

## **Chapter 11**

### **Marathon of Afghanistan (Part 2 of 2)**

It was 3 a.m. and I was awake. I was thinking about the news Taylor had given me at supper. Zainab would not be running this year's race. She had been given a new role at Skateistan and was too busy. I was very disappointed and started to think that the race had lost its meaning. But then I thought, "How can I help?" and came up with a crazy idea: I would be a Pace Bunny. These are very common in the majority of marathons and half marathons in North America and I thought it was time the Marathon of Afghanistan had one. My reasoning was that the new route, around Band-e-Amir, was super tough and the majority of the Free to Run women and girls were first-timers. If we set an achievable time then maybe the majority could make it in. With this idea came another challenge. I needed bunny ears!

I met Taylor at breakfast and she loved the idea and suggested we shoot for a seven-hour race completion. Game on.

First thing in the morning was a 5-km run, and it almost killed me. Still, I got it done and I felt better for doing it. Today was Band-e-Amir day and we piled into the van at 8:30 a.m. In our van were Oma, JC, Kelly and me. We had a great chat about running and came up with the idea for running the highest marathon ever run, in a plane at 34,000 feet. I am going to check with Guinness to see if it's already been done.



The day at Band-e-Amir was amazing and we were all pretty tired as we returned to the hotel. I wasn't very hungry so I ordered a Greek salad. The next day was ball hockey with Free to Run and registration. Not long now to the big day. Start your engine, Pace Bunny.

Had a chat with Kauser at supper and he suggested I contact "The Book Seller of Kabul" to see if he would stock *The Secret Marathon*.

Not a bad sleep but I couldn't wait until 6 a.m. came around. Headed down for breakfast but the cupboard was bare. Luckily there was coffee. Checked my emails and the Calgary Central Library wants me to speak. Excellent.

I had made arrangements to meet Taylor at 8 a.m. and Mia and Ita joined me. Right on time Taylor came down and we had breakfast together. She explained how she wanted to use my year end fundraiser for her new program in Iraq and I thought it could work. Also joining us were Stephanie Case and two gentlemen, Rupert and Patrick, who also worked for the UN. I had a great chat with Patrick. He was here with a film crew to record the final clearing of IED (Improvised Explosive Devices) from the Bamyan area. He said that this was a huge accomplishment as they could now say that Bamyan was "Bomb-Free." He had a vision that one day flights could come in directly from Istanbul to Bamyan and that this town and area could be a tourist destination. That would be incredible.



After breakfast the vans arrived and we headed off for a morning of ball hockey. After 30 minutes we were in Dragon Valley and a beautiful grassy plateau. We all piled out and I went over to chat with Kubra. I noticed she was limping and she said she had a problem with her upper leg. In the vans were 16 girls from five provinces. We started off in a circle and played a game where we learned each other's names. Then the ball hockey was set up. We picked four teams and they were called The Successful Blossoms, The Kangaroos, The Free Birds and The Eagles. For two hours we played hockey on a plateau in Dragon Valley, overshadowed by the Hindu Kush mountains in Afghanistan, and had a blast. Then it was time to go back to the hotel.

I had a Greek salad with Ita, Mia and JC then went up to my room. I borrowed a marker and stapler from the desk and made my bunny ears from the cover of a book. I made the "Time Banner" from some card stock on the end of a selfie stick. Next up, race registration.

Ali-Sha drove us over to the offices under the big Buddha and I picked up my #10. Back to the hotel and a nap. At 5:15 p.m. I was in the lobby ready to head over to the Free to Run meal. At 6 p.m. transportation arrived and we travelled 5 km to the Highland Hotel. All the girls were there plus Taylor, Stephanie, Rupert, Jasmin and Patrick. Taylor played some gender games with the girls and then I explained the "Pace Bunny" concept. The girls were very keen.

I was tired and got a ride back to the hotel. After preparing my water and CarboPro it was time for bed. Big race tomorrow.

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Now a little something on the organizers, guides and international runners. As per the previous races James Wilcox was the trip organizer and James Bingham was the race director. The guides were Kauser and Gull and our driver was Ali-Sha, the Olympic ski hopeful. The international runners were, in no particular order, Jordan, UK; Manfred, Italian; Ita, Italian; Mia (Ita's daughter), Italian; Guvarney, Italian; Phillip, Italian; JC, French; Kelly, Singapore; Oma, Norwegian; Sam, US; and Jasmin (non-runner), Argentinian.

Again I woke up early at 4:30 a.m. and waited for the lights to come on. Every night they switch the power off and it's a guessing game as to when it will come on again. Breakfast was scheduled for 6 a.m. so I was sure we would get an early turn-on. No, finally at 5:45 a.m. it came on. I had prepared my CarboPro mix the night before so there was no problem getting ready in time. With my bunny ears and seven-hour placard safely tucked away in my backpack I headed down to breakfast. I needn't have bothered, nothing was ready except green tea. Slowly the other runners came down and we chatted about the day ahead.

Breakfast finally arrived at 6:30 a.m. and we were on the road to Band-e-Amir by 7:30 a.m. It's an hour trip to the lakes and we arrived just after 8 a.m. There were already vans, cars, buses, police and an ambulance at the start area. The temperature was 0°C so I stayed in the van for a while to keep warm. At 8:40 a.m. I emerged and started to mingle with the crowd. I found Stephanie Case and then went to find Hassina. She was with a group of girls and I asked her to bring them over to an empty spot at the back of the start area.



I explained that we would let the other runners start and then we would run through the start line. I also explained that as we did this we would be shouting, “Hey Ho! Let’s Go!” They were all very excited. The group practised it a few times and I knew they were ready to go. There were speeches before the start, Stephanie and the Bamyan governor said a few words, and then at 9:10 a.m., James Bingham, race director, did the countdown 5...4...3...2...1, and we were off. The first part of the race was a 2 km out and back and at the completion of every kilometre I had decided to yell out “Hey Ho!” to which the girls replied “Let’s Go!” With the out and back completed we headed up on the first of many steep climbs out of the numerous valleys in Band-e-Amir.

The cut-off time was eight hours and I had confidence in the group’s ability to do it in that time. So as the only official “Pace Bunny” in the race I had made up a seven-hour placard and Hassina was my Assistant Pace Bunny. Checkpoints were located every 7 km and things were going pretty well with the group as we approached the first aid station. The route had been tough but as we completed every kilometre I yelled out “Hey Ho!” and the girls yelled back “Let’s Go!” and this seemed to keep their spirits up.

My only concern was that one of the girls was complaining of back pain, so I suggested she drop out at the next checkpoint, but she said no. I knew there was a sweep vehicle behind us and that she would probably take that before the next checkpoint. The group kept moving forward and were on track up to the 10 km point. Then disaster struck. The course was marked with wooden planks with black arrows on

and we had been following them diligently. At a fork we followed the arrow pointing left and continued for 2 km down the path. Then we heard yells from across the valley and people were waving at us to come over. The girls and I trudged across a marshland and met up with the men. They told us that someone had turned the plank from pointing right to pointing left and that we were going the wrong way.

I was mad. It was going to be tough enough for the girls and I to make the eight-hour cut-off without this type of garbage. At the 14 km checkpoint I shared my feeling with the volunteers. I asked that they pass along a message to James Bingham to extend the cut-off to nine hours. Unfortunately no one had a phone. Luckily Jasmin came along and said that she would get hold of James.

The group was doing well and we reached the 21 km, halfway checkpoint in 4 hours, 30 minutes. However, on my GPS it said 23 km, as we had added on 2 km for the detour. I knew at this pace we had a chance. The first half had been brutal – stunning views but it had been a tough slog up and down the steep, dusty hills. We had been told that the second half would be easier but I had my doubts. James Bingham had said the course had “Rolling Hills.” I knew we were in trouble.

I left the 21 km checkpoint, having given Neil, one of the three race organizers, with James and his brother Ollie, a piece of my mind about the routing problem and my request for an extra hour on the cut-off time. They had heard nothing back from James yet. The group had become smaller by one. I had lost sight of the girl with the bad back and another girl had started to lag.



A key marker on the route, at the 26 km point, is the arched entrance to Band-e-Amir National Park. It was a long straight climb from there and as I reached the top of the hill I looked back to the arch and couldn't believe my eyes. There, in the distance, was the girl with the bad back. It had been 20 km and four hours since I had seen her and she had kept going on her own and not given up. I decided there and then that I would try and get her, and the other girl who had fallen behind, across the line before the nine-hour cut-off.

I continued to the 28 km checkpoint and told Hassina that I was going to wait there for the two girls and that she was to take the rest of the group to the 35 km checkpoint and wait for me there. I waited 20 minutes and the two girls arrived at the checkpoint. I asked if they wanted to drop out and they said no. The girl who had been way back could speak a little English and she said her name was Sonya, she was 14 years old and lived in Herat. She told me that the other girl was Anita, 16 years old, also from Herat, and her sister. Unbelievable.

We had three hours to do 14 km and I said we had to go. The girls were suffering but they plodded on. We arrived at the 35 km checkpoint, but no Hassina or the other runners. She had done the right thing and not waited for us. Every so often we would do a "Little Run," maybe 100 m, just to keep some momentum going. We had an ambulance following us and I asked the girls on a number of occasions if they wanted to get in and they said no.



The last 3 km were downhill and we had 55 minutes to do it in. The girls were getting excited and wanted to get the medal. The sun was setting as we rounded the last corner and then we heard the cheers and yells. The three of us ran across the finish line with hugs and tears all round. I saw Hassina. She said that she was sorry that they hadn't waited at the last checkpoint. She was worried we wouldn't make it and wanted to get the rest of the girls in on time. I told her she'd done exactly the right thing and not to worry.

After a round of photos it was into the van and back to Bamyan to bed.

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The 4th Marathon of Afghanistan by the Numbers:

- 1 Pace Bunny
- 2 races (10K and Marathon)
- 8 hours, 46 minutes, 45 seconds to complete marathon
- 9 hours marathon cut-off time
- 13 international runners
- 13.7 per cent oxygen at maximum elevation

- 20 Free to Run women and girls completed marathon
- 43.78 km total distance run
- 100 runners in marathon
- 3,723 feet (1135 m) elevation loss/gain
- 11,033 feet (3363 m) maximum elevation on course
- and thousands of tears shed by the runners as they crossed the finish line.

Usual night of sleep. Slept to 4 a.m. and then awake. Power came on at 5:15 a.m., unbelievable, and I wrote about the previous day. I decided to head down for breakfast at 6:30 a.m. and they were just putting out the stuff. Phillip and James W. were already there and I loaded up with oatmeal and boiled eggs. Slowly the other runners came down. We chatted about their races and how they felt. One of the runners, Manfred, was feeling a bit melancholy. He had had a good race, coming in second for the international men in a time of five hours, but he was also having an after-race letdown. He told me that he had ordered *The Secret Marathon* on Amazon and he was very moved by Sue's foreword in my second book, *Running to the Edge*.

A number of international runners were leaving today, including Jordan, JC, Oma, Phillip, Manfred and Sam. I waved goodbye as their vans headed out to Bamyán Airport. Re-entering the lobby I spotted Taylor and we had breakfast together. She told me that Kubra had finished the race but had ended up in hospital. They had given her some medicine and she was doing well.

I then brought up the idea that Sue had suggested: What did Taylor think of me being part of a mixed-gender team to do an ultra somewhere in the world, possibly the Gobi March? She seemed interested and would talk to her team. She then headed back to the girls at the Highland Hotel.

James W. was taking Guvarney, Kelly and Ito to Dragon Valley. I had been there two years ago so I decided to head down to the bazaar to see if I could find some material for Sue. It was only a five-minute walk to the market street and the place was bustling. Halfway down were several shops selling scarves and material. I walked into one and met Jimale. He spoke excellent English and he introduced me to Muhammad. I looked at a number of bolts of material and found an amazing blue one. Muhammad measured out 2 metres and charged me 280 Afghani (US\$4).

For the next hour I cruised the bazaar. There were numerous shops selling clothes, cookers, fruit and veg, telecommunications, tires and car components, books and journals, and your regular convenience stores. Heading back to the hotel it was time for a nap. Then off to the women's café for lunch.

I must admit I much preferred the women's café to the men's Chihanna. We sat in wicker chairs and enjoyed soup and fries. The highlight was the fried liver, the best I have ever had. From there it was off to Shahr-i-Zuhak to meet the Free to Run women and girls. They were all there, Kubra, Hassina, Sonya, Annetta and the rest. I had been Shahr-i-Zuhak two years ago. A very impressive fortress and a good climb to the top.

We spent an hour there and it was time to go. I said goodbye to everyone and in particular Kubra. We got back to the hotel at 5:30 p.m. and had supper at 7:00 p.m. I talked to James W. about the plans for tomorrow. He said that we would leave at 10 a.m. for a noon flight. I let him know that I would like to go to the Kabul bookshop. He said no problem. I settled up my food bill (US\$26.50) and hit the sack.

Each morning I would lie in bed waiting for the power to kick on. On race day it was 5:45 a.m., yesterday it was 5:20 a.m., today it was 5:35 a.m. As I lay awake I started to make a "To Do" list for when I got back.

I started packing and at 6:10 a.m. went down. No one around. I ordered breakfast and sat eating oatmeal, eggs, bread, cream cheese and honey plus coffee, all by myself. Slowly the others come down and we hung out until 8:30 a.m. I tried to check in for tomorrow's flight but didn't have much luck.

After finishing packing I dropped the key off and waited in the lobby. James W. was not leaving Bamyan until 2 p.m. so he put me in charge of getting Guvarney, Mia, Eta and Kelly on the flight and to Kabul.

We arrived at the airport after saying goodbye to Jasmin, Ali-Sha and Sajjid. Things were going well until I handed over the flight manifesto and my passport. Problem. On the flight manifesto my last name was spelled "Parnel" and on my passport it was spelled "Parnell." The immigration official was not happy. He explained that the names had to be identical, but after a lot of discussion between officials they let me through. In the departure lounge we met Rupert and Stephanie. Just as we were settling in for a chat the departure call went up one hour early.

Forty-five minutes later we were in Kabul and heading to the guest house. After a quick cleanup we headed out for lunch. The afternoon was spent visiting a carpet shop, meeting the last Jew in Kabul and walking up and down Chicken Street checking out all the tourist shops.



The highlight of the day was the final shop, The Bookseller of Kabul. I told the owner that I written a book about Afghanistan called *The Secret Marathon*, and we checked it out online. He told me to drop him a line and we would see if we could get a delivery to Kabul via Toronto. Very cool.

The sun had gone down and we headed back to the guest house. Time for a quick supper and bed on the super-hard mattress.

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Early start with omelette and coffee. A group of us were heading out at 5:45 a.m. Kelly and JC had later flights and Oma and Jordan left on Sunday.

The trip to the airport was the usual gong show. At the terminal it was the five pat-downs. My flight was at 7:30 a.m. with an arrival in Istanbul of 12:55 p.m. Departure to Houston from Istanbul was 1:55 p.m. I got there at 1:15 p.m. and scurried over to gate. No problem. Departure was delayed. I said goodbye to James B., Ollie and Ian and headed off. This was a long flight, 13 hours plus. I watched *Molly's Game* (not bad) and *The Bookshop* (bit depressing). Even though we left an hour late we arrived spot on time at 7 p.m. Then the fun began. US customs is rigorous. I went through security then picked up my baggage. I went to baggage transfer but it didn't like my bag. Off into line for United. All these delays had caused numerous people to miss their flights. Not me. Luckily mine didn't go until 7:30 a.m. the next morning.

I got through everything by 10:30 p.m. and had pan-fried trout and an IPA beer for a late supper. Time to find a place to rest my head. I cruised the airport and was not happy with what I saw. The International Terminal at Houston is an old building and all the chairs have arm rests. This makes it very difficult to stretch out. I had tried to slip between the chair and the arm rest but I was too big and almost trapped myself in the furniture.

I then did a reconnaissance of Gate E. I spotted a café that had a bench seat. Several other passengers were circling for potential resting places but as the night staff left I swooped in and claimed my bed for the night. It was not comfortable but I did get three hours' sleep and at 5 a.m. I went over to Einstein Bros. Bagel shop. I ordered a smoked salmon and cream cheese bagel and coffee. While having breakfast I read the *New York Times*. Lots of good articles. It was now 7 a.m. and I was at Gate E1 waiting for my 7:45 United flight to load.

Happy to say that the flight was right on time.