



Running On Top of the World

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Posted Oct 07, 2008



A woman wearing a Northern Village of Kangiqsujuaq baseball cap handed me a cup of water and offered me a protein bar halfway to the finish of the 26.2-mile out-and-back Arctic Marathon in Nunavik, Canada. I was racing in a place you won't find on a map, on a plateau above a 3,000-foot fjord in Douglas Harbor, 61 degrees 49'N, 72 degrees 50W.



This being the Arctic, I'd figured on snow and sub-zero temperatures and had packed enough fleece to outfit every Inuit who lived within 50 miles. Instead, it was 85 degrees—an Arctic heat wave—and I felt as though I were boiling in hot oil. I would have eaten seal blubber if it would help get me to the finish line sooner.



The sun beat down vindictively and there wasn't a tree on the entire plateau because we were above the tree line. The course, a seldom-used mining road, was a carpet of stones ranging in size from cherries to coconuts, which meant I had to keep my head down so I wouldn't trip on a rock. I was missing all the scenery—not that there was anything to see. Except for a handful of Inuit volunteers at the infrequent water stops, there wasn't a house, car, telephone pole or another human being in sight—not even a bird; just mile after dusty mile of winding dirt roads, scorched earth, and boulders.

At the New York City Marathon, there were more than 30,000 runners and thousands of spectators. Here there were 34 runners and no spectators. The nine full marathoners included six Canadians, one Englishman, one Inuit and me. There were also two Inuits with shotguns who patrolled the course on ATVs just in case a polar bear wondered by.

By the time we'd barely gone a mile, the other runners were already little moving specks in the distance. After a while, I couldn't even see the specks. I was completely alone. Why had I entered this forlorn event? Way in the distance, the running specks, spaced about a half a mile apart, were headed back towards me. As each one passed, we shouted encouragement to each other. One high-fived me. The ATVs followed and the drivers gave me a

thumbs-up. Where was the eighth runner, the 21-year-old Inuit Games champion who was expected to be first?

At around 13 miles, I felt a sudden throbbing pain in the ball of my foot. It had to be the rocks. Maybe it was an inflamed nerve? Each step on the uneven terrain made it worse. I knew I should stop but thought of the countless mornings I'd gotten up at sunrise to run endless laps in Central Park, the hundreds of training hours I'd clocked. I refused to quit, but I couldn't run another step. And then it hit me—walk!

And so, in almost bearable pain, I walked the second half. And because I no longer had to watch for the rocks, I could now look at the landscape, which wasn't so desolate after all. Every mile or so was another crater-shaped pond the color of the sky on a cloudless day, a mirage against the sun-parched earth. And there were white quartz rocks that looked like snow piles among the boulders. I'd been so busy looking down that I'd missed everything.

Thirteen miles is a long haul with no ipod, no other runners and no one to cheer me on. I tried to relax and take pleasure from the eerie silence. All I had to do was move one leg in front of the other just like mountain climbing. Finally, I crossed the finish line. None of the other runners or volunteers had left. They'd stayed and waited for me and cheered wildly as a huge medal was hung around my neck. I won for my age group. This was not surprising, as I've said before: Everyone else my age is dead. And I placed eighth overall. I would have placed ninth (last), but the Inuit Games champion quit early because his shoes were killing him.

That night, we celebrated in the bar. One of the staff members onboard, herself an Inuit Game competitor, taught us Inuit leg wrestling. You lie down on the floor opposite each other, link arms, raise your leg and try and push the other person over with your leg. I beat every woman who took me on. No one could believe it, least of all, me. Then, the Inuit bartender, with legs like tree trunks, challenged me. She beat me easily but I didn't care. I'd just run a 26.2-mile marathon; that was victory enough for me.

The 2009 Arctic Marathon will take place aboard Cruise North's July 22 to 31 2009 Arctic Odyssey Cruise at Douglas Harbour, the South shore of the Hudson Strait in Nunavik, Canada. For more information, go to Torontomarathon.com