

# ANTARCTIC ICE MARATHON 2008



I ran the marathon in aid of Leukaemia Research. Your kind sponsorship is set to raise over £15,000. **Thank you!**

Leukaemia is a blood cancer which comes in many forms and is contracted by young and old alike. Leukaemia Research support fundamental work into finding cures and also provide advice and support to those impacted by the disease.

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At 19:15 on 12<sup>th</sup> December I watched the altimeter inside the Ilyushin-76 reach 850m and we touched down on the blue ice runway. Everything shook in the huge cabin as the aircraft gradually slowed to a halt. With few windows we could see little until the door opened and bright Antarctic light pierced the dark interior accompanied by a blast of icy air. After two days waiting on weather in Punta Arenas, Chile, we had arrived at Patriot Hills on the Antarctic mainland ready for the most southerly marathon in the world.

At 80 degrees South we were only 600 nautical miles from the South Pole and mere summertime guests whose activities were subservient to the whims of Antarctic weather. The nearest wildlife was over 300 miles away on the coast and the air temperature varied between -10 and -20 C. The wind though was the key feature. During our extended stay we experienced conditions between crystal clear calm to a storm with 50 knot winds and visibility down to tens of meters. The windchill effect was dramatic and care was required to avoid cold injuries when heading outside for any length of time. A second injury to avoid was snow blindness so goggles or appropriate sunglasses always had to be worn.



We were based at a camp run by Adventure Network International who support many expeditions to Mount Vinson and the South Pole from November to January each year. We slept in two man tents and other tents were set up for eating, ablutions, storage, medical treatment etc. It was very well run and we met many fascinating climbers and Antarctic adventurers during our stay.

The race started one day after arriving at 20:12 on 13<sup>th</sup> December – my birthday. With 24 hour daylight we had waited for the winds to subside to a 5 to 10 knot breeze creating a windchill temperature of -15 to -20 C. The visibility was stunning with mountains rising dramatically out of the ice sheet under a deep blue sky. 19 runners started the race, 15 of whom were doing the marathon. Many were experienced trail and ultra runners and several people working at the base joined in. We were all nervous as we set out and I was careful to start at a comfortable pace.

The course followed a groomed trail through the sastrugi and was marked by small flags. Four check points were set up providing hot drinks and energy snacks and there was a tent if people needed shelter. I chose to provide my own “fuel” of isotonic drinks, energy gels and oatmeal bars but also took on hot gatorade. The air is very dry and I drank about three litres during the race – a lot for a marathon.

Within the first kilometre I hit problem one .... I could not breathe! I had elected to start running using a buff over my nose and face as it is more comfortable and flexible than a face mask. But it quickly became full of moisture and almost impermeable. To keep running I ran with no face cover, pulling the buff up over my nose and cheeks whenever they started to go numb. Awareness is a key part of avoiding cold injuries so I often touched my nose and face to make sure feeling was still there.



After a flat start we turned and headed gradually upwards to the first checkpoint at 9.5km. A small group of us were running together at the front. I monitored my heart rate and breathing to make sure I was not working too hard – it is a long race and sweating too much fogs sunglasses / goggles and reduces how well the clothes insulate you. At the check I changed into a face mask before setting off 200m behind the leader.

The route became increasingly spectacular heading between two lines of hills at an altitude of about 1000m. I kept my own pace and gradually moved into the lead. I was now running solo through the amazing scenery and breathing more comfortably. The air was so clear that distances were foreshortened and it seemed to take forever to make progress. The route gradually descended to the second checkpoint at 19km with amazing views across the ice sheet to distant mountains. I was now getting tired and feeling dehydrated and so made a brief drink and food stop. Andy caught me up and we started the next section together –



he is a mountain guide and was back from a trip to Mount Vinson, Antarctica's highest mountain.

The final part of the Patriot Hills circuit now started with more stunning views across the ice as we descended. Feeling strong I pushed on and was soon in the lead again heading up to the camp and the third checkpoint at 26km. My plan had been to reach this feeling fresh and ready to up the pace for the last section but reality had other ideas. I was already exhausted and the games of "mind over matter" started. To recharge I took on a lot of liquids and some food at the check. Andy chose not to stop and moved into the lead.



The final section of the race was 8km out into the white wilderness and back the same way giving a fantastic idea of the scale of the ice sheets. With the wind now light and behind me, sunglass fogging had to be managed – running with no eye protection is not an option. I kept to my pace and soon moved into the lead once more. The 8km out leg seemed endless – lots of mind games – and I was very glad to reach the last

check for more drinks and nourishment. My head felt cold and I knew I was not making much sense grunting to the people there. With the final part of the race being into wind and colder I switched from sunglasses to goggles and from beanie to balaclava. Running a marathon in harsh conditions requires you to monitor yourself and the adjustments + fuelling undoubtedly helped me maintain pace to the end.

As I started the final 8 km to the finish I knew my lead was now only a minute or two and I would have to work to stay ahead. As I met the other runners coming the other way we gave each other encouragement. The recent months of speed endurance training were paying off. Taking the previous week's marathon in Chile slowly had left energy in the legs and I let my heart rate lift knowing the end was approaching. The camp was visible from 3km out and it seemed to take forever to reach it. And then the finish line was there bringing my first experience of breaking a tape! Andy came in 9-1/2 minutes later after slowing on the last stretch. My time of 4 hr 36 min 53 secs was a new course record by nearly 6 minutes aided by the near perfect conditions. Finishing in this way was an emotional end to completing the Grand Slam of a marathon on every continent plus the North Pole.

The day after the race the weather closed in with a cycle of snow, winds and low visibility followed by periods of clear weather with winds outside flying limits. On mid-summer's day (21<sup>st</sup> Dec) a significant storm set in and everyone's plans to be home by Christmas were dashed. We eventually left at 2am on 27<sup>th</sup> December, nine days later than planned. Being at the mercy of the Antarctic weather was a humbling lesson and everyone in the camp pulled together very well in a unique experience for us all.



Raising funds for Leukaemia Research in this way, two months after my father died of the disease, has been a great opportunity. Your tremendous sponsorship and support is greatly appreciated. Thank you.