

# The Polar Bear Marathon

Churchill, Manitoba

November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012



Never before had there been a marathon in Churchill - with the Polar Bears still lurking around among the big rocks along the coast of Hudson's Bay in November, a few days after the tourist season. It was cold and the running route was right along the coast. Huge rock along the shore as well as inland could easily resemble a bear, or give the bear a good place to hide. We were not afraid, but were very aware that these 700 to 1500 pound furry, hungry animals were still around.

The marathon took place on November 20<sup>th</sup>. 14 runners were assigned to the five escort vehicles and with a shot from a bear gun we were off and running into the sunrise. The escort vehicles were multifunctional, they served as mobile aid stations for the runners assigned to them. Extra clothing, food, drink were in the vehicles. The vehicles would also serve as protection from the bears if needed. It was not meant as a race for a PB (personal best) but a race to challenge the elements. The vehicles were also instructed to have a bear watcher and a bear gun.

Fortunately (or unfortunately) the weather was mild at minus 7°C with practically no wind. The scenery was new and unique to many of us runners, the road curving along the bay with some inclines and a view of the boulders and the ice building up in the bay. Except for one runner, everyone who started completed the course.

The support we received from people was encouraging, besides our 'official' escort vehicles others made a point of coming along the road to see how we were doing and to help scout for bears. The RCMP, the ambulance, a Tundra buggy, the taxis as well as others would stop and report to our drivers.

The two runners up front completed the 42 kilometers in just over 4 hours – they were Garry Koop from Steinbach and Eric Alexander from Colorado. The two runners bringing up the rear were myself with my buddy Mike Pierce from San Diego, CA.

That very evening Mother Nature began to show us a different side of herself and the falling snow began to be whipped around by the winds off the Bay. Temperatures dropped to minus 20° C. Running in those conditions would have been a completely different story.

There had been sightings of bears during our run by the bear watchers, and they had crossed the road in front of us, but none of the runners spotted any. So the day after the run we drove out to an area where we were assured there were bears – or at least a bear. We had been warned repeatedly about how aggressive they can be, however, the one we saw seemed quite contented and did his best to ignore us and our cameras. We did stay in the vehicle and came to within three meters, but my foot was constantly hovering over the gas pedal just in case he would take a sudden interest in us. The huge dents in the conservation officer's truck had been pointed out to us.

That day we also watched as a bear was 'released' from the bear prison and airlifted out with a helicopter.

This was the first ever Polar Bear marathon on the edge of the Arctic in Churchill, Manitoba. Athletes In Action Canada was pleased to organize this run in support of the First Nations community work we do in Northern Manitoba and Ontario.

Albert Martens

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The following is a posting to my Facebook:

ONE

The first Polar Bear Marathon in Churchill, MB. was a huge success. All fourteen runners did well. The weather was not harsh, rather unusually mild - (-7 and no wind). The Polar Bears were present, however the 6 escort vehicles, RCMP cars, Taxi, MB. Conservation Officer vehicle, Ambulance kept us safe. Wow, what a beautiful sunrise, a fantastic scenic route along the coast of the Hudson's Bay - meandering along the shore's huge smooth boulders and rocks, where the bears make their homes. It was a high adrenaline marathon. Animal Planet film team from the UK was present and they filmed the whole event. The next day, the weather was something else - minus 20 with very strong winds. I doubt whether I would have been able to finish the marathon in such brutal weather. Requests are coming in for next year's run.

TWO

Everest Mountaineer Eric Alexander was our guest speaker at our Athletes in Action Dessert Night on November 22nd 2012 at the Canad Inn in Winnipeg. He is one fantastic - high interesting speaker. He also ran with us in Churchill on November 20th - the full marathon, his first and my 47th. The bloody toe on his blog is Eric's toe, not mine. Our escorting vehicles with bear watchers did scare two bears away. We all got to be close (3 meters away) from a bear the next day. We were in a van, and I had the foot on the gas pedal all the time as we photographed a Polar Bear in the wild.

See some pictures on the next page.

