

The 2018 Polar Bear Marathon

My friend Gord told me one time that we have been very fortunate to run the marathon in basically “good “weather and someday, “You will receive and taste the real Churchill weather.”

This was the 7th Polar Bear Marathon. During our organizational meeting in the lounge of the Seaport Hotel, we came upon this topic, “What IF?” – referring to the weather because we all knew it was stormy outside. It was as if I didn’t want to know. After a good part of our logistics in place for the run, start bibs, pairing up runners matching escort vehicle with the runners, I asked them what we should do if the weather becomes worse – Who make the call? I looked at the Churchill people and they said, “You do”. So, we discussed running 3 km loops around Churchill with 4 check points, however the runners did not want to hear that. You see you must understand these ultra- runners – they paid to come up here to have an “Ultra-Challenge “. One good thing was that the bears were all gone. Gone to a better life of eating seals after the Hudson Bay was frozen.

So, the next morning the weather was no better, I think a bit worse. Little things go wrong for me as usual at the start – someone, tipped the speaker off the ledge, all set to play OH CANADA. The speaker broke so no “Oh Canada” - Well at-least I got my prayer in just before the bear cracker gun went off and then a loud real gun shot went off – so the runners started suddenly with a bit of a scare – into the harsh cold wind they ran with each runner having an escort vehicle with them, serving the runners as a mobile aid station (safety, food and drink).

I was an extra vehicle driver, sort of a rover and I had the Polar Bear Mascot suit in my van and seeing my promised little “bear” person did not show up, I got into it.

The running was tough. The side wind going and coming back was not any fun. And yet, who knows, I think the runners were happy. A team of ladies, one from Windsor, ON. and another from Darlingford, MB, were enjoying it and smiling a lot, even though one time one lady lost her glove, which the wind blew into the ditch – she followed it and sunk into the snow. Martin Peters from Steinbach came in first at the Half Marathon point and Simon Cutlip from Tadoule Lake came in first for the full marathon. The full marathon runners finished the full 42.195 km in the wind. Wind gusts went up to 68 km/hr. We had water and energy bars in each vehicle. One lady really suffered in the full marathon. Coming back into Churchill along the long 5 km – coming around the bend approaching the Churchill elevator that looks like it is a kilometer away, actually is 5 km away and this is an area in the open where the wind gives you a strong side push. This lady was lite-weight and she was literally blown off the road. She hung onto the back of the truck coming into Churchill, still having fun. I approached the two ladies at this point and asked whether they should quit for safety sake. I had asked for the ambulance to come, but they had only one person on duty, so they couldn’t come. Several runners had frost bite which is their mark of the marathon honourable battle.

What was very special this year was the fact that the first freight train arrived in the evening of our Awards Dinner. In fact, I heard the whistle. Mayor Mike Spence spoke at our dinner and he mentioned this. The Awards Dinner is the highlight for me. I briefly introduced each runner, as they came up to introduce themselves. Each runner was presented with a carved Alabaster Polar Bear, a medal and a jacket, and other gifts. I had purchased some blueberries from Simon in Tadoule Lake in summer time, which my wife made into blue berry jam as a gift to all the runners. It was special to have Mike Spence speak to the runners, as well as have little William and Simon play the drums before the dinner. The music teacher of the Duke of Marlborough school brought out the children to sing 3 songs for us. They sing the songs with a big chart of symbols, instead of music notes. The Churchill Ladies Club presented each runner with a meal gift certificate for the Seaport Hotel restaurant.

We were pleased to be able to fly back one night early, saving the runners one extra night (savings of \$1000.00) which was given to the kid's food and toy hampers. 40 hampers were being prepared by Danica Village. Danica is named after a 6-year-old girl who drowned in a canoe mishap. So, the runners were able to contribute to this cause of helping the Churchill children at this (Christmas) time. We bought additional toys at the Northern Store for this Christmas project. What a meaningful angle to the Polar Bear Marathon.

The Canadian Rangers, a division of the Canadian Army were present. Four of their staff, including a coast guard were present to escort the runners. This gave the runners the needed comfort and security in the time of the snow storm.

We had 17 runners join us this year. About 7 are local Churchill runners, two from Tadoule Lake, Darlingford, Manitoba, Steinbach, Winnipeg, two from the Comox Valley, BC, as well as International runners from Arkansas, Alaska, Windsor, ON and Cary, NC, USA. One Lady has run 250 Ultras and Full Marathons, and another lady has run 382 full marathons. Our senior runner was 72 of age.

I already have several people indicating their intention of running it in 2019. Thank you for all your support, the many sponsors and prayers that were so much appreciated by all. Special thanks to Frank Klassen, David Peters, and Josh Plett who helped me a lot on the ground pulling it off successfully again. The Polar Bear Marathon is a small, unique and personal marathon - a group of about 20 runners each year.

Albert Martens

Athletes in Action
Churchill - Polar Bear Capital of the world
November 30, 2018