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On Top of the World

For Mark Dangerfield, running is about much more than health. In fact, his commitment to the gospel and a new, more fulfilling life has helped him accomplish his ultimate goal: running marathons in all 50 states in the U.S. and on all 7 continents. (Yes, even Antarctica.) **BY JAKE HEALEY**

It's July of 2003, and the track is nearly deserted. Only Mark Dangerfield braves the scorching Arizona heat, running lap after lap after lap.

The workout is part of a recovery process that's lasted decades. When Mark was in his 20s, he was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis—a chronic disease with no cure. As his condition worsened over the years, a colonoscopy revealed precancerous growths, and doctors recommended the entire colon be surgically removed.

Following two complex operations in 1997, Mark made a gradual but full

recovery that motivated him to remain physically active. “When I could finally get up and move again, oh, how wonderful that felt!” he recalls. “The experience planted in my heart a new appreciation for the simple joy of movement.”

“Tests of Manhood”

Not wanting to feel “over the hill,” Mark decided that to commemorate his 50th birthday, he would ride his bike 50 miles. Each year after that, he conducted a new “test of manhood” to prove to himself that he still had it.

That's why, in 2003, under the blazing July sun, Mark celebrated his 53rd birthday by running 53 laps around a local community college track. With every lap, he thought of what happened in the corresponding year of his life.

In lap 19, he thought of his call to serve an LDS mission in South Africa. In lap 22, he thought of his marriage. Laps 23, 25, 27, 31, 36, and 39 marked the births of his six children. This exercise in reflection left Mark feeling grateful for his blessings, happy for the life he'd lived to that point, and exhausted from the effort.

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Shortly after finishing his goal, Mark realized that 53 laps around a track was roughly half of a marathon. So he decided that for his next birthday, he'd give himself the biggest test yet: the Deseret News Marathon in Salt Lake City.

As a Classical Greek Language and Literature major, marathoning is actually the perfect hobby for Mark. The race gets its name from the Battle of Marathon, fought in 490 B.C. by the Greeks and the mighty Persian army. Legend has it that when the Greeks defeated the Persians, a soldier named Pheidippides was sent to Athens to deliver the good news. Pheidippides ran the 26.2 miles from Marathon to Athens, delivered his message, then promptly died from the effort.

These days, people often undergo that sort of torture for fun—but the feat of running 26.2 miles hasn't gotten any easier since ancient Greek times. Mark says that when he successfully completed the Deseret News Marathon in July 2004, he, like Pheidippides, "felt like collapsing and dying at the finish line."

But he was hooked. That race was the beginning of a journey for Mark—one that has taken him to some of the most exotic and unique locations the world has to offer. He's seen the Great Wall of China, traversed the volcanoes of Hawaii, and even braved the unforgiving landscape of Antarctica. He's made friends, seen sights, and won medals, all in pursuit of his new, extreme "test of manhood": running a marathon in all 50 states and on all seven continents.

Aid Stations

Our bodies naturally store a substance called glycogen—essentially, it's the stuff that keeps us moving. We are able to work our bodies by gradually burning this glycogen, much like the fuel that powers

a vehicle. The lower our glycogen levels become, the more weak and depleted we feel.

Nothing works a body quite like long-distance running, and that's why there's no sight more beautiful to a marathoner than an aid station. In an organized race, there are almost always aid stations every few miles where runners can grab water, sports drinks, and sometimes even fruit or other quick energy snacks. "[Aid stations] are a godsend," Mark confirms. "It's critical to make regular use of them."

As a practicing Latter-day Saint, Mark has found many parallels between living the gospel and running a marathon. Just like marathon runners need aid stations to replenish their body's energy and to continue moving forward, there are also spiritual aid stations within the gospel. "Prayer, meditation, and scripture study are . . . examples," he says. "And exercise itself is an aid station! Most of us have jobs where we sit or stand around most of the day without moving, and movement boosts our morale as well as strengthens our bodies."

"Our weekly Sabbath day services are a type of aid station," Mark adds. "When we attend church regularly and partake of the spiritual fare offered there, our spiritual energy is recharged, and we're ready for another week." This respect for Sabbath day observance is what prompted Mark to add a twist to his "test of manhood"—he hasn't competed in any Sunday races.

"I know not everyone agrees with me," he acknowledges, "but I view the Sabbath as a day of rest, where you attend church, try and devote yourself to more spiritual pursuits, and spend time with family. Of course, I'm not perfect in observing the Sabbath properly, but [that's why I made] a commitment not to run Sunday races."

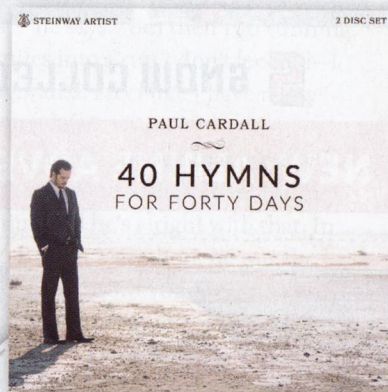
The Extra Mile

When most people run a marathon, it's pretty much the only thing they have energy to do that day. That's why nearly every marathon takes place on a weekend. However, this also means that a fair amount of races are scheduled for Sunday,

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which made Mark's goals a little loftier than he first thought.

By the time he'd decided to race in every state and continent, Mark realized that some states *only* offered Sunday marathons. For these states, he decided that he would run ultramarathons, which are most often run on Saturdays. An ultramarathon is a race longer than 26.2 miles—sometimes more than twice as long. Mark tackled such feats in Tennessee, Illinois, Vermont, Florida, Maine, Hawaii, South Dakota, and even South Africa.

Mark visited South Africa in early 2005 to run the 55-mile Comrades Marathon—and yes, it was the year he turned 55. The race is the world's oldest (first run in 1921) and largest (10,000–15,000 runners) ultramarathon. Though Mark first learned of the race as a young missionary, he hadn't returned to the nation since his service, and longed to go back. A decade later, he still counts the experience as one of his most memorable races.

Around the World

But his memorable races didn't stop there. In 2006, he competed in “the holy grail for marathon runners”—the Boston Marathon. The world's oldest annual marathon, Boston is one of the few races that has a qualifying time requirement. Since he'd run a qualifying time two years prior, Mark was excited to return to the area. He's since run Boston four times.

In May of 2008, Mark visited—and ran on—one of the world's most recognizable landmarks. But even before the Great Wall of China Marathon began, the trip was already memorable. Shortly after Mark and his family arrived at the hotel, their room began to shake. They were caught in the middle of a 7.9 magnitude quake that devastated Sichuan and the surrounding area. Fortunately, the Dangerfields escaped unharmed, and Mark continued with the marathon, as planned.

During the race, Chinese locals lined the course, cheering for the runners as they passed. This included dozens of enthusiastic Chinese children who ran out



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to greet the competitors. Mark had been told this would happen, so he ran the first part of the race with candy in his pockets and handed it out as he passed. “I won't soon forget those beautiful kids,” he says. “They were so happy just to get a piece of candy or two.”

Mark's steepest test came in 2011, when he ran the grueling Antarctica Marathon. Unlike all his other races, there wasn't much of a crowd at that one—there's no native human population on Antarctica, and no country owns the continent. The only permanent residents are penguins, seals, and some sea birds. Trees, bushes, flowers, and grass can't grow there—just the occasional patch of moss.

Running on the world's coldest, driest, and windiest continent is about as tough as it sounds. To minimize environmental impact on the region, only 100 runners are allowed to compete each year. The year that Mark's name finally came up was terribly windy. To make matters worse, a small heat wave had melted the snow on the dirt

roads of the course, so Mark was forced to brave the cold, the wind, and the mud.

“I have never been quite so happy to finish a race,” he admits. “The hot shower on the boat afterwards felt indescribably good.”

Small Changes, Incredible Results

At 65, Mark proves that age is no impediment to greatness. His recent completion of the Kansas City Marathon was the final step to achieving his goal—in the last 11 years, he's run a marathon in every state and on every continent in the world.

“I'm getting wrinkled and gray, and sometimes I feel that my time for significant accomplishment may be fast drawing to a close,” he says. “But then I go running, and 10 miles into a run I don't feel old—I feel invigorated. I feel like I have many useful years left.”

Mark learned long ago that there will always be someone who finishes the race before him, and he's alright with that. In the 2006 Boston Marathon, he was the 6,755th finisher. However, Mark usually places in the top three of his age group. And though he does have a little competitive fire inside, he agrees with President Monson that “the joy comes in the journey—the rest is just icing on the cake!”

Not everybody has the willpower, or perhaps even the desire, to do what Mark has done. But all can benefit from the lessons he's learned as a cancer-surviving marathoner. “Gradual, consistent, and persistent efforts yield results far beyond what we may have initially envisioned,” he shares. “Think of the Grand Canyon. It was created by weather and erosion over millions of years . . . in any one year there is no perceptible change, but small changes accumulate, and over time, they produce incredible results.”

“When I first got this idea, I had many occasions to doubt that I could do it,” he adds. “But I trained gradually—consistently—and persisted until my goal was accomplished. In life, as in running, aim for relentless forward progress.” And that's exactly what he plans to keep on doing. 🏃