

RUNNING WITH THE PACK

Story and Photos by Katie Jones



On a wintry Sunday afternoon, over 4,500 runners have gathered along the lakeshore in Burlington. The crowd is a sea of bobbing toques, as racers jog on the spot to stay warm.

An air horn sounds, and a rainbow of vibrantly clad figures launches forward from the start line. The Chilly Half Marathon has begun.

Among the throng is veteran athlete and ultra runner Rob Kent, a man who has completed over 30 marathons, in locales such as New York, Miami and even the Sahara Desert.

For Kent and other extreme athletes, running is a paradox of pain and pleasure, loneliness and camaraderie, highs and lows. The thrill of finishing lasts only until the pain of aching muscles and hammered joints insidiously creeps in. But then the next race lies just ahead, and the cycle continues.

According to a 2012 study by Statistics Canada, the number of Canadians over the age of 12 who run or jog was 23 percent, approximately 6.5 million people. In the 1980s, the development of large marathons across North America saw the number of race participants double over a 10-year period. A decade later, participation had doubled again.

This year, there are 473 registered foot races in Canada, including 70 marathons, 132 half marathons and 66 ultra marathons.

Marathoners may run for the health benefits, stress relief, or simply a love for the sport, but the social aspect of the running community often keeps them lacing up their shoes time and again.

Running in the same social circles as Kent, ultra runner Carla Miceli traded her regular gym routine for daily outdoor runs.

"Running started for me with a 5-kilometre corporate team race," said Miceli. "I just loved the feeling of racing and finishing and celebrating afterwards, the whole atmosphere."

Now a member of the Canadian National Ultra Marathon race team, Miceli has completed over 50 marathons across North America, as well as 10 100km races worldwide.

"There are few external rewards in long distance running," sports psychologist Peter Papadogiannis points out. "There's not a lot of money out there, there are very few prizes. The motivations are more intrinsic. People do it for themselves, because they feel

good about it."

Rob Kent is a self-proclaimed 'ordinary guy' with a fulltime job and family, who enjoys various forms of exercise and physical activity in his spare time. But he's hardly ordinary when it comes to sports.

Among his many achievements, Kent has participated in marathons, triathlons, and Ironman competitions. In 1988, he swam the men's 100m breaststroke in the Olympic trials, failing to place in a top spot alongside those who would go on to compete in the Summer Games later that year.

In addition to the six-day race across the Sahara Desert, Kent attempted to swim across the English Channel in 2006, and successfully swam across Lake Ontario in 2012.

But other than that, he is pretty ordinary.

On the racecourse, Kent blends in with the few thousand runners braving the frigid conditions to complete the half marathon. He is tall and slim, with long, slender legs.

Dressed in blue from head to toe, his determined eyes fixate on the path before him from beneath a knit cap. Kent runs with a jaunty gait; his shoulders are slightly hunched, sitting high, arms pumping back and forth with each trot as he makes his way down the race route in a steady rhythm.

He looks serious, and so do many other runners on the course. Some occasionally smile and wave to the crowd of spectators gathered to watch the race. But under the upbeat exterior lies a huge mental and physical challenge.

"It may look easy, but it's really not," he says. "Most of us won't mention it, but what we do is actually really hard."

Over the course of a single marathon, a runner's feet will strike the ground with the full weight of the body 35,000-40,000 times, according to the Greater Baltimore Medical Center. The foot absorbs the shock of impact, before traveling upwards to the ankle, knee and hip.

"It's pretty much all about damage control," muses Kent. "When I first started running, it hurt my lower back so bad that I had to walk with a cane. I literally couldn't run, couldn't move."

Between swimming and running, if there's a diagnosable injury out there, chances are, Kent has had it.



"When the race rolls around, that's when you're at your peak in overuse. Physically you may feel at your best, but you're also at your worst in terms of injuries from training."

Chronic pain is common.

"There are a lot runners that tell you that they constantly hurt somewhere," said Dr. Stephen Connor, a chiropractor and massage therapist who has treated both Kent and Miceli in the course of their training. "They get injured and over the years simply adapt to it."

The continuous cycle of pleasure and physical pain is par for the course for any long distance runner, especially when it comes to race time. The lasting effects on the body caused by running marathons and long distances are staggering.

Chronic knee problems, joint pain, stress fractures, black toenails, bleeding nipples – and that's not even the worst of it.

"I've had an inflamed tendon, I've had sciatica, I've had a tight hamstring," said Miceli. "(Many) trips to the chiropractor or osteopath or massage therapist."

Papadogiannis says runners are constantly in conflict.

"One moment, they're in pain, but then they get through the pain and feel better. Then there's pain again, and they might struggle, but they pull through it. And then they finish, and they're in pain. But there is so much personal reward."

Even the physical pain felt after a long distance run can be overshadowed by a sense of loneliness, despite the personal satisfaction of finishing. Kent recalls both the physical and emotional pain of once competing in a marathon on his own.

"It's horrible to go through all that hard work, kill yourself in a race and look around...and you have no one to share it with," describes Kent. "It's awful!"

As the last leg of the race nears, Kent maintains a constant pace but is visibly tiring. The running horde has thinned out considerably, separating the quick from the moderate.

Somewhere in the middle, Kent pushes through. He does not stand out, but he stands alone, at least until the race is over.

"It is totally solitary," he reflects, "and it can be very boring. If you're good at it, you can get in the zone, a meditative state."

The crowds gathered at the finish line do not waver in

their enthusiasm as a steady stream of racers follows in Kent's footsteps. With no one waiting to greet him, he knows that if he takes a walk, his group of running mates will not be too far off.

"If you were only after the race experience you wouldn't do this because its way too much work to do on your own," says Kent. "For me, finding a good training group is really the best way to make fitness a permanent part of my life."

Not many sports or physical activities offer the reward of achieving individual success combined with the social camaraderie of training and support.

"It's a connection," said Papadogiannis. "You're running together on the course, you feel a part of something. But you run the race on your own. It's basically your name with a time attached to it."

Over three hours have passed since the Chilly Half Marathon began, and the majority of competitors have made their way across the finish line.

The sun is shining and conditions are brisk, the cold temperatures intensified by winds blowing in from across the lake. For the growing crowd at Emma's Back Porch, the interior of the local pub is bright and warm. The sea of spandex and numbered bibs is a dead giveaway that there is a race in town.

At a large table in the center of the room sits a rowdy group of middle-aged athletes.

"We're a drinking group with a running problem," remarks Kent as he raises a glass to toast his fellow contenders. He pats his stomach, joking about the imaginary weight he will inevitably gain from his celebratory ale.

The group laughs easily now but in a matter of hours they will be dealing with a list of physical ailments caused by running today's race – sore legs, a stiff back, tight shoulders.

But already the group is talking about the next marathon coming up, one in which they will all individually participate, but train for together.

"There's a lot of people that take this stuff way too seriously, and I take it very seriously," Kent said, a smile forming on his face, "but the other side of the coin is to take it with a grain of salt and a beer."