

On top of the world

North Pole Marathon, Neutral Polar Ocean. 8 April 2006



enough for the Antonov planes to land. It is a collection of heated tents with two Mi-8 helicopters at hand, and is the operational base for all North Pole expeditions and search and rescue efforts.

Explorers attempting to reach the North Pole by foot must do so by the end of April before the camp shuts down.

After its 30 passengers disembarked, the Antonov returned to Svalbard (NOR), 2.5 hours away, to pick up the remaining members of the North Pole Marathon expedition. Svalbard, the largest island of a Norwegian archipelago otherwise known as Spitsbergen, lies between 74N and 81N latitudes and is the departure point for almost all North Pole groups.

Within six hours the plane was back at Camp Borneo with the rest of the group. They were greeted by the 24-hour daylight that lasts from 21 March to 21 September - and unusually mild temperatures of -10C.

Between these arrivals a course was flagged that avoided 'leads', or breaks in the ice. The presence of leads close to camp and exceptionally difficult terrain of ice hillocks and patches of deep powdery snow, dictated that the race lap be no longer than 2.64km. The changeable weather conditions also made a short lap advisable because of the possibility of poor visibility or

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even whiteout conditions. Competitors had to cover the GPS-measured lap 16 times.

Among the capacity 54-person field was pre-race favourite Michael Collins of Ireland, who had won the Sahara Half Marathon on 28 February, six weeks before. Alison Hamlett was the favourite for the women's race but here, above all places, it is the participation that counts most. Everyone has set out to achieve something different: to raise money for charity; to stand at 90N (exact North Pole or 'true north'); to experience an element of danger; and of course to run a marathon. For many, it was their first marathon.

Ten runners had waited almost two years to compete. The 2005 North Pole marathon had been cancelled due to an unprecedented dispute between French and Russian logistics operators that resulted in the cancellation of almost all 2005 North Pole trips. Polar Running Adventures, the operators of the North Pole Marathon, offered to bring disappointed 2005 entrants the following year at no extra cost or refund their money: ten brought forward their registrations to 2006.

On 8 April at 12.00 Moscow time, the race started in good visibility, mild temperatures of -10C and virtually no wind.

Keeping the body dry and fending off the wind are the priorities in cold weather races, which requires multiple lightweight layers rather than one or two thick ones. Everyone wore a thermal, fleece and windproof outer on their upper body while one thermal and windproof were worn on their legs. The peripherals, which are the most susceptible to frostbite in dipping temperatures, required special attention. Most wore two pairs of socks beneath a neoprene layer to cover the toes and keep the feet warm. Hands were cased in a pair of thin gloves covered by a pair of over mittens with a balaclava, facemask, hat, neck gator and goggles on the head and over the face. Almost all of the field decided to use snowshoes given the soft and uneven underfoot conditions.

From the start pre-race favourite Collins and Carsten Kolle forced the pace, crunching through the hushed indomitable surroundings and matching each other stride for stride over the initial 10km. A polar bear was spotted but turned out to be a fellow competitor



On 7 April an Antonov-74 Russian cargo plane landed on a makeshift ice runway at 89 degrees north, high in the Arctic Ocean only 40 miles from the North Pole. Here, at the temporary Russian base 'Borneo' was where the 2006 North Pole Marathon took place.

The North Pole Marathon is the most northerly marathon and it is the only marathon run 'on' water. There is no land at the North Pole and beneath the 2-4m thick drifting ice floes lies 4000m of ocean.

Every year Camp Borneo is established for the month of April - but only when the ice is compact



donning a costume on one of the laps.

Without visible landmarks like buildings the 2.64km circuit seemed much longer, but the biggest problem was the soft and loose snow that covered the course. It was like sand on a beach, energy-sapping to run on, and impossible to maintain a rhythm over. On the positive side, the mild temperatures allowed balaclavas, facemasks and goggles to be discarded.

Despite the polar bear scare, Collins was relentless in his efforts and went on to win "comfortably" in deteriorating visibility and temperatures that temporarily dipped to -23°C .

Marcel Kasumovich judged his race well to overhaul Kolle for second place. Brent Weigner (USA), finished sixth man in his third North Pole Marathon.

Alison Hamlett set a new women's record for the event, finishing ahead of 2006 Antarctic Ice Marathon winner, Wendy MacKinnon. Her time was good enough for sixth place overall. Both winners received highly coveted Kobold expedition watches for their efforts.

All 54 participants completed the race. Some joined the 'Marathon Grand Slam Club' by running a marathon on all seven continents and at the North Pole; others successfully completed their first marathon in the most unique location possible. Approximately EUR 500,000 was also raised for various charities through



MEN:

1	Michael COLLINS	IRL	4:28:35
2	Marcel KASUMOVICH	CAN	5:00:26
3	Carsten KOLLE	GER	5:06:54
4=	Philippe MOREAU	FRA	5:51:50
4=	Herve TAQUET	FRA	5:51:50
6	Brent WEIGNER	USA	6:13:15
7	Henri-Alain D'ANDRIA	FRA	6:18:26
8	Mark TOINTON	GBR	6:18:47
9	Johnny DONELLY	IRL	6:40:30
10	Hal SALVESON	GBR	6:41:35

WOMEN:

1	Alison HAMLETT	GBR	5:52:56
2	Wendy MCKINNON	GBR	6:36:28
3	Caitriona STRAIN	IRL	7:41:47
4	Kate CHARLES	GBR	7:45:06
5=	Colleen ANTROBUS	NZL	9:03:02
5=	Jane GOWING	GBR	9:03:02
7	Kenwynne BARBER	GBR	10:31:50
8	Kimi PUNTILLO	USA	10:41:35
9	Evelyn HARRAN	GBR	11:12:50
10	Terri STRAITON	CAN	11:39:40

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competitors' heroic efforts in completing the event.

Finishing the race wasn't the only highlight. The following day all competitors travelled the remaining short distance to exactly 90N by Mi-8 chopper to complete their trip of a lifetime.

Within 48 hours of leaving Norway for the Pole to run the marathon, the competitors safely returned to Svalbard and made their connecting flights home.

Next year will be International Polar Year. To register for the 2007 North Pole Marathon, see www.npmarathon.com. Places are strictly limited according to aircraft capacity.

