



THE WORLD IS NOT ENOUGH

In Australia as part of a his bid to run-around the world, Irishman Tony Mangan hopes his wanderlust may finally be sated when there is nowhere left to run.

WORDS: RONNIE BELLEW | IMAGES: SUPPLIED



On his 56th birthday, endurance runner Tony Mangan clocked 46 minutes in a six-kilometre handicapped race. It was a time he described as terrible despite it earning him second place in a local running club event in Alice Springs. While there is nothing remarkable about Mangan's time, the story of how the Irishman came to be in Australia's Red Centre for the run colours his effort in a different light.

This particular fun run coincided with Mangan's arrival in town on 20 April for a stop-over on a trans-Australian run that began at the coastal Victorian township of Queenscliff back on 13 March, and is scheduled to end in Darwin sometime in early June. In all, Mangan will run 3,800 kilometres during his epic journey. So far, he is averaging over 60 kilometres for each day on the road. Some days, however, he has clocked up as many as 75 kilometres a day in his ambition to reach Alice in time for his 56th birthday and, of course, the fun run.

It's a journey that would be considered the achievement of a lifetime for all but the most hardened and ambitious of endurance runners. And even within that tribe of men and women whose concept of time and distance belong to another dimension to ours, Mangan is revered as a true warrior of the road and other terrains.

And running Australia is far from an end in itself for the Dubliner.

Instead, it's just another leg on a 'World Jog' that began with the Dublin Marathon in October 2010



and is scheduled to conclude some 48,500 kilometres later at the start line of the same race in 2014. To date he has covered over 30,000 kilometres and on average has run the classic marathon distance of 42.2 kilometres for each of his 700 plus days on the road.

So why would a middle-aged construction worker, who holds two 48-hour world running records, has run for his country and who should be thinking of settling down, swap the relative securities of home and hearth for the hazards of four years on the road?

The simple answer, says Mangan, is that he feels he has no choice. "The world run is not something that was thought up overnight over a few pints. It's an idea that was incubating in my mind for the last 20 years and it grew and grew to be an absolute monster. I felt like I was a prisoner of this idea and ambition.

"I remember reading a book years ago, *The Longest Walk* by George Meagan, about his seven-year walk through the Americas. On the last page, he had a line: '...since the day I got this idea I have been a prisoner of my dream'. That line really jumped out at me. For 20 years, the idea of a world walk, jog, run, whatever, was never a few hours from my waking mind."

Redundancy from his construction job in July 2010 made up Mangan's mind. "Twelve years previously, when I was living in Colorado, I was about to do it, except it was a world walk back then. I even had the t-shirts printed but I backed down from the idea in the end. I realised three years ago I wasn't going to have many more years to do this. My competitive career as an ultra-runner was over – I would never attain in racing what I had before – and I always said I would do this when I'm older."

So how does the Australian leg of the World Jog compare with his two-year trek through the Americas from Newfoundland to Tierra del Fuego?

"This might surprise people, but I didn't have any concerns beforehand about the Australian leg," he says. "Actually, I am looking on this leg of the journey as almost a form of relaxation. The hospitality and generosity of so many people has been humbling. The heat isn't an

issue because I dealt with 50°C temperatures in Mexico. And for the first time since I left Dublin, I have a support vehicle and I won't have anything to hump around in a backpack or push a stroller in front of me for thousands of kilometres."

During the massive Canadian and American legs of his run, Mangan pushed his basic supplies and camping gear ahead of him in a customised stroller as he ran. The hardship was sometimes softened by offers of accommodation and meals from his contacts in the ultra-running community, but he spent countless nights camping out in often freezing conditions.

He depended on truck stops and convenience stores for essential food, liquids and services – a limited budget meant he only occasionally allowed himself the luxury of a motel room for the night. He abandoned the stroller for most of the South American route, opting instead to carry a light backpack and take each day as it came on the road, where the kindness of strangers repeatedly came to his rescue.

The resilience and fortitude he developed during his international ultra-running career has also been an incalculable asset. Apart from the occasional bout of athlete's foot and some trouble getting going in the morning or after a rest, he has remained injury-free during the World Jog. "When I stop running, my body is battered – I have trouble getting up from a sitting down or lying position, but I am okay when running," he says. "Perhaps I should just keep on running."

Mangan's Australian route has been mapped out by ultra-running legend Phil Essam, and his support vehicle is being manned by Michael Gillan – another ultra-running veteran and physical therapy pioneer who also assisted Denmark's Jesper Olsen when he tackled Australia in 2005 as part of his world run.

Gillan's support has enabled Mangan to pump up the mileage and recharge mentally. "I can't state enough how much Michael's support has meant to me – this is the way it (a world run) should be done. Michael is wonderful. He prepares early breakfast and late dinner and packs up the camping gear in the morning



when I am off running. I could not have run the big distances I have run here without his help stopping every few kilometres to give me snacks and water (up to 10 litres some days)."

As for the terrain, Mangan says "the first 1000 kilometres as far as Port Augusta was pretty routine and we had lots of invites for places to stay. After that it was the outback and road houses about 100-to-120 kilometres apart and lots of picnic sites to shelter and camp. I was surprised, too, to see lots of trees all through the outback to get shade, because all the advice I had ever gotten was that there was no shelter anywhere."

The biggest surprise, though, for the Irishman, has been the reaction of the average, non-running Aussie to his exploits. "People are more surprised and puzzled about me than they were in America. All the time, people stop and ask me am I ok or if I need water and I also get a lot of the 'gringo loco' type remarks I got in parts of Latin America. People



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are just not used to seeing a runner on the road in the outback and one man actually thought I was an escaped convict.”

Mangan is no stranger to startled stares and adventures on the road.

Long before he became a runner, he set off around the world on a bicycle. He was 21 when he packed in his job in 1978 and headed off on a five-speed Raleigh to catch the ferry to France, inspired by Dervla Murphy's classic travel book, *Full Tilt: Ireland to India with a Bicycle*.

He didn't even know how to fix a puncture, but he was a quick learner in the ways of the road and became physically hardened as he crossed Europe. Little did he know what lay ahead of him on the far side of the Bosphorus.

After crossing Turkey, he pedalled on into Iran just as the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamist revolution against the Shah was about to unfold. By the time he reached Tehran, the Shah had been overthrown and relations with the West were in disarray – a scenario recreated in this year's Oscar-winning movie *Argo*.

With the lifeline of wired money from home cut off, Mangan survived by selling his blood plasma, twice, for \$15 each time. Along with a couple of other stranded Western backpackers, he survived for six weeks cooking omelettes over a kerosene stove. Despite the hardship, he has fond memories of Iran and describes the Iranians as “the most generous people in the world”.

When the borders re-opened,

he cycled into Afghanistan, again encountering great hospitality. He experienced Afghanistan at its best, when it still retained the ancient and open character of a country that was once a pivotal crossroads between East and West.

“I was there six months before the Russians invaded and, at that stage, it was super exotic. I never had any nervous moments even though I was cycling through serious mountains in February – through cold and desolate mountain areas. I remember once coming into a village needing water and some food and there was a mud hut and I knocked on the door. These bearded tribal guys came out and it was total Islamic hospitality even though there was a lot of charades to get over the language barrier.”

The battered Raleigh Corsa got him as far as South Korea, where he worked for two weeks in Seoul teaching conversational English. He bought a new 10-speed bike with his earnings and flew to Honolulu before travelling on to North America for the final leg of his journey. He cycled up along the west coast via Los Angeles, San Francisco and Portland before swinging north through Canada and southwards again, taking in Boston and New York.

In all, he spent 15 months on the road before returning home to Dublin before Christmas 1979. His wanderlust temporarily sated, he settled into a new job as a technician on mainframe computers. When he was laid off in 1983, he used the redundancy money to fund a cycling

and backpacking trip through South America. More trips to places as far apart as Iceland and Egypt followed, but it was after discovering running as a 30-year-old in 1986 that his life took a new direction.

Within weeks of taking up running, he was hooked. He ran his first Dublin Marathon in 3:09 on the back of five weeks training. He pared his marathon PB down to 2:38, but it was only on emigrating to Colorado in 1994 that he discovered ultra-running and realised that the longer the distance was, the more competitive he became.

Mangan was working on oil rigs and construction sites when he started racing in 50-kilometre and 100-kilometre mountain trail races. He progressed to 24-hour and 48-hour races in Colorado, a part of America with a vibrant ultra-running culture and home to events like the 72-hour Across The Years trail run and the Leadville Trail 100, the race that featured as a centrepiece in Chris McDougall's barefoot running bestseller *Born To Run*.

In 2002, Mangan sustained a serious plantar fasciitis injury and returned home for treatment rather than trying his luck in the prohibitively expensive American medical system. With the Irish construction boom in full swing, he decided to stay in Dublin and set his sights on Irish, European and world ultra-running records.

He clocked world best times for 24-hour and 48-hour treadmill running at the 2003 Dublin Marathon

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Expo, and he reached an ultra-running pinnacle four years later, breaking the world indoor 48-hour running record in the Czech city of Brno. He clocked 426.179 kilometres in that race, running for 47 hours and walking just 750 metres for a record that still stands. Three years ago, a committee of ultra-running historians announced that Mangan's performance in Brno was also the first time anyone had ever run 200 kilometres for two consecutive days – his splits coming in at 223 kilometres and 203 kilometres. In 2008, he regained his 48-hour treadmill running record by running 405 kilometres at another Irish marathon expo.

Mangan honed his ultra-running technique by running back-to-back marathons and distance races, not to mention running up to 24 kilometres in and out of work on the building sites of Dublin. "One of my techniques when I started was that I used to run back-to-back marathons. I would run a marathon on Saturday and then run another marathon or a 50-kilometre run on Sunday when I was already tired. My thinking was that I was simulating tiredness and developing coping strategies for the ultra races."

Apart from relishing the distance and challenge, Mangan says records motivated him. "I loved trying to break records, be they Irish, European or the possibility of world – I just had that competitive instinct. I was never really interested in going for a regular 50-kilometre trail run. With the indoor ultra races, I like the way everything is formalised. There are no disputes about timing or distance. It is just you against the clock."

"The most important thing is that the clock never stops. You can stop and walk, but in a 24-hour race at elite world championship level, you won't get away with resting. Nobody sleeps. The last two 24-hour races I ran, I averaged about six minutes stoppage time in total in each race between toilet breaks, eating and changing clothes."

"The 48-hour races are a different ball game," he says. "Only a couple of runners in the world are capable of going the whole way without a break. The second night of a 48-hour race goes on forever. You can go a bit gaga, there's a constant battle going on between the body and the mind. The mind always has to win because the body rebels and tries to close down. A

runner can experience haziness during the second night of a 48-hour race, it can be very tough, but as the sun comes up you find renewed energy and the sniff of the finish line can get you through. When you finish one of those races, it's like one long hangover for a week afterwards. But it's worth it because when you are running those races, a lot of positive thoughts pass through your mind. You do get incredible highs. You don't really get similar highs in normal life."

Normal life for Mangan prior to the World Jog mainly consisted of running and long days working as a snagger on building sites.

"I would probably have got married and settled down if it wasn't for this obsession," he says. "There were a couple of girls I was with who ran a mile once they realised I was serious about planning to run around the world."

He fell in love in 2006 with an Italian

woman he met at the European 24-hour Championships and says he would have given it all up to get back with her. "She was the love of my life. I was going over for weekends and I was close to packing my bags and going over there to live. I think my ambition to do this trip was one of the reasons it didn't work out...I will never know. I often wonder if I will ever settle down; maybe I will when this is over."

For now, he's relishing each day on the road. There's a sense that the World Jog is a journey he has to complete before his restless spirit will be done with roaming.

"The world is like a massive boulder and every day I take a small chip out of it," he says. "If my body doesn't break down and I have the luck to avoid injury, one day I will be able to lift that massive boulder high over my head and every minute of the World Jog will have been worthwhile." 🏆

