

Going to **Extremes**



What drives a 48-year-old woman from Sydney to run 42.2 kilometres across a frozen lake in Russia? **Stephanie Campbell** talks with Maybritt Prabl on conquering the Baikal Ice Marathon

Maybritt Prabl, 48, Sydney
Female winner of the 2012 Baikal Ice Marathon, Russia (3:50:11)



When did you start running marathons?

My first marathon was in Melbourne in 1992. I had participated in some fun runs and City to Surf events prior to that in my 20s but always found I had extra energy to burn upon reaching the finish line. I thought I'd give a marathon a go and see how I went. Crossing the finish line of my first marathon was such an amazing experience, I thought, *That's it, I have to do another.* I was hooked and ended up completing 10 marathons in as many years.

What attracts you most to the marathon?

Marathon running pushes you to your limits both mentally and physically; it is also a sport that requires a lot of preparation to succeed. Both aspects appeal to me. Overall I think marathon running is about 80 per cent mental and 20 per cent physical. If you haven't got it sorted upstairs then you're really going to struggle. To keep going and perform well throughout the race you need to embrace the long run and relax into it. You have to be completely in the

moment. That's one of the things I like most about the marathon experience. It's quite meditative, your mind stops thinking about anything else other than the run. When I'm in the zone I feel like I can run forever. Getting to that positive place isn't a walk in the park though – I put in hours of solo pre-marathon training in the early hours of the morning before work, Monday to Friday (typically between 3.30am and 6am) and on weekends during the months leading up to an event to build my mental toughness. You have to if you are going to kid yourself into believing your body isn't hurting so much during the event. It's not all bad though. I love the rush, the freedom, the fresh air in my lungs, the strength in my legs and the pull of the road underfoot and that feeling of doing something so naturally human when I run.

Was Baikal your first "ice" marathon?

No. The Polar Circle Marathon in Greenland in 2011 was the first marathon I did in snow and ice. The landscape was

beautiful, with endless snow and ice, glaciers and mountains looming in the background. I thought, *Wow, I have to do this.* Despite the frosty conditions (it was minus 28 degrees Celsius). I ended up placing second in the women's division, which gave me the bug. Straight away I started looking for other ice marathons to participate in, which is when I found Baikal in Siberia.

Describe to us, non ice-runners, what makes Baikal so special?

The marathon takes place on UNESCO World Heritage site Lake Baikal. It is the deepest, largest and oldest freshwater lake in the world. At the time of the year when the marathon is held in March, the surface is completely frozen. When you step on to that lake it really is like transitioning into another

COOL RUNNING:
Maybritt Prabl on her way to completing the Baikal Ice Marathon.

Photographs provided by MAYBRITT PRABL



“Be true to yourself. Life is short so live each day to its potential.”



world. You look around and all you can see is white and snow until the horizon; it's just the most spectacular place to be. The 42.195km course stretches from one side of the lake to the other over sheet ice and snow hummocks and is widely regarded as one of the toughest running events in the world.

Isn't competing on a frozen lake dangerous?

It could have been if the organisers hadn't done such a great job of preparing the event beforehand. The first one-and-a-half metres of the lake are solid ice but under that is free-flowing water. As the water moves the ice cracks in a process called "breathing" so the organisers had to mark out a course they knew would be safe ahead of time. In some sections there were cracks across the course three to three-and-a-half metres long. For those they put down planks. There was also a really tricky section at the end of the course made of brash ice (ice that melts, congeals and then freezes again into odd shapes), which is very sharp, slippery and difficult to run on. The organisers had to grade a lot of that section to make it safer for the competitors.

How did you train for Baikal?

My preparation was similar to past marathons except this time I added training on soft sand during my long run on the weekend (20 to 30km) to simulate soft snow underfoot. Clothing was also different. I wore regular Gore-Tex running shoes with spikes underneath and around the soles to grip the ice and snow. To keep warm I wore four very thin thermal layers and an outer waterproof shell over the top, two pairs of gloves, a beanie and balaclava. Temperatures during the race varied from minus 14 to minus 4 degrees Celsius so it was important to keep warm. To help me acclimatise I arrived a few days before the marathon. It also helped me to shake off my jet lag and adjust to a new time zone.

What was the toughest part of the race?

Even though I never felt exhausted or tempted to give up, the last 10 kilometres was quite hard going. Early on in the race my watch had stopped as a result of the cold. Because of that I had no idea what pace I was running. About 30 of the 105 competitors had managed to charge away in front of me

during the first leg so I also didn't have a very good idea of where I was placed until I reached the last refresher station (35 kilometres). As I stopped briefly for a drink, the Russian attendants kept saying excitedly, "first woman, first woman". That's when I realised I was doing better than I had anticipated. With renewed energy I ran the remaining distance to cross the finish line. When I returned to Australia I discovered that I had set a women's record for the event (by 4 minutes) and a world record. I am the fastest woman yet to complete a marathon on ice!

Setting a world record in such harsh conditions is no mean feat. But this isn't the first time you have performed well in extreme conditions [Maybritt is a national skydiving champion]. Has your background in skydiving contributed to your success as a marathon runner?

I skydived for seven years from 2004 to 2010 while I had a break from running and during that time I actively pursued competitive 4-way and 8-way formation

skydiving. In 2011 I won a gold medal at the national skydiving championships in the latter event. The focus and visualisation skills I gained through that learning experience definitely helped my mental preparations for marathon running. When you are on a formation skydive you have to be able to perform under pressure and be single-minded in pursuing a goal. You also have to be able to imagine or “visualise” beforehand how a jump will occur, where you will be in relation to the other jumpers in your team when you transition between each new formation. It’s a very mental game and one that

helped me with the marathon on Lake Baikal. For weeks prior I visualised what it was going to be like – the scenery, the cold, the pressure to perform, the lethargy and pain in my legs. When I was actually doing it, the experience wasn’t so bad because I already knew what was coming. I had already been there in my mind. Both sports complement each other in that respect.

How do you trump running on ice?

My next major project is the New York Marathon later this year. I’ve set myself a goal of breaking my best marathon time, which I set 19 years ago (3:22). Before I

did Baikal my physiotherapist pointed out that my running style wasn’t very efficient so I’ve been working on that and I think it definitely made a difference on the Siberia run. I’m keen to see what I can achieve in more hospitable on-road conditions.

What’s your motto for life?

Be true to yourself. Life is short so live each day to its potential. Try and pack in as many good things as possible before it’s all over. Also, set goals for yourself – it keeps you honest. **RW**

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