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JULY 17, 2007

Tony Reed: How I Became the First Black Runner to Complete Marathons on All Seven Continents

Tony Reed

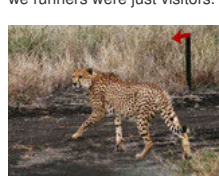
On the eve of Kenya's SafariCom Lewa Marathon, I was a nervous wreck. This race would be the final jewel in my quest to run a marathon on all seven continents (7C). As the Co-Founder and Executive Director of the National Black Marathoners' Association (NBMA), I felt that it was fitting for Africa to be the grand finale. Hundreds of people were awaiting the results of the race. I was also nervous because I may be the first Black in the world to accomplish the 7C feat. (Several groups are helping me confirm this.)

Since my first marathon in 1982, I've counted the number of Blacks in all the races I entered. Occasionally, I was the only one. Anytime there were more than 10 Blacks, I felt happy. Thus, running in a predominately Black marathon would be very different.

As the only Black in races, or one of few, I've felt that my failure to finish would leave a negative impression about American Blacks and the discipline to complete distance races. I especially felt this pressure during Antarctica's Last Marathon in February. I was the lone Black runner on the "white continent." I don't think my friends would have let me live it down, if I had quit the race.

In Kenya, as I lay in my tent the night before the **SafariCom Lewa Marathon**, I thought about the warnings from the pre-race meeting. We faced a dangerous mixture of high altitude (5,200 ft.), dry air, and heat. Hyponatremia, the dilution of sodium by over-hydrating with water, was a risk before and during the race. Fortunately, I've trained in the Texas heat for 25 years, and I ran the New Mexico (5,800 ft.) and Salt Lake City (4,800 ft.) Marathons without any problems. Thus, I thought about the new, more challenging obstacles: wild animal attacks.

The day before the race, we saw three cheetahs, two rhinos, and a zebra herd on the marathon course. The animals would be roaming freely during the race. After all, it was their home and we runners were just visitors. As the cheetahs walked by the race marker, I asked our guide,



"How often do they eat?" He replied, "They're excellent hunters and work as a team to easily bring down a zebra. It would provide enough food for about three days."

I hoped that there would be one less zebra before tomorrow's race. But I realized that I couldn't control the weather or the wild animals, so I stopped worrying about them. Instead, I focused on what I could control: me. Somehow, I managed to fall asleep

On race day, I got on my running groove while listening to Parliament/Funkadelic's Cosmic Slop and Chocolate City. During the ride to the starting area, I didn't see any animals. But I did notice the airplanes. At the starting line, I marveled at being surrounded by hundreds of Black runners. It didn't matter that I didn't speak their language. I felt good just being there. It was like being at my first family reunion. I didn't know anyone, but the closeness was in the air. I saw groups of school children in their team colors straining behind the tape to watch us start. They were also awaiting the start of their own race.

When the race started, I felt like the entire NBMA was running vicariously with me. We had just finished another successful gathering at the May, 2007 Rite-Aid Cleveland Marathon. The veteran runners noted that I may be the first Black marathoner to complete the seven continents goal. About 200 other runners had achieved it before me.

Midway up a long curving the hill, my eyes began to tear up. As I looked in front and behind me, I saw a long stream of Black runners. In 25 years of running 86 marathons and 150 races, I had never seen this many Blacks in a distance race. Unforgettable.

After the first loop, hundreds of half marathoners turned off towards their finish line. Suddenly, we marathoners were alone. After participating in marathons with thousands of runners and cheering spectators, skyscrapers, and TV helicopters, the solitude (with the exception of an occasional buzz) was a welcome relief. This is what long distance running is all about—enjoying nature in all its beauty.

The runners and crowds were transformed into waves of blowing grasses. The skyscrapers became majestic mountains. And the TV helicopters were replaced by the prop planes. They "buzzed" the wild animals to keep them away from the course. Around 40K, I reached the safety of the compound's fenced area. I decided to finish the marathon alone.

I wanted to savor the moment and reflect on the challenges I had overcome to reach this pinnacle. Who would have imagined that a Black, non-athletic, inner city kid from St. Louis would have run 87 marathons in 25 States and seven continents, including Antarctica?

This went against the odds. But then, so have so many things in my life. I gathered myself together and crossed the finish line as (possibly) the first Black in the world to join the exclusive **Seven Continents Club**. I topped off my adventure by having Kenya's Paul Tergat, the marathon world record holder, autograph a copy of his biography, "Paul Tergat – Running to the Limit."