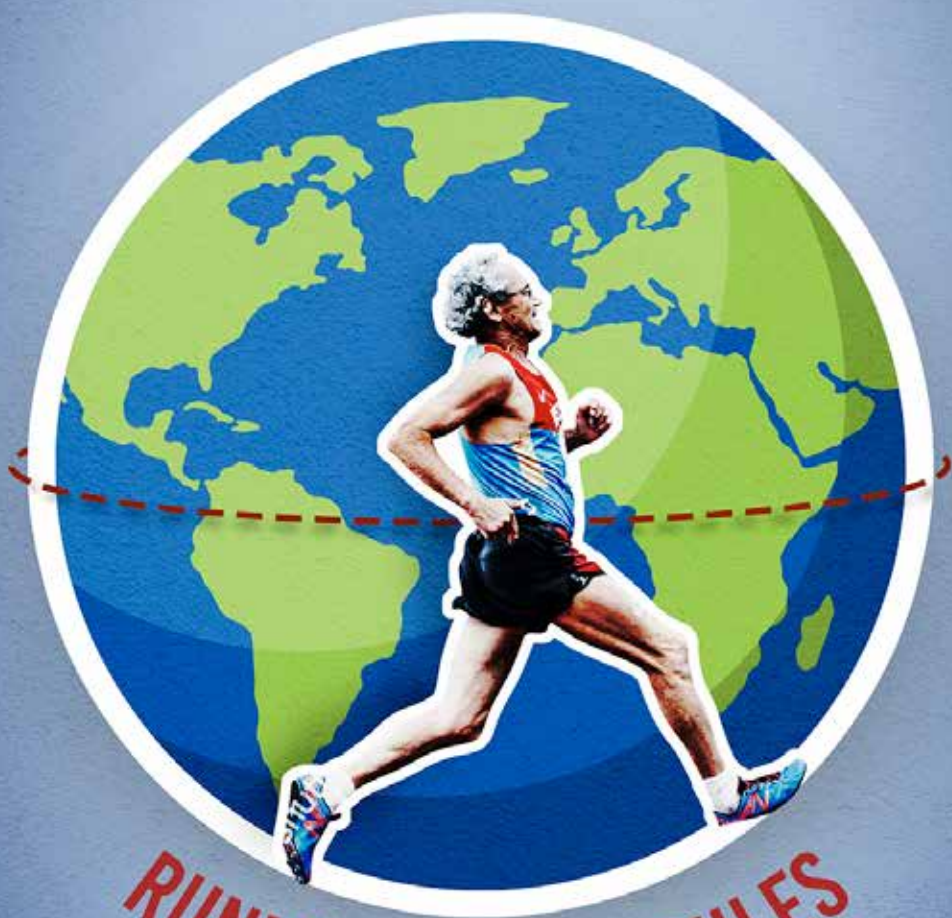


ONCE AROUND THE PLANET



RUNNING 24,902 MILES

DOUG RICHARDS

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Chapter 1

The ebbs and flows of Venice

THE AFTERNOON sunshine glinted off its polished, metal surface and tears of pride welled in my eyes. In my right hand, held aloft, as I waved with my other arm to the vociferous crowds of spectators lining the pavements, was one of the most precious items I had ever been privileged to carry. It was Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's Baton and I had been selected as one of a chosen few who would carry it on its worldwide journey in the lead-up to the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham.

Yes, it was only a 200m slow jog, but not every run is defined by distance travelled and time taken. No run has ever filled me with more personal pride than this one did. I took my time. I wasn't going to rush that treasured moment.

But why me? I am a naturally modest person who doesn't like to blow my own trumpet. Why had I been picked out from the many thousands of deserving nominees to have the honour of carrying the Queen's

Baton? As much as I have relished the experiences my own back catalogue of worldwide running adventures has given me, and am proud of the tens of thousands of pounds I have raised for charities in the process, perhaps the greatest pleasure I get is from inspiring others to embark on their own running journey. It may be a young child who, having listened to one of my school talks, decides to sign up for junior parkrun. Or maybe an octogenarian who bravely attends one of my couch to 5k programmes and then, nine weeks later, I can marvel at the smile on their face as they achieve their goal. And yes, my written and spoken words have also gone on to inspire others to achieve even greater heights; half- and full marathons and even some of the toughest ultra-runs our planet has to offer.

Running, in so many ways, has played a pivotal role in my life journey, and those few, priceless, emotional, baton-bearing minutes seemed to encapsulate all the many facets of joy this simple activity has provided for me.

* * *

It was during the summer of 1981 that I had taken that very first step out of my front door with the single goal of running for a mile. Quite simply, I wanted to begin to reverse the decline in my physical fitness, even though I was only 33 years old at the time. That moment represented one of the most momentous decisions of my life and would shape it for decades to come.

If you had stopped me then and listed the places I would eventually run in, I would have laughed at you. If

you had stopped me then and told me of the adventures that were ahead of me, and of the amazing people I would share them with, I would have believed you were living in some kind of fantasy world. If you had stopped me then and told me that the amazing journey I was about to embark on would provide enough material to write not one, but two books, I would have doubted your sanity. For goodness sake, all I was going to do was to run around the block, and hope that the inevitable pain that I knew I would feel at the end of the run did not put me off running for life.

Now I sit at my keyboard, preparing to begin yet another journal of this extraordinary journey that I have been privileged enough to enjoy, and occasionally suffer. A trilogy! Who would have believed it?

My first book, *Running Hot & Cold*, takes you back to the very beginning, not just that one-mile run, but why it took me into my fourth decade to discover that I enjoyed running. Life is an unpredictable journey; we never quite know what lies around the next corner, and the direction my running life took was very much intertwined with the roller-coaster experiences of family, health and work matters. I openly admit that, at various points in my life, I have suffered with mental wellbeing issues, principally anxiety and depression, and I will never undervalue the role that running has played in helping me keep things in perspective. Nothing boosts your self-confidence more than achieving a goal that the little voice in your head was saying was beyond your capability.

My first book traced the journey from that first run to half- and full marathons, and eventually to ultra-marathons. I explored new cities by running around them, and then felt this strange urge to explore races that, frankly, no rational person would want to run in. This led me to discover the mountains and deserts of China and the humidity and jungles of Sri Lanka. I shared African plains with the native wildlife, and battled my way through the barren winter landscapes of Siberia and the polar ice cap in Greenland. In contrast, the searing heat of the Sahara would test me to my very limits.

In the sequel, *Can We Run With You, Grandfather?*, I described a scenic return to south-east Asia in the Bagan region of Myanmar which preceded a first visit to South America for a half-marathon in Rio de Janeiro, and this opened up an enticing new goal. Could I run at least a half-marathon on each of Earth's seven continents before I reached the age of 70? There were a few trials and tribulations along the way, but the answer was yes. The contrasting conditions of the heat of the Australian Outback and the wind and blizzards of Antarctica saw me earn the seven continents accolade that would have been beyond my wildest dreams when I first set out almost 40 years earlier.

* * *

So, that's it. Job done. Seven continents, seven decades. End of; except it wasn't.

What could possibly exceed the magical moments I experienced on the Antarctica trip? Not just the run

itself, but the otherworldly scenery, the proximity to and extraordinary interactions with the wildlife, the sea journey across the Drake Passage, the camaraderie on board our ship. The answer is that it probably won't be exceeded, but is that reason enough to stop exploring different horizons?

The simple fact was that, although I was now into my eighth decade, I was blessed with a mind, heart and legs that were still at their happiest when I was out running. I've never been the fastest of runners, but neither have I been among the tailenders. I guess I'm a middle-of-the-pack Joe Average although, as time goes on, there is an inevitable slowing. I know the day will come when I can't do it any more but while I can still run with a smile on my face and not a grimace, the journey will continue.

For me there has to be a goal: something to aim for. It may just be an entry in a local race which gives an incentive to guide the training to ensure you reach race day in the best condition possible to achieve the distance you've set yourself. Longer-term goals are very important too. For the previous couple of years, seven continents had been my target, but now that had been achieved I needed something else: a distant objective far away on the horizon that would help motivate me to get out and run on those days when just any other type of activity seemed a better idea.

As I've said before, I am a shameless obsessive when it comes to recording my runs, even going back to that very first mile. Other than a short period when I was

working in London in the late 1990s, when a group of us used to go out and run in Regent's Park at lunchtime, I have meticulously recorded every running journey. Part of me still doesn't understand why I didn't make note of those lunch-break jaunts, but life was very hectic at the time as I was commuting to London from the south coast and had responsibility for my two children at home, so I guess time was a factor. It was also a period when we didn't have wrist-worn GPS devices that could measure how far we had run, and zig-zagging repeatedly around a park would be hard to estimate from a map alone. What it does do, in retrospect, is to give me a little buffer in that whatever mileage milestones I may claim to have achieved, I know in my own mind that I have actually done a little bit more. Anyway, I digress. Long-term targets.

When I crossed the finish line of the Antarctica half-marathon, my cumulative total mileage stood at 19,925. Yes, I am sad, aren't I? That meant I had a little less than 5,000 miles to reach, what for me, would be a magical total of 24,902 miles, the distance of the circumference of our world at the equator: once around the planet. Every time I go out to run, I am nibbling away at that distance, reducing it mile by mile. As I run, I picture my globe in the lounge at home and see myself on that imaginary line, edging towards that target. OK, I may be running across the Pacific Ocean, but it's that goal that keeps me going.

* * *

Once the hullabaloo had died down after the Antarctica trip, my attention turned to a new overseas challenge, one that was causing me quite a bit of anxiety – the Venice Marathon in October of 2018. I have run dozens of marathons before, so why should it make me anxious? As you now know, my primary reason for continuing my running career is enjoyment. Not time, not pace, but just being out there. As time has gone on, and as I have grown older, my enjoyment of the marathon distance has diminished. Not really the race itself as the crowd support on a big-city marathon can normally carry you through. It's really the long training runs to try and get yourself to the fitness level required that can be a challenge. I'm quite selfish when it comes to long training runs with other people and prefer to do them on my own. If your partner or partners are a little faster than you, you can feel yourself being dragged along at a pace you're not comfortable with and vice versa. I just want to run at a pace my body wants to run at on that particular day.

I'd also discovered that advancing years had brought an increasing tendency to calf cramping in the later stages of the long runs, despite using tried and tested fuelling strategies that had worked for me over the years. Half-marathons, no problem; they were probably my favourite distance. I could train for them, run them and feel fully recovered within an hour of crossing the finish line, but my love of the full 26.2-mile distance had decreased over the years.

There is no denying, however, that the marathon is the blue riband event of the distance running world. You

know me and my propensity for setting goals to drive on into the future. At some point in recent years, and I do not remember exactly when, although wine was probably a factor, I had announced to my family that I wanted to run one more marathon after I reached the age of 70. Chris, my son, had not forgotten this and so plans were laid that he and I would run the 2018 Venice Marathon and we would turn it into a family break, being joined in this unique city by his wife Lynne, and young Holly who, as their life unfolded, now preferred to be known as Cam. My previous outing over the distance had been back in 2012, in Rome, when I also ran with Chris or, more accurately, behind him. I had taken on the run at short notice when one of Chris's RAF colleagues had pulled out, and was hopelessly under-prepared, having run nothing further than the half-marathon distance beforehand, but I made it. If I could do it then, with a summer ahead to prepare, I could do it again in Venice.

* * *

The summer of 2018 bubbled along nicely. In August I booked my next long-distance running trip, a half-marathon on the remote Easter Island in the South Pacific, to be followed by a few days of sightseeing in Machu Picchu in Peru, a place I had long wanted to visit. This time I would have local company as well. Two months previously I had given one of my running talks to a mixed audience of running friends and inmates at a local open prison. I had mentioned the future possibility of running on Easter Island and a running friend, Clare,

who had been in the audience, asked if I would mind if she joined me on the trip. Clare was also very eager to visit Machu Picchu, but her husband Bill would not have been able to cope with the altitude, so this trip would possibly be her only opportunity.

All was going well on the health front apart from becoming rather hard of hearing, particularly in my left ear, which is, I guess, another consequence of advancing years. Curiously, my hearing tended to worsen as the day went on, before reverting back to as near normal as it would get the following morning. As I watched television I would subconsciously be tweaking up the volume control during the day, only to be nearly blown off my sofa the next morning when I turned the TV back on. Eventually, after a few tests, I was given hearing aids for both ears, although I preferred not to wear them for running in case they bounced out, which could incur expensive replacement costs. I just had to make sure that anybody I was running with ran on the good ear side, assuming of course that I wanted to hear what they were saying!

The partial hearing loss also had an impact on some of my longer training runs. In the past, with preferring to do them on my own, I would have sailed off down the narrow country lanes of Worcestershire and Warwickshire (I live on the border). This meant I had to be acutely aware of approaching traffic, which became more challenging with the hearing defect, so I sought new, and safer, routes. Fortunately the town of Redditch, where I live, has a vast network of footpaths

and cycle paths, underpasses and flyovers, which make it possible to run long distances without ever having to encounter traffic. It could almost have been designed by a runner, and even now, after 24 years of living there, I am discovering new safe routes.

* * *

On Saturday, 8 September 2018, just seven weeks before the date of the Venice event, I ran a marathon, but of a very different kind. One of our local Arrow Valley parkrun heroes, Kevin, organised an annual charity event which involved running eight different 5km parkrun routes, plus one junior 2km parkrun course, in a single day; 42km in total – yes, a marathon distance, but a very different type of challenge. A coach was provided to transport us between the various venues, although some preferred to use their own cars, and an amazing selection of food and drink was laid on by Rachel, our local parkrun event director's wife. Of course, being a Saturday, only one of the parkruns could start at 9am and be counted as official, the remainder counting as freedom runs.

The day began with a 7.45am start at Sandwell Valley. One of the local team had kindly got up early to explain the route to us but, of course, there would be no marshals. With over 40 of us running, of varying capabilities, we soon spread out and on a twisting course of mixed surfaces, one or two wrong turns were made! However, despite a bit of early morning stiffness in my thigh, a slightly over-distance 3.3 miles

was recorded and we leapt on to the coach for the next stage.

Sutton Park was the official parkrun and this was a challenging route, with several tricky climbs and grazing cattle as spectators, a bit too close for some. By the time we reached run three at Perry Hall, rain had begun to fall. This was a fairly flat route which I was familiar with, having run it several times before, and the local core team not only left signs and marshals out from their 9am parkrun, but also provided us with cake and hot drinks – a great gesture, so typical of the parkrun community.

Cannon Hill parkrun was next, another route I knew well, and the rain had now stopped. With a slightly longer break for us to get a bit of lunch, we moved on to Brueton Park, and a different start and finish to the usual to spare us a long walk from the coach drop-off point, but a full 5km all the same. Five parkruns in the bag.

Number six was a bit surreal – a sort of ghost parkrun. It was in the village of Wythall, bordering Birmingham and Solihull, and in the pre-event planning had been advertised as a ‘secret’ parkrun. The reason for this was that although Wythall Park was a venue recognised by the national parkrun organisation, and had an accurately measured course, only one parkrun was ever held there, as hostility from some members of the local community was so great, with concerns about parking and damage to the grass. We therefore crept from our coach somewhat furtively, looking out

for shifting net curtains, just in case the more hostile residents noticed that the runners were back.

Some of us, not myself, had run the one and only Wythall parkrun, so knew the route, but there was a problem. Some sort of local event was going on in the park and, where the start would have been, an archery range had been set up. As we were an unwanted presence anyway, we were certainly not prepared to risk flying arrows, so chose a start point at random and headed off into the outer reaches of the park to run the rest of the prescribed course. There was a consequence to this, of course. When we arrived at the official finishing line, where the timers were waiting to record us, we were all around half a kilometre short of the full distance. Fortunately the finish line was adjacent to a rugby pitch: cue a few dozen runners randomly zig-zagging and circling across the pitch, their faces glued to their running watches until the distance reached the magic 5km, when they could safely run across the line. We didn't wait around after our last runner had finished, and there were definitely a few twitching curtains as we made our way back to the coach.

Stratford-upon-Avon was the next stop and, as in previous years on this annual event, their team pulled out all the stops to make sure our increasingly fatigued bodies were refreshed as much as possible. By now, a few of us had called it a day and complaining muscles were being massaged back to life. There was an interesting question doing the rounds. Which is harder – running a marathon without any rest breaks, or doing it in

5km segments but suffering in between as tired limbs stiffened up in the cramped conditions on the coach? Opinion was fairly evenly divided.

We did two runs at Stratford. They were about to launch their first junior parkrun event, so we ran the proposed course, mainly on grass. After a short break of no more than 15 minutes, we then ran the official course: three laps, a mix of grass and tarmac, and, by the final lap, my legs were really beginning to feel it.

Just one more parkrun to go and this was always an emotional moment as we returned to our home ground of Arrow Valley Park. The coach dropped us off at the outer reaches of the park, and sped away for the last time. Not everybody on the coach had taken part in the running. Several were volunteers who had marshalled, time-kept, recorded our individual performances and, of course, kept us fed and watered throughout a long, tough day. Others had run just selected routes but we all marched together, as a team, the few hundred yards to the start point of the final run in the fast-fading evening light.

As in previous years, the route was lined with dozens of people who had come out to welcome us back and applaud us in. High fives, hugs – my eyes were moist with the reaction we were getting. And then we were off for the final time, joined by local parkrunners who hadn't been able to take part in the rest of the day but were eager to be part of the finale. As we drifted across the finish line, by now in full darkness, our times were once again recorded and, for

those who had run the full distance, a commemorative medal was presented.

That final leg was my slowest, but I had covered the full marathon distance in a day, and that was a real boost to my confidence in my preparations for the upcoming marathon in Venice. And that wasn't even an end to my running that weekend. Immediately after finishing, I drove the one hour or so up to Chris in Telford in readiness for a 10km race on the airfield of RAF Shawbury the following morning and, yes, I managed to complete that in a respectable time as well.

* * *

As much as my preparation for Venice seemed to be on track, this was not the case for Chris. He was fast approaching the end of his 22-year period of service with the RAF Regiment, and the uncertainty of what lay ahead was really beginning to play on his mind. How quickly had that time passed, for me at least? The memory of the tears rolling down my cheeks as I dropped my boy off at RAF Halton for his basic training certainly didn't seem over two decades old. Yet in that period he had served in conflict zones around the world, witnessed things that no one would ever wish to see, lost some close colleagues and been in some terrifying personal situations himself. The excellence of his service had been recognised on several occasions, most notably with an award in the Queen's birthday honours list. As his dad, I will always be immensely proud.