

## **The dentist who ran 4,000 km**

For many people, running a marathon is a challenge too difficult to contemplate. Karel Sabbe from Belgium ran two a day, for almost two months.

Starting at the Mexican border with the US, he pounded the beautiful Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) all the way to Canada last summer. A distance of 4,227 km (2,627 miles).

“I had always wanted to hike the PCT but knew I wouldn’t be able to take enough time off work. So I decided to run it instead. My family thought I was mad, but I thought, why not?”

In doing so, the 27-year-old Belgian set a new record for running the trail. 52 days, 8 hours and 25 minutes, to be precise.

Bushfires in the California desert forced him to take some detours, adding 8 km to his route. Karel made sure his movements were GPS-tracked and could be followed live online. The trail running community agree he was right not to run through closed sections and most accept his new record. He has sent all his evidence to the Guinness Book of Records and is waiting for confirmation.

In the meantime, he is justifiably proud of his extraordinary achievement. Most ordinary mortals hike small sections of the PCT. To beat the record, Karel had to run 80 km per day.

Not bad considering Karel is a relative newcomer to ultrarunning (running distances longer than a marathon). He used to play a lot of football but realised his talent for endurance running after an “impulsive” decision to do the New Zealand coast-to-coast race in 2015.

And unlike others attempting similar challenges, his support team consisted of just one person – his friend and brother-in-law, Joren. Handily, Joren happens to be a physiotherapist.

So how did he do it? “The high point was being there with Joren, how we supported each other,” Karel explains. “We had a wonderful adventure.”

The PCT passes through desert, more than sixty mountain passes, and canyon descents as it winds its way up the West coast of the US. The increase in altitude is 128,000 metres: at least fourteen times the height of Mount Everest.

This varied and sometimes extreme terrain brings gruelling challenges. “The biggest challenge in preparing was coming from Belgium. We don’t have any mountains!” laughs Karel. He ran many hours a week and signed up for some major races including the Marathon des Sables, which helped him prepare for the desert section of the PCT. He also contacted the previous record holder, US national Joe McConaughy (who ran it in 53 days and 6 hours).

The PCT challenge began on 22 June 2016. Joren had a huge responsibility as Karel’s solo buddy in the wilderness. They kept in touch using satellite phones. Despite their preparation, the pair were confronted with many issues and were constantly problem-solving.

Difficult access for Joren in the High Sierras meant longer harder days for Karel. On one “miserable” day, “after only two hours’ sleep, I had to run 57 miles and do three major alpine passes.” The toughest moment came towards the end, in the rainy mountains of Washington.

Joren would have to meet Karel much further along the trail than planned, as storm damage had made it impassable. “Luckily it didn’t rain that night. Every time I was falling asleep while running/walking I laid down on the trail, curled up and slept a bit until the cold woke me up and then I continued.”

Quitting was simply never an option. The friends’ humour and optimism saw them through. Joren kept him going with sandwich deliveries. Karel also managed to digest more fatty foods like burgers and pizza without any problems. “I’m lucky to have a pretty strong stomach, so could digest more fatty foods,” explains Karel. “I was drinking lots of soda though, not good for a dentist!”

The stunningly beautiful scenery also brought reward and inspiration. Karel’s favourite places were the Lassen Volcanic National Park in northern California, and the view of the Three Sisters from Mount Washington in Oregon.

By the end of the trail, Karel was 3 to 4 kilos lighter and had burned through seven pairs of shoes. On 14 August, his blistered feet carried him into Canada. “As soon as I crossed the finish line, my body realised it was over and I could barely walk the few kilometres to the car. I was crying and laughing, glad and sad. Most of all, I was proud of what Joren and I had accomplished”.

Karel has no plans to turn professional though. “Being a dentist is a good, stable career. It’s a hard life trying to make it as a professional runner.” Next year he will attempt the Appalachian Trail with the same grit, inspired by his passion for running and nature. And with a little help from his friend.