

This article appeared in the June 28th edition of the Galway Independent

MISSION POSSIBLE

One Man, One Year, Seven Ultra Marathons, Seven Continents



Richard Donovan is a man with a mission. A local Galwegian, he has set himself a huge challenge, a challenge that will take him to every continent and one that will push him to his ultimate limit. These races take place in extreme climatic conditions such as the Antarctic and the Sahara. Already this year, Richard won the South Pole Marathon in Antarctica, which is the highest, driest, most windswept continent on earth – truly the last frontier. He ran at an effective altitude of 12,000 feet, in wind chill temperatures of –50C, against a freezing headwind. After winning the marathon, Richard continued for a further 3km on top of the traditional marathon distance of 26.2 miles (42 km) to complete an ultra marathon of 45km in total. Only ten weeks later, in a solo effort, he became the first person in history to run a marathon at the North Pole. Although situated in the Arctic Ocean and not on a continent, Richard added the North Pole run to his itinerary because of the historical significance of being the first to run a marathon at both Poles. Two weeks ago, on June 15th, Richard won the Poor Man’s Comrades Ultra Marathon in Australia – an uphill race of about 90km, or 55 miles. The following is Richard’s personal recap of his races to date and a summary of his upcoming challenges on the remaining continents.

Since travelling to the North and South Poles, people often ask me if I’m mad. The short answer is that I am mad, but not mad in the sense of the word that is normally intended. I’m mad about the plight of people who starve in the Third World and, on a local level, about the level of cruelty to animals and lack of government funding to the GSPCA. Moreover, I’m mad enough to be motivated to undertake this seven continents challenge. In doing so, the hope is that I can become a channel by which money can be directed to GOAL’s street children’s project in Calcutta and the GSPCA’s animal sanctuary in Killimor. All I really am in this project is an intermediary. It is the people of Galway and Ireland, who will ultimately make the challenge a success by donating to the charity account I have set up.

To date, I have run an ultra marathon on two of the seven continents: Antarctica and Australia. I have also run a marathon at the North Pole in the Arctic Ocean. My five remaining races, therefore, must take me to North America, South America, Asia, Africa and Europe. Most of these races will be significant challenges for me, with no

guarantee of my being able to complete any of them. Moreover, running ultra marathons is fraught with risk and complications.....

I suffered a lot at the South Pole Marathon in January. I had frostbite on eight toes, the tips of my fingers were numb with frost nip, I developed hypothermia after the race, I had mild snow blindness and I was placed on a drip, where I received 3-4 litres of IV fluid. In essence, running an endurance race on the polar plateau is like playing with matches when petrol is all around you. The battle against the environment is intense and it took all of 8 hours and 52 minutes for me to complete just a regular marathon distance. Breathing, in particular, is strenuous under altitude conditions and with decreased barometric pressure every breath contains fewer and fewer molecules of oxygen. You have to work harder to obtain oxygen by breathing faster and deeper. The effects of the extreme cold are also more pronounced at altitude as the lack of oxygen depresses the body's own heat production. The ensuing fatigue leads to carelessness and poor decision-making. I ventured off course with three miles to go and was lucky to re-route myself to the South Pole. It was an incredible battle to just finish the event and continue to complete an ultra marathon, so the victory was a big bonus for me.

Needless to say, I went to the North Pole ten weeks later with a considerable degree of fear and anxiety following my South Pole experience. Although the North Pole is not at altitude, the danger would be that I could fall through a lead, or crack, in the ice and be quickly claimed by the Arctic Ocean: the North Pole is not situated on land but on ice floes. Before I left for the North Pole, I purchased a flotation device in the hope that this could keep me alive for an extra minute should my limbs become immobilised on plunging into the Arctic. I then left covertly for the North Pole as I was attempting to get there before the athlete who finished second in the South Pole Marathon. He is a professional endurance runner from San Francisco and he appeared intent on becoming the first person to run a marathon at the North Pole. My discretion paid off and I successfully completed the marathon in 3 hours 48 minutes before the American arrived. The wind chill temperature on the day was -60C and strong 60km winds made running difficult. The icy, uneven terrain, dotted with hillocks of ice, resulted in much stumbling through the run. A near whiteout also resulted in very tense moments for my Russian helicopter crew, but we got back safely and I suffered only minor frostbite to my cheeks and eyelids.

I was glad to have my polar runs completed and be able to concentrate on training for a 'regular' ultra marathon road race. My next race would be the Poor Man's Comrades Ultra Marathon, which took place in Sydney on June 15th. This was an uphill race of almost 90km duration and followed the Old Pacific Highway from Sydney to Gosford. In true Australian style, it is a very low-key event, which advertises "No Fees, No Prizes, No Aid, No Wimps". From the outset, I found myself running with Australian ultra marathon runner, Kieron Thompson. We finished the 55-mile run together in first place in 8 hours 49 minutes with Grahame Murphy of Scotland in third position. By an unusual coincidence, Grahame had also been to the North and South Poles, having hauled a sled across the Antarctic to the South Pole and skydived over the North Pole. My principal injury in this race was just another dead toenail to join the others I have suffered in training.

The next race on my itinerary is the Vermont 100-mile Endurance Run in North America on July 20th. As the name suggests, this is a 100-mile race on trails and dirt roads. The course encounters 15,000 feet of ascent and descent, which should be quite problematic. On August 8th, I run a high altitude race in the Andes Mountains in Peru called the Inca Trail Marathon (27.5 miles). Next is the Himalayan 100-Mile Stage Race, which takes place in Darjeeling, India at the end of October. However, the most gruelling of all the races this year promises to be the Trans 333 in the Tunisian Sahara in November. This race is a one-stage race covering a distance of 333km in the desert sands. The distance of 333km translates to 208 miles or eight back-to-back marathons in one go. My final run, which takes place in Galway on December 14th, is called Killimor to Cuba*, where I will run from the animal sanctuary in Killimor, Co. Galway to Cuba Bar and Restaurant in Galway City.

As well as the intense preparation, running these races is a very expensive undertaking and I would like to give particular thanks to some local businesses that have helped me out, particularly the Grealish family who own Cuba Bar and Restaurant. They gave unsolicited sponsorship to me with no strings attached after reading about my proposed races, as did David Lohan of Prospect Hill and John Rabbitt, Forster Street. None of these have sought any public recognition for their help but I would like to extend my thanks publicly. I have also benefited throughout my training regime from the encouragement of Galway Ryan Leisure Club.

The Galway Independent are delighted to be covering Richard's quest and will keep you up to date with exclusive interviews from all his upcoming challenges. His motivation behind his quest is to raise money for two of the most vulnerable groups of the world in which we live - street children in the large cities of the developing world and abandoned and mistreated animals in our own society. Specifically, he hopes to raise funds for GOAL's street children's project in the Indian city of Calcutta and the GSPCA's animal sanctuary in Galway, Ireland.

He will dedicate the races to his mother Mary, who died in June 2000. Mary was an avid admirer and supporter of GOAL's work in the developing and a keen lover of all animals, especially cats. He will also be remembering his father Paul, who died in April 1998, but who also buried on the same day as Mary. Paul, who had donated his body for scientific research in the intervening period, was one of the founding members of the credit union movement in Ireland, a fiery campaigner for the rights of the underprivileged in Ireland and a real animal enthusiast.

All donations from the public are divided evenly between the two charities and can be made to the following account:

Seven Continents
Bank of Ireland, Salthill
Sort Code: 90-38-40
Account: 45726438

For more detailed accounts of Richard's races, log on to <http://www.sevencontinents.ie>