

7 Marathons in 7 Days on 7 Continents (Healthy?)



By *Jamie Wells, M.D.* — January 18, 2017



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Like most, my initial reaction to such a challenge is “umm, no thanks.” But, I admit I am not much like the long distance running extreme endurance athlete set. A unique club. One I simultaneously admire and am perpetually surprised by as the stakes in these wild endeavors seem to be getting higher and higher from ultra marathons in the Serengeti to the imminent [World Marathon Challenge](#) [2] of 7 marathons on 7 Continents in 7 days.

Whereas I used to think there was a level of insanity that must accompany such extreme sport, a dear friend taught me invaluable lessons that enabled me to reframe these triumphs and feats of physical prowess. She had a life goal to run a marathon on every continent as just the United States would have been too pedestrian for her. She accomplished all but Antarctica which she was registered for upon her untimely death. Battling a rare blood disorder, she achieved more in her all-too-brief life than most of us.

The goal-setting, mental fortitude and perseverance she employed in this arena translated to all aspects of her life. The obstacles she faced, in general, were met with an insurmountable resilience as a result. A worldly, limitless perspective.

Does this personality type explore or gravitate to these perpetually escalating tests or do the challenges themselves cumulatively formulate so indomitable a spirit? A little of both, I imagine.

In particular as a physician keenly aware of the finite nature of life and the varying depths of human suffering, I advocate living. Responsibly, of course. I recognize the invaluable importance of continued testing of status quo and limits no matter the field or task. This is the only way to harness innovation and advancement. Discovery and breakthroughs.

So, philosophically, I endorse the pursuit of tackling new frontiers. When it comes to the [World Marathon Challenge](#)

[2] specifically, I temper my response. As long as the individual is well-informed and thoroughly appreciates the risks of such exertion and accepts the potential short and long-term consequences, then best of luck to you, keep striving and do so with the utmost in personal responsibility and preparation.

This whirlwind undertaking kicks off its global venture with the first marathon in Antarctica (Union Glacier). The route proceeds next to Punta Arenas (South America), Miami (North America), Madrid (Europe), Marrakech (Africa), Dubai (Asia) and culminates in Sydney (Australia). Being that the Guinness Book of World Records—among others—acknowledges the race, the fastest times in total serve to crown a female and male winner—though completion alone is a successful achievement in its own right.

Marathons, in general, require proper planning from a health perspective—let alone 7 in 7 days. Dehydration and injury (e.g stress fractures, blisters) are not uncommon. Fortunately, there are now very good preparatory guides and materials out there that enable people to avoid unnecessary complications to the experience. Sufficient hydration and electrolyte repletion throughout the journey is essential to eliminating resultant damage. Not urinating, diminished concentrated output or blood in the urine reflect trouble signifying poor hydration even possible kidney insufficiency or damage. Substantial muscle break down can overwhelm the kidney and cause untoward effects. The good news is preparation is key and early detection of an issue with actionable response can impede and avoid progression often reversing problems. Delaying care can induce paying a hefty price. Cardiac issues in endurance athletes are [well-reviewed here](#) [3].

Knowing who you are and stopping when signs of issues occur is of critical import to impeding or reversing the reversible. People properly conditioned for these undertakings fare best. Speaking of this particular World Marathon Challenge necessitates a complex understanding of the many physiologic, physical, mental and emotional issues as well as the race conditions, frequent travel aspect and all imposing environmental or logistical conditions.

[Freezing and unpredictable climates](#) [4] like Antarctica provide profound influences on well-being. Frost bite, altitude changes, [sun safety](#) [5], humidity, remote access to health care—to name a few— all require consideration and planning in the World Marathon Challenge to optimize the experience and maintain maximum health. Depending on your altitude of residence especially, correctly acclimating is especially essential to remaining well.

Not for the weary or afraid, participants assume risk of exposure to mental, bodily, and financial injuries that include travel environments themselves, accidents, transportation, civil unrest, unexpected perils and so forth. They are warned of the likely progression of [jet lag, fatigue and consequences to health](#) [6] being advised that temperature fluctuations can vary 50 Degrees Celsius or more. Even the “[Voluntary Participation and Assumption of Risk](#) [2]” consent for the journey includes, in part:

“I understand that Antarctica is the most remote and one of the most inhospitable and undeveloped regions of the planet. Logistics problems are enormous, the weather ferocious and unpredictable. Delays of days or even weeks must be anticipated. I understand that the risks of travelling and competing in the Antarctic include, without limitation, extreme weather conditions can change rapidly and without warning; that temperatures in January at Union Glacier can fall below -40 degrees Celsius, with wind chills even lower; that bad weather and aircraft malfunction

could strand the expedition for many days; that prolonged exposure to the Antarctic environment can even cause loss of fingers, toes, and body parts due to frostbite, or loss of life due to hypothermia, dehydration and other means. Furthermore I understand that participating in physical activities such as running in the Antarctic area may, in a worst-case scenario, place me at risk of death from the frigid conditions. I fully understand that I am in a remote region devoid of many medical supplies and facilities, as well as rapid evacuation capabilities.”

Astronaut Buzz Aldrin was recently evacuated from Antarctica for altitude sickness. To read more about this and prevention of altitude sickness, review these two pieces: [At High Altitude with Buzz Aldrin](#) [7], [Fly Me to the Moon, But Hold the Altitude Sickness](#) [8]. Studying the weather and environments this time of year for all stops along the journey is paramount as is attention to the trek one needs to take to arrive at the start point.

The pressing importance in this effort is considerable preparation and execution of climate acclimatizing in general and to varying altitudes, weather along with trail knowledge acquisition, appropriate gear for all transitions, [stress of travel and flight, along with the constant adrenaline and stress hormone secretion](#) [6] this type of exploit encourages.

With 59 hours of air travel upon start of the competition, [jet lag, dehydration and stress](#) [6] are among the physical and consequent mental ramifications. Vaccinations or wound prevention are impactful actions for superior travel health and safety along with other key factors, learn more here: [Carrie Fisher and Heart Attacks, Or Medical Events Amid Holiday Travel](#) [9].

As in most things, the individual is the variable. Some have unknown underlying conditions that can be susceptible to such bids while others have known disorders that require special accomodation. Either way, even in perfect health the extreme nature of this venture can incite problems.

Imagine the struggle for those without health conditions, now recognize that two beyond inspiring participants this year include [BethAnn Telford of the United States](#) [10] and [Ireland's Sinead Kane](#) [11]. [Telford](#) [10] was diagnosed with [brain cancer](#) [12] in 2005 and undergoes continued treatment. She is running to raise awareness and funding for pediatric and [brain cancer research](#) [13]. [Kane](#) [11] seeks to become the first blind athlete to complete the World Marathon Challenge.

This lofty goal - though riddled with hazards - may not be the right choice for many of you or me for that matter. However, innumerable lessons can be learned from these two champions and those joining them in Antarctica January 20th. Extending ourselves beyond our comfort zones is important to overall well-being, self-esteem and optimal mental health. For some, that might entail going somewhere alone or conquering a fear of flying. Regardless of the act, giving in to fear is often the greatest risk we take in this wondrous, but too short life.

In Summary...

Being in excellent health and comprehensively evaluated by a physician is vital to enduring such a trip successfully without adverse consequence. Discussion about all short and long-term ill effects of such extreme sport and prevention with your doctor—who knows your entire medical and family history, medications and has physically examined you—is the safest most reliable measure to

ensure your decision to go forward with this form of challenge is a well-informed one. Formal heart assessments are beneficial. If after that you opt to do so, then prepare and execute as instructed. Seeking early treatment is always in your best interest when situations go awry as is follow-up evaluation once finished such a laborious exploit.

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- [2] <http://www.worldmarathonchallenge.com>
- [3] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3538475/>
- [4] <http://www.acsh.org/news/2016/12/01/winter-no-wonderland-10514>
- [5] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/10/31/tanorexia-latest-skinny-melanoma-10369>
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- [9] <http://www.acsh.org/news/2016/12/27/carrie-fisher-and-heart-attacks-or-medical-events-amid-holiday-travel-10647>
- [10] <http://abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/woman-brain-cancer-run-marathons-continent-days/story?id=44806356>
- [11] <http://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/sport/irelands-sinead-kane-aims-to-become-first-blind-athlete-to-complete-world-marathon-challenge-772658.html>
- [12] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/10/10/brain-tumors-fact-vs-fiction-part-i-10281>
- [13] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/10/11/brain-tumors-fact-vs-fiction-part-ii-10285>