

EPIC WINTER RACE

Battling extreme conditions, these endurance racers celebrate human resilience

by **Gregory McNeill**, *Winnipeg*



On February 15, 2014, for the third year in a row, men and women gathered in the dead of winter to bike or run 130 kilometres through unforgiving temperatures, brutal winds and barren landscapes of southern Manitoba.

The “Actif Epica” race was started by local sportsman Ian Hall after he realized that a winter ultra marathon could be created right here in Manitoba with a unique urban finish. Before Actif Epica, local ultra marathoners had to travel to Minnesota, ND and other places to compete.

Ian’s idea utilized the historic Crow Wing Trail, a trading route previously used by Manitoba’s Indigenous peoples and early settlers. This event now draws participants from as far away as Delaware, Colorado, and California.

The race starts 130 kilometers south of Winnipeg in St. Malo, Man., and routes through the communities of St. Pierre-Jolys, Crystal Springs Hutterite Colony, Niverville and St. Adolphe, ending at the historic Forks in Winnipeg. Each town has washrooms, food, water and hot/cold drinks for the racers, plus a warm place to meet and get checked by safety staff. It’s also

during these stops that racers greatly appreciate the help and encouragement from the volunteers.

I’m a local city bus driver and community journalist and I wanted to cover the event like an embedded journalist. I have been involved in running, cycling and duathlons for a few years, but only in a recreational capacity. To train properly for the event, after not completing it the year before, I ran 16 kilometres every other day in up to -45°C temperatures and completed one long 45 kilometre run in the cold just a week prior to the race. I also took part in the pre-race “re-con ride” in which we ran or biked 32 kilometres and tested our equipment. My gear weighed about 18 to 22 kilograms. I took more than most people, including snowshoes, which I didn’t end up needing. I also had my camera and a few extra items because the army taught me not to scrimp when it comes to survival equipment!

“Runners have half an hour until the start,” announced one of the race directors, Dwayne Sandall. He oversaw the runners, checking that everyone was alert and physically able to tackle the day.

There were 15 of us runners and almost 50 cyclists



who were starting an hour later. **Caption** Some participants were the high-performance types, and others were regular people like myself—just active citizens. There were some people trying out different ways to race, like cross-country skiing and relay teams. A local Hutterite female competitor showed up to the start wearing a gorgeous traditional dress. And I thought I was tough!

My running partner, Ryan, and I witnessed the passing of the first cyclists. They were not happy. We ran through some very deep snow, so the cyclists would have been pushing their fatbikes, which can weigh up to 27 kilograms with their gear, through the same snow.

I saw that Ryan was starting to limp about 24 kilometres into the race, so I told him I was going to go ahead. It was daylight and the weather was good.

Around 40 kilometres into the race, blizzard conditions appeared. My hands were getting terribly cold, so I took my hand out of my glove to get a chemical warmer pack—the muscle in-between my fingers





was firming up, like thawing steak. I was scared, but thankful the chemical pack was generating heat for my hand.

Twenty minutes later I saw another runner running in the other direction, back to Crystal Springs, holding his frozen hand in his glove. He had to drop out.

At the halfway point, I entered the Niverville Arena where everyone cheered every time a racer entered. While resting there, I dropped out and then re-entered the race thanks to the encouragement from a volunteer. Ryan appeared, and we agreed to continue together and finish the race. Off we went.

A few hours later though, Ryan's foot was getting worse. How he managed to make it to that point I have no idea. My body temperature was dropping steadily and we had to keep moving to stay warm.

When we arrived at the second to last checkpoint, the University of Manitoba, Tom from the safety staff checked Ryan's feet. Ryan had no choice but to drop out, but as he did so, he encouraged me to continue on. I was very sad, but he was in no danger.

Towards the end of the race, shuffling through the night, I was worried I wouldn't make the 25-hour limit. Fast runners do the event in 17 hours, normal people in around 22. The tracks of the cyclists and fast runners had already been blown away, so the moonlight reflected off a sea of snow. With the light on my



ACTIF EPICA VIDEO Check out a video of the race by Tom from the safety staff including an interview with Gregory! Plus see more photos on our website.

head, I looked and felt like an astronaut exploring another planet.

I bumped into two female runners who were out on the Riverwalk for a short run. After they took a look at me, one of them said, "Are you in Epica? Still?"

It turns out one of the women had a son in the event and was thinking of entering next year. I told her to bring hand warmers.

I was the very last person to finish the race, arriving at the table to receive my snowflake medal at 24 hours and 45 minutes. It was just before sunrise when I left St. Malo and it was sunrise when I arrived in Winnipeg. What a spiritual experience. At one point in the race, I don't know why, but I started crying. I wasn't feeling any pain and there was nobody around me. I was by myself. I was living. I was free. ■