



# Finding Ultra: Rejecting Middle Age, Becoming One of the World's Fittest Men, and Discovering Myself

By Rich Roll

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*Finding Ultra* is Rich Roll's incredible-but-true account of achieving one of the most awe-inspiring midlife physical transformations ever.

One cool evening in October 2006, the night before he was to turn forty, Rich experienced a chilling glimpse of his future. Nearly fifty pounds overweight at the time and unable to climb the stairs without stopping, he could see where his current sedentary lifestyle was taking him.

Most of us, when granted such a moment of clarity, look the other way—but not Rich.

Plunging into a new way of eating that made processed foods off-limits and that prioritized plant nutrition, and vowing to train daily, Rich morphed—in a matter of mere *months*—from out-of-shape midlifer to endurance *machine*. When one morning ninety days into his physical overhaul, Rich left the house to embark on a light jog and found himself running a near marathon, he knew he had to scale up his goals.

How many of us take up a sport at age forty and compete for the title of the world's best within two years? *Finding Ultra* recounts Rich's remarkable journey to the starting line of the elite Ultraman competition, which pits the world's fittest humans against each other in a 320-mile ordeal of swimming, biking, and running. And following that test, Rich conquered an even greater one: the Epic5—five Ironman-distance triathlons, each on a different Hawaiian island, all completed in less than a week.

But *Finding Ultra* is much more than an edge-of-the-seat look at a series of jaw-dropping athletic feats—and much more than a practical training manual for those who would attempt a similar transformation. Yes, Rich's account rivets—and, yes, it *instructs*, providing information that will be invaluable to anyone who wants to change their physique. But this book is most notable as a powerful testament to human resiliency, for as we learn early on, Rich's

childhood posed numerous physical and social challenges, and his early adulthood featured a fierce battle with alcoholism.

Ultimately, *Finding Ultra* is a beautifully written portrait of what willpower can accomplish. It challenges all of us to rethink what we're capable of and urges us, implicitly and explicitly, to "go for it."



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## **Finding Ultra: Rejecting Middle Age, Becoming One of the World's Fittest Men, and Discovering Myself By Rich Roll Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Rich Roll's *Finding Ultra* is a testament to the power of the human spirit to overcome any obstacle, break down walls, and redefine what's possible." --John Brenkus, creator and host of ESPN's *Sport Science* and *New York Times* bestselling author

"You walk away from reading this book knowing you have the total power to transform your life on every level . . . Roll is immensely likeable, a most compelling storyteller, and a true shaman of health and fitness!" --Kathy Freston, *New York Times* bestselling author

"If you liked *Born to Run*, you'll love *Finding Ultra* . . . one of the best books about health and fitness that I've ever read." --Neal D. Barnard, MD, president, Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine

"*Finding Ultra* is the ultimate story of hope, perseverance, and endurance against life's biggest challenges." --William Cope Moyers, *New York Times* bestselling author

"I loved this. A rare book, unusual for its honesty and willingness to bare all, that really does deserve such superlatives as 'riveting' and 'compelling.' I was moved by watching Roll conquer his demons and felt privileged to share in his eventual enlightenment. By laying it on the line, Roll absolutely wins us over." --Rip Esselstyn, *New York Times* bestselling author

"*Finding Ultra*" is about a journey we all take as human beings, when we decide to pursue the impossible and live a life of mission. When I need to dig deeper, push harder, and find a little boost, Rich Roll is the guy who comes to mind. He is inspiration embodied." --Sanjay Gupta, MD, Emmy Award-winning chief medical correspondent for CNN and *New York Times* bestselling author

"This awesome piece of writing -- one part memoir, one part how-to, and one part megadose of gut truth -- reminds us to wake up and live our best life. Prepare to be entertained, but most of all, prepare to be inspired." --Mel Stewart, fourteen-time national champion, former world record holder, and winner of two Olympic gold medals in swimming

"An incredibly inspirational book about achieving greatness at any age through self-belief and a positive attitude. Rich Roll is a true champion of life and sport." --Levi Leipheimer, two-time stage winner of the Tour de France and Olympic time-trial bronze medalist

"A tribute to the fortitude of the human spirit and the power each of us has to grab hold of our life and achieve the unexpected. For anyone who feels stuck, Rich offers sage advice on everything from relationships to lifestyle to diet to spiritual well-being." --Dave Zabriskie, five-time national time-trial champion in cycling

"An inspiring story of a man whose life took a tragic turn but then rebounded spectacularly. Down but not out, Rich Roll rose like a phoenix, taking the commitment to his own health to a new level and achieving a remarkable transformation. I believe everyone will be able to relate to this plant-powered athlete's riveting story and perhaps garner some inspiration for their own journey. A top read!" --Luke McKenzie, five-time Ironman champion

"Roll has accomplished amazing things, but it is his ability to draw inspiring and uniquely insightful lessons from his experiences that sets him apart from other extreme athletes. *Finding Ultra* is a fascinating read full of practical tips." --Dean Karnazes, nationally bestselling author of *Ultramarathon Man*

"*Finding Ultra* is an inspired first-person account of fast living and even faster swimming, biking, and running that will leave you convinced of the power of your own will." --Brendan Brazier, Ironman triathlete, Ultra Marathon Champion, and bestselling author

#### About the Author

RICH ROLL has been featured on CNN and has been named one of the world's twenty-five fittest men by *Men's Fitness* magazine. He is a graduate of Stanford University and Cornell Law School. He lives in Los Angeles with his wife and four children and, when he isn't training or competing, manages the entertainment boutique Independent Law Group.

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#### Chapter One

##### A Line in the Sand

It was the night before I turned forty. That cool, late-October evening in 2006, Julie and our three kids were sound asleep as I tried to enjoy some peaceful moments in our otherwise rowdy household. My nightly routine involved losing myself in the comfort of my giant flat-screen cranked to maximum volume. While basking in the haze of *Law & Order* reruns, I'd put away a plate of cheeseburgers and followed that welcome head-rush with a mouthful of nicotine gum. This was just my way of relaxing, I'd convinced myself. After a hard day, I felt I deserved it, and that it was harmless.

After all, I knew about harm. Eight years earlier, I'd awoken from a multiday, blackout binge to find myself in a drug and alcohol treatment center in rural Oregon. Since then I'd miraculously gotten sober, and one day at a time was staying that way. I no longer drank. I didn't do drugs. I figured I had the right to pig out on a little junk food.

But something happened on this birthday eve. At almost 2 a.m., I was well into my third hour of doltish television and approaching sodium toxicity with a calorie count in the thousands. With my belly full and nicotine buzz fading, I decided to call it a night. I performed a quick check on my stepsons, Tyler and Trapper, in their room off the kitchen. I loved watching them sleep. Aged eleven and ten, respectively, they'd soon be teenagers, grasping for independence. But for now, they were still pajama-clad boys in their bunk beds, dreaming of skateboarding and Harry Potter.

With the lights already out, I had begun hauling my 208-pound frame upstairs when midway I had to pause—my legs were heavy, my breathing labored. My face felt hot and I had to bend over just to catch my breath, my belly folding over jeans that no longer fit. Nauseous, I looked down at the steps I'd climbed. There were eight. About that many remained to be mounted. Eight steps. I was thirty-nine years-old and I was winded by eight steps. Man, I thought, is this what I've become?

Slowly, I made it to the top and entered our bedroom, careful not to wake Julie or our two-year-old daughter, Mathis, snuggled up against her mom in our bed—my two angels, illuminated by the moonlight coming through the window. Holding still, I paused to watch them sleep, waiting for my pulse to slow. Tears began to trickle down my face as I was overcome by a confusing mix of emotions—love, certainly, but also guilt, shame, and a sudden and acute fear. In my mind, a crystal-clear image flashed of Mathis on her wedding day, smiling, flanked by her proud groomsmen brothers and beaming mother. But in this waking dream, I knew

something was profoundly amiss. I wasn't there. I was dead.

A tingling sensation surfaced at the base of my neck and quickly spread down my spine as a sense of panic set in. A drop of sweat fell to the dark wood floor, and I became transfixed by the droplet, as if it were the only thing keeping me from collapsing. The tiny crystal ball foretold my grim future—that I wouldn't live to see my daughter's wedding day.

Snap out of it. A shake of the head, a deep inhale. I labored to the bathroom sink and splashed my face with cold water. As I lifted my head, I caught my reflection in the mirror. And froze. Gone was that long-held image of myself as the handsome young swimming champion I'd once been. And in that moment, denial was shattered; reality set in for the first time. I was a fat, out-of-shape, and very unhealthy man hurtling into middle age—a depressed, self-destructive person utterly disconnected from who I was and what I wanted to be.

To the outside observer, everything appeared to be perfect. It had been more than eight years since my last drink, and during that time I'd repaired what was a broken and desperate life, reshaping it into the very model of modern American success. After snagging degrees from Stanford and Cornell and spending years as a corporate lawyer—an alcohol-fueled decade of mind-numbing eighty-hour workweeks, dictatorial bosses, and late-night partying—I'd finally escaped into sobriety and even launched my own successful boutique entertainment law firm. I had a beautiful, loving, and supportive wife and three healthy children who adored me. And together, we'd built the house of our dreams.

So what was wrong with me? Why did I feel this way? I'd done everything I was supposed to do and then some. I wasn't just confused. I was in free fall.

Yet in that precise moment, I was overcome with the profound knowledge not just that I needed to change, but that I was willing to change. From my adventures in the subculture of addiction recovery, I'd learned that the trajectory of one's life often boils down to a few identifiable moments—decisions that change everything. I knew all too well that moments like these were not to be squandered. Rather, they were to be respected and seized at all costs, for they just didn't come around that often, if ever. Even if you experienced only one powerful moment like this one, you were lucky. Blink or look away for even an instant and the door didn't just close, it literally vanished. In my case, this was the second time I'd been blessed with such an opportunity, the first being that precious moment of clarity that precipitated my sobriety in rehab. Looking into the mirror that night, I could feel that portal opening again. I needed to act.

But how?

Here's the thing: I'm a man of extremes. I can't just have one drink. I'm either bone dry or I binge until I wake up naked in a hotel room in Vegas without any idea how I got there. I'm crawling out of bed at 4:45 a.m. to swim laps in a pool—as I did throughout my teens—or I'm pounding Big Macs on the couch. I can't just have one cup of coffee. It has to be a Venti, laced with two to five extra shots of espresso, just for fun. To this day “balance” remains my final frontier, a fickle lover I continue to pursue despite her lack of interest. Knowing this about myself, and harnessing the tools I'd developed in recovery, I understood that any true or lasting lifestyle change would require rigor, specificity, and accountability. Vague notions of “eating better” or maybe “going to the gym more often” just weren't going to work. I needed an urgent and stringent plan. I needed to draw a firm line in the sand.

The next morning, the first thing I did was turn to my wife Julie for help.

As long as I've known her, Julie has been deeply into yoga and alternative healing methods, with some (to put it mildly) "progressive" notions about nutrition and wellness. Always an early riser, Julie greeted each day with meditation and a series of Sun Salutations, followed by a breakfast of odoriferous herbs and teas. Seeking personal growth and counsel, Julie has sat at the feet of many a guru—from Eckhart Tolle, to Annette, a blue-eyed clairvoyant, to Chief Golden Eagle of the South Dakota Lakota tribe, to Paramhansa Nithyananda, a youthful and handsome Indian sage. Just last year, in fact, Julie traveled by herself to southern India to visit Arunachala, a sacred holy mountain revered in yogic culture as a "spiritual incubator." I'd always admired her for her willingness to explore; it sure seemed to work for her. But this kind of "alternative thinking" was strictly her territory, never mine.

Particularly when it came to food. To open our refrigerator was to see an invisible but obvious line running down the middle. On one side were the typical American heart attack-inducing items: hot dogs, mayonnaise, blocks of cheese, processed snack foods, soda, and ice cream. On the other side—Julie's—were mysterious Baggies filled with herbal preparations and an unmarked Mason jar or two filled with putrid-smelling medicinal pastes of unknown origins. There was something she patiently told me was called "ghee," and also chyawanprash, a pungent, brown-colored sticky jam made from an Indian gooseberry known as the "elixir of life" in Ayurveda, a form of ancient Indian alternative medicine. I never tired of poking fun at Julie's ritualistic preparations of these strange foods. Though I'd grown accustomed to her attempting to get me to eat things like sprouted mung beans or seitan burgers, to say it "never took" is an understatement. "Cardboard," I'd announce, shaking my head and reaching instead for my juicy beef burger.

That kind of food was fine for Julie, and certainly fine for our kids, but I needed my food. My real food. To her immense credit, Julie had never nagged me to change my ways. Frankly, I assumed she'd simply given up on me. But in truth she understood a crucial spiritual principle I'd yet to grasp. You can stand in the light. And you can set a positive example. But you simply cannot make someone change.

But today was different. The previous night had given me a gift: a profound sense not just that I needed to change, but that I wanted to change—really change. As I poured a massive cup of very strong coffee, I nervously raised the issue across the breakfast table.

"So, uh," I began, "you know that detox, juice-cleanse thing you did last year?"

From a bite of hemp bread spread with chyawanprash jam, Julie peered up at me, a small smile of curiosity playing at her lips. "Yes. The cleanse."

"Well, I think I might, well, uh, maybe I should, you know, give it a shot?" I couldn't believe the words were coming out of my mouth. Even though Julie was one of the healthiest people I knew, and I'd seen how her diet and use of alternative medicine had helped her through so much—even miraculously, at one point—just twenty-four hours before, I would have argued till I was blue in the face that a "cleanse" was useless, even harmful. I'd never found any evidence to support the idea that a cleanse was healthy or that it somehow removed "toxins" from the body. Ask any traditional Western medicine doctor and he'll agree: "These cleanses are not just innocuous, they're downright unhealthy." And by the way, what are these mysterious toxins, anyway, and how would a cleanse possibly remove them? It was all nonsense, I'd thought, pure fabrication, the babbling of snake oil salesmen.

But today, I was desperate. I could still feel the previous night's panic, still feel my temples pounding. The drop of sweat and its dark portent, flashing before my eyes, were all too real. Clearly, my way was not working.



“Sure,” Julie said softly. She didn’t ask what had prompted this curious request, and I didn’t offer an explanation. As clichéd as it sounds, Julie was my soul mate and best friend—the one person who knew me better than anyone. Yet for reasons I still don’t fully understand, I couldn’t bring myself to tell her about what I’d experienced the night before. Maybe it was embarrassment. Or more likely, the fear I’d felt was simply too acute for words. Julie is too intuitive not to have noticed that something was clearly up, but she didn’t ask a single question; she just let it unfold, without expectation.

In fact, Julie’s expectations were so low that I had to ask her three more times before she actually returned from the alternative pharmacist with the goods needed to begin the cleanse—a journey that would soon change everything.

Together we embarked on a seven-day progressive regime that involved a variety of herbs, teas, and fruit and vegetable juices (for more information on my recommended cleansing program, see Appendix III, Resources, Jai Renew Detox and Cleansing Program). It’s important to understand that this was not a “starvation” protocol. Each and every day I made certain to fortify my body with essential nutrients in liquid form. I cast aside my doubts and threw myself into the process with everything I had. We cleared the fridge of my Reddi-Wip, Go-Gurts, and salami, filling the empty shelves with large vats of tea boiled from a potpourri of what looked like leaves raked from our lawn. I juiced with vigor, downing liquid concoctions of spinach and carrots laced with garlic, followed by herbal remedies in capsule form chased by gagging on a tea with a distinct manure aftertaste.

A day later I was curled up in a ball on the couch, sweating. Try quitting caffeine, nicotine, and food all at once. I looked horrible. And felt worse. I couldn’t move. But I couldn’t sleep either. Everything was upside down. Julie remarked that I looked like I was detoxing heroin. Indeed, I felt like I was back in rehab.

But Julie urged me to hang tough; she said that the hardest part was soon to pass. I trusted her, and true to her word, each day proved easier than the day before. The gagging subsided, replaced by gratitude just to put something—anything—down my throat. By day three, the fog began to clear. My taste buds adapted and I actually began enjoying the regime. And despite so few calories, I began feeling a surge of energy, followed by a profound sense of renewal. I was sold. Day four was better, and by day five, I felt like an entirely new person. I was able to sleep well, and I only needed a few hours of sleep. My mind was clear and my body felt light, infused with a sense of vibrancy and exhilaration that I hadn’t known was possible. Suddenly I was jogging up the staircase with Mathis on my back, my heart rate barely elevated. I even went out for a short “run” and felt great, despite the fact that I hadn’t laced up a pair of running shoes in years and was on my fifth day without any real food! It was astounding. Like a person with poor eyesight donning a pair of glasses for the first time, I was amazed to discover that a person could feel this good. Until then a hopeless and lifelong coffee addict, I entered into a momentous collaboration with Julie on day two of the cleanse when we unplugged our beloved coffeepot and together walked it out to the garbage bin—an act neither of us would have thought possible in a million years.

At the conclusion of the seven-day protocol, it was time to return to eating real food. Julie prepared a nutritious breakfast for me—granola with berries, some toast with butter, and my favorite, poached eggs. After going seven days with no solid food, I might have been excused for inhaling the meal in seconds flat. But instead, I just stared at it. I turned to Julie. “I think I’m just going to keep going.”

## **Users Review**

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**Mary Edick:**

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**Christine Cote:**

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