and 01:50, although it was really 4 °C (39 °F) at that time. Despite the fact that several runners reported seeing hail and freezing rain, they assumed it was most likely Graupel because the weather rendered such events implausible. But they were wrong. *[Show clips of dark clouds, thunderstorms, rugged mountains]*

When they realized just how bad things were getting, they considered returning to the starting point as finishing the race was impossible. So they headed back hoping to escape the rain and cold on time. At around 12:17 pm, one of the participants sent a message for help on the event's group chat. The organizers then set up a group of 20 rescuers into the mountains. However, due to several obstacles on the way, they got there quite late.

[Show clips of a person sending a text]

At around 01:00 pm, some racers found a shelter to find warmth away from the intense rain. As time passed, more of them found their way to that shelter, and in no time over forty of them were cramped up in that small room that was just about 30 square meters. *[Show clips of people stuck in a room]*

Other racers who weren't in the room were out there trying to climb the mountains in a bid for survival. But as they did that, they were met with more intensity of the cold. Some of them began to collapse. *[Show clips of people struggling to climb a mountain]*

At 1:32 PM, local shepherd Zhu Keming from the nearby village of Changsheng was caught in the rain and quickly sought refuge in a cave he had previously set up for shelter while herding cattle. This cave was situated between the second and third checkpoints of the marathon route, at around 2,200 meters elevation. As Zhu approached the entrance, he noticed a man in a summer T-shirt trying to stay warm by crossing his arms. He was one of the participants. *[Show images of the local shepherd]*

The marathon participant eventually sought refuge in the cave where Zhu Keming was residing and complained of leg cramps. Zhu led him inside, and soon after, four other runners appeared. Zhu started a fire with some wood and old books he had kept in the cave, providing warmth for the party. The runners alerted Zhu that many more were stuck on the mountain, suffering from the cold. Zhu and a warmed-up runner went searching and discovered a man lying with a heated blanket. They worked together to get him back to safety. *[Show Ariel views of a mountain and random people lying down on it]*

At the same time, Wong Kinlin, a nearby village's party secretary, rallied around 20 locals to deliver blankets, food, and water to those sheltering in the cave. They saved six people, but there were still numerous runners in need of help. By 2 p.m., the organizers had paused the race and summoned extra rescue teams armed with drones, thermal cameras, and radar equipment. *[Show clips of cameras, drones, and radar equipment]*

Meanwhile, checkpoint 4 staff and photographers were already waiting for the runners to arrive. Some of them then decided to go into the woods to see what was going on. Soon enough, they found the first racer who was already suffering from hypothermia. He explained the situation and told the photographers about the other racers who were in the mountains freezing and helpless. By 03:00 pm, they had relayed the news to the organizers and everyone was now ready and mobilized to rescue the racers. When the rescuers got to the mountains, they were able to save many of the participants, however, for some, it was too late as they were already dead. *[Show clips of rescuers trying to save the participants]*

At about 06:00 pm, 33 participants were still missing; the others had been brought to safety. They kept searching for more of them, combing the hills and river shore area. By midnight more of the racers were found, although some were dead and others were in pretty bad shape. At that time, there were already 720 rescuers in the area. Of the 172 participants, 151 survived with several levels of frostbites and 21 of them weren't lucky enough to survive to tell the tale.

[Show images of survivors receiving treatment]

Prominent runners such as Huang Ganjun, a Paralympian, and record-holder Liang Jing, age 31, were among the deceased. One of the survivors, Zhang Xiaotao recounted his experience.

According to him, he fell several times, and at one point “could not get up”. He said he covered himself with the emergency blanket and set off his GPS locator before passing out. *[Show the clip of Zhang Xiaotao talking about the event]*

[Show clips of the participants being rescued]

The deaths of the participants generated deep anger and resentment by the people toward the organisers and the government. They highlighted concerns about why the organizers appeared to have disregarded the impending inclement weather. This sparked new calls for stricter regulations pertaining to athletic events. Also, following the fatalities, the General Administration of Sport in Beijing said that all activities that did not meet national safety criteria would be canceled, including ultra-long distance running, wingsuit flying, and mountain trail running.

[Show clips of the day of the marathon]

If you’ve been wondering if anyone was at least held responsible for the horrific event, then here comes the bomb. The court in Baiyin sentenced five people who were a part of the planning of the event to three to five and half years imprisonment. They were charged with “organizing a large-scale event that led to a significant safety incident”. Two officials of the event were also sentenced. One to four years and ten months for dereliction of duty and bribery, and the other to three and half years for dereliction of duty. *[Show a judge making a ruling]*

Finally, 27 officials were officially given notice and were dismissed.

The End

In hindsight, considering everything that has been discussed, it is clear that the situation could have been handled differently. Had the organizers exercised greater caution, they might have postponed the event or, at the very least, made more thorough preparations to prevent casualties. However, we would like to hear your thoughts—what do you believe could have been done to avoid such a tragic occurrence?

