

Coronavirus: Running marathons under lockdown

With races cancelled and curfews imposed, runners are logging miles on balconies and in living rooms to stay active.



by **Saba Aziz**

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Italian veterinarian Walter Tarello ran a marathon in the corridor of his apartment building in Dubai [Photo courtesy: Walter Tarello]

Wojtek Machnik was supposed to run a marathon on the British island of Guernsey last Sunday in what would have been his 100th race destination - a century-mark the Polish globetrotter is aiming to reach in the world's fastest time period of two years.

But that marathon and six others Machnik booked in the Middle East and Europe have all been cancelled due to the [coronavirus outbreak](#), putting his world record attempt on hold.

With his plans derailed, the 42-year-old tour operator decided to run his first-ever indoor marathon when he was kept under an obligatory two-week quarantine, following his most recent trip to Yemen.

Wearing flip-flops, a blue T-shirt and shorts, [Machnik](#) laboriously went clockwise and anti-clockwise in a 7.5-metre loop around his bed inside a small rented room in the Polish capital Warsaw.

He did this more than 5,600 times over almost nine hours, taking phone calls and walking in between, to eventually log a total distance of 42.2 kilometres (26.2 miles).

"When you stay in a room for two weeks, there is no way to do anything more crazy than this," he said laughing.



Machnik said he ran the indoor marathon for fun and to kill the time in isolation [Photo courtesy: Wojtek Machnik]

The global coronavirus pandemic, which is thought to have originated in China's Wuhan in December, has brought life to a near standstill amid all the lockdowns, curfews and [border closures](#). More than one million people have been infected in 180 countries, while the global death toll is nearing 57,000.

To prevent the spread of the disease, governments have urged their citizens to stay at home.

Access to public parks and beaches is either banned or restricted but that has not kept many, like Machnik, from going the distance at home - in their living rooms, gardens and on balconies.

[Z Adventures](#), a Qatar-based sports travel company that organises races around the world, started a virtual challenge last week, called the Self-Isolator Circuit, challenging runners to complete the marathon distance in their homes over a maximum period of one week.

The idea was to raise awareness about physical distancing, staying at home, while also encouraging people to stay active.

From the United Kingdom, China, the United States, France, to the Caribbean, South Africa and Nigeria - more than 150 people took part in the challenge.

"It just basically shows the solidarity between all the runners that we can still continue during times of crisis and to act as a motivator, just to have some light at the end of the tunnel," Nadia Rahim, owner of Z Adventures, told Al Jazeera.

"I just hope that people realise the importance of exercise during this time and how it's important to keep your mind healthy because a healthy mind produces a healthy attitude," she said.

'Running is my therapy'

The World Health Organization (WHO) has [started using](#) the phrase "physical distancing" instead of "social distancing" on purpose so that people still stay connected with their loved ones and communities online while maintaining a safe distance.

According to sports psychologist [Adam Naylor](#), the "unprecedented" nature of the coronavirus crisis is bound to cause uncertainty, stress, denial and sadness among athletes.



Dayo Akinbode is on a mission to run a marathon in every country [Photo courtesy: Dayo Akinbode]

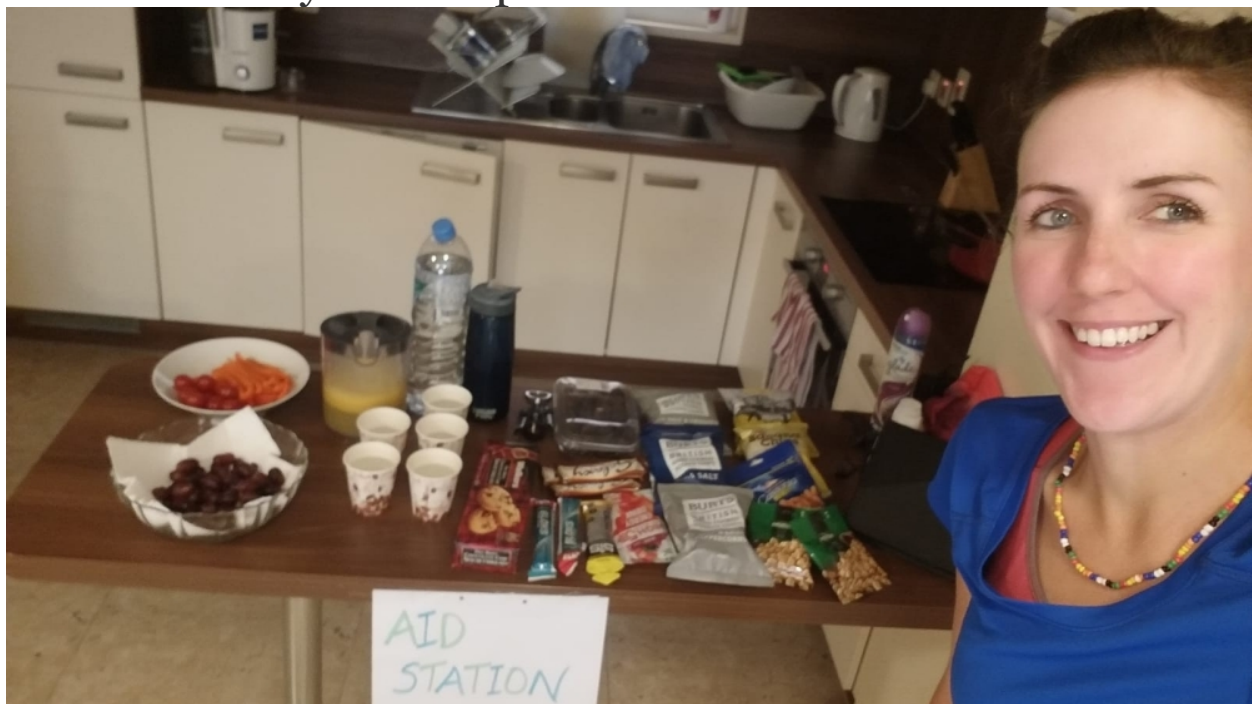
"You really can't discount the motivating quality of a connected community," Naylor, lead consultant at [Telos SPC](#), told Al Jazeera.

"Athletes are having to find new ways to connect in meaningful ways with others. Virtual training groups and support from others will be valuable as time goes by." Dayo Akinbode, a retired Nigerian engineer, who holds the African record for completing marathons in the most number of countries, said: "Running is my therapy."

"Not being able to run for somebody like me would get me into a state of depression," the 53-year-old told Al Jazeera, while running a marathon on the 10 metre-long kitchen balcony of her fifth-floor apartment in Lagos.

"If you tell me to sit at home and not run that may kill me faster than the virus. I am in agreement that you must stay at home, but staying at home does not mean you stay inactive."

Stephanie Innes, a Scottish school teacher who lives in the Qatari capital, Doha, livestreamed her race on Facebook, as she ran around the living room, kitchen, bedroom and shared hallway of her apartment.



Innes set up an 'aid station' with snacks and drinks in her kitchen to keep her energy levels up while running [Photo courtesy: Stephanie Innes]

Disappointed to have missed her first multiday ultra 250k race in Sri Lanka due to the pandemic, she hoped her more than four-hour long running escapade would at least encourage her friends to keep active and perhaps bring a smile on her young students' faces during this challenging time.

The avid runner also used her indoor challenge to raise 900 pounds (\$1,100) for the UK homelessness charity Shelter.

"Everybody who would normally walk past homeless people and maybe give them a sandwich or a couple of pounds in a shopping centre but they cannot sit there any more; the shopping centres are shut," Innes told Al Jazeera.

"Everyone's been told to stay at home and self-isolate and these people have to still sleep on the streets," the 34-year-old added.

Elsewhere in Qatar, Guillanam Alinier, a French-Mauritian teenager rearranged the furniture of his family's three-bedroom apartment in Doha to clear out the route for his first-ever marathon.



Guillanam Alinier, 13, ran his first marathon with his dad in their living room in Doha, Qatar [Photo courtesy: Guillaume Alinier]

"I thought it would be easy because I just had to run around my living room, but it turned out to be very hard," said the 13-year-old, who ran the full distance in four hours with his father last month.

American triathlon coach Beth Sanden took her challenge outdoors, riding her handcycle 240 times on a private street near her house in San Clemente, California.

Used to competing in front of thousands of spectators in big-city marathons, like Boston and Rome, the 65-year-old incomplete paraplegic was cheered on by her husband and a few neighbours across the street.

"Our beaches are now closed where we live, nobody is supposed to go down and walk along the beaches. We are supposed to maintain at least a six-foot radius around us," Sanden said about the virus-related restrictions.



Wearing a hazmat suit, Sanden's husband handed her oranges with a barbecue tongs during her marathon attempt outside their house in San Clemente, California [Photo courtesy: Beth Sanden]

"I thought, well, nobody can catch me on my handcycle if I stay on my own street," the Guinness world record holder

added. "Nobody is going to contaminate me and I'm not going to contaminate anybody else."

With [hundreds of deaths](#) reported each day in recent weeks, Italy has been the country hardest hit by COVID-19.

UAE-based Italian, Walter Torello, from the northwestern region of Aosta Valley, said he was saddened by the situation back home.

A regular outdoor runner even in Dubai's searing summer heat, Torello has been forced to move his daily runs indoors or to the car park in the basement of his apartment building amid the curfew in the Emirati city.

"There are no alternatives, so what to do," the 55-year-old veterinarian said after completing his marathon in the empty corridor of the health club on the eighth floor of his apartment building.

"Many people have got nothing to do at home, they are getting into a toxic situation, just eating and drinking too much or just getting depressed, so the best therapy is to exercise."

Follow Saba Aziz on Twitter: [@saba_aziz](#)