

FITNESS JILL BARKER



PIERRE OBENDRAUF GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

Markus Wiaderek pulls a sled carrying his gear for a 100-mile marathon. It weighs about 22 kilograms.

ARCTIC MARATHONS are cold, dark, lonely and exhausting
— but Markus Wiaderek can't get enough of them

A long time running

When we first met ultramarathoner Markus Wiaderek in January, he was running through the night in preparation for the Yukon Arctic Ultra 100-miler in February. Turns out his all-nighters paid off. He crossed the finish line first – seven hours in front of his closest competitor.

“It was pretty fun,” the Île Bizard resident said.

If Wiaderek defines fun as running 31 hours in sub-zero temperatures with no sleep and only the cries of the wolves to keep him company, you gotta wonder what his bad days are like.

Much of Wiaderek’s satisfaction lies in the fact that his win is payback for last year’s DNF (did not finish). With temperatures in the minus 40C range, he was forced to drop out of the 2008 event due to frostbite. He wasn’t alone. Over half the competitors suffered the same consequences due to the coldest recorded temperatures in the race’s seven-year history.

Who, other than Wiaderek, heads up to the Arctic to run? In all, about 50-plus ultradistance athletes from all over the world travel to Yellowknife annually for the race. Not all of them attempt the 100-mile distance. Some complete the basic 26-mile marathon. Others traverse an extremity-numbing 300-mile or 430-mile distance. Not everyone runs. Some ski the course. And there’s always the odd cyclist or two.

The athletes travel the distance pulling a sled packed with enough gear to survive the trip. Food, a sleeping bag, tent, camp stove, first aid supplies and extra clothing are the essentials. Wiaderek’s sled weighed between 22 and 23 kilos.

The course follows the same route as a dogsled race that finishes the day before the ultra athletes take off. The trail is well marked, and, according to Wiaderek, there’s little chance that participants will lose their way.

“The first 50 to 60 kilometres, you just follow the rivers, and then once you get onto the Klondike trail, it becomes very,

very hilly, and it becomes very challenging,” Wiaderek said.

Add to that challenge the fact that the runners spend the majority of the race in their own company.

“In a distance like 100 miles, the field spreads apart quickly,” he explained. “There are periods where you are by yourself for 12 or 13 hours until the next checkpoint.”

That kind of isolation can wear on you. So, too, can the very short days and the very long nights.

“You put your headlight on, and the only thing you see is the white spot in front of you,” Wiaderek said. “Mentally this is a killer.”

It was during the night that Wiaderek overtook his competitors. Most of the runners succumbed to the cold and fatigue and crawled into their sleeping bags for a bit of shut eye. But not Wiaderek. He just kept on running – often with the sounds of Guns N’ Roses, Metallica and Beethoven as motivation.

The other trick he used to keep going was fuelling his body with Haagen Dazs ice cream.

“Last year’s race, I was talking to one of the pro athletes (Steve Reifentstahl) and I asked him for one serious insider tip,” Wiaderek said. “He said when you run for that long, you need calories to stay warm and keep going. The easiest thing is to eat Häagen-Dazs.” Half a litre has about 1,150 calories, so with two litres of Haagen Dazs in his Camelback, he had about 4,600 calories on hand.

Wiaderek added several shots of espresso to his vanilla ice cream and kept it in a pouch under his coat where it warmed up to a consistency that allowed it to flow easily through his drinking tube.

Another good decision was the way he dressed for the cold.

“This year, I went with a totally different system. I used a vapour barrier that looks like a sweat suit. You put it on and it traps all the moisture (and heat) inside. So the only thing you do is stay comfortable by putting layers on top.”

One advantage to using the vapour barrier system is that it is extremely light weight compared with the traditional Gore-Tex approach to dealing with the cold. It’s also a fraction of the cost. The whole outfit cost about \$180 vs. the several hundred it costs for more traditional cold-weather gear.

As for his feet, Wiaderek pulled on a pair of sealskin socks, followed by running shoes designed for trail running and an overboot with the soles cut out to maximize traction.

Fortunately the temperature during this year’s event was downright balmy compared with the year before. Wiaderek says it was about minus 22C at the start, heated up to a sunny minus 15C by midday and dropped to about minus 35C at night.

Gearing up for an event like this takes more than wearing the right stuff. It takes money. Lots of it. Add up the gear, airline ticket and the entry fee of 750 to 850 euros (\$1,250 to \$1,450) depending on when you register, and before you know it you’re down several thousand dollars. If you think that winning helps recoup the costs, think again. Crossing the finish line first garners you a handshake, bragging rights and a finishers’ medal.

Still, the win has boosted Wiaderek’s confidence. He plans on entering two big ultradistance events (Rock and Ice in the N.W.T. and the Race Across America) in the coming year, both of which have cash prizes. And while he doesn’t think he’ll be a contender the first time out, he feels that with some experience he may have a shot at some prize money.

He’s also planning on using that experience to plan a Canadian version of the Race Across America.

“St. John’s to Vancouver is quite a nice distance and it’s beautiful country,” Wiaderek said.

You gotta agree with him on both points. But I think I’ll stick with the train.

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