

Is It Really Cold Outside? I Don't Think So! by Koach Karl

I will start this with a little background. Until last winter (2007-2008) I was a fair-weather runner. Even though I had run many marathons and ultras I wouldn't train outside if the weather was too harsh. For example, anything under 30 degrees and I was on a treadmill or indoor track. I once did 30 miles indoors to get ready for the Brew to Brew, a local 42-miler, so you can see how determined I was to avoid the elements. Then, September 9, 2007, I had a little accident on the trampoline with my kids and crushed a vertebra. I was down for about two weeks and resumed exercise with light cross-training. I didn't start running until eight weeks later, and that may not seem long to most, but when running is your passion... it is a lifetime. I was told to start moderate exercise in twelve weeks, what a bunch of crap! If I can give one piece of advice about injuries it would be that MOVEMENT is healing. If you don't move, you atrophy and that is worse than an injury. Moving on...

During this time I realized how much I took running for granted and should be thankful for every step. So it was at this time, as we went into the winter months, that I decided I should be thankful to run (even in the cold!) since I came close to not ever being able to run again. That winter I ran outside whether it offered rain, sleet or snow. I actually enjoyed most of it. I keep telling myself that I have the special clothing to run outside in this weather so embrace it. The winter went well and I somehow survived the cold weather runs that most runners had already conquered.

During this time I received a short video from Bobbi, a friend and ultrarunner, about a guy who ran a half marathon in the arctic in subzero temperatures. It was very interesting and motivating at the time, particularly as I was trying to "beat" the cold weather. He ran barefoot with shorts, a hat and gloves. No shirt! It is a nine-minute video, so it does cover his training and preparation, which isn't rocket science. He simply conditioned his body and MIND (key) to handle the elements. I watched it many times and became intrigued since I had been such a pansy when it came to running in the cold. As the current (2008-2009) winter season approached, I thought to myself, "If he can conquer the cold, so can I." So my journey began.

I started with a short two-mile run. The temperature was about 31 degrees with a light wind. Normally, I would wear long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, a fleece, a hat and gloves. Oh, and as we progress I will always have on running shoes as I have wimpy feet! I very rarely go barefoot in good weather. I started my short run with shorts, tank top, hat and gloves. I sat in my truck beforehand, gearing up mentally and talking to myself for about fifteen minutes, which was just a little short of the time it took to run my two miles. Off I went, and I was running on the dirt trails. It was a bit brisk the first five minutes but then I started to get going and found that it really wasn't too bad. Yeah, it was cold, but it really wasn't much different than when I had all the cold weather

gear on. I sweat a lot, more than most, and my layers get wet and start to feel cold against my skin. My wife, Paula, who is also an ultrarunner, had told me many times that I was over-dressing since I sweat so much and to wear less for more comfort. But really, who listens to their spouse? But she was right, much to my disbelief. With no wet clothing against my skin, the cold really was bearable and my body had just started to really heat up when suddenly I was finished with my two-mile test run. It really flew by, and I enjoyed it. *Conclusion: This was not long enough to really test myself since it seemed so comfortable. Must run longer, which is usually my answer to any running question.*

Having such a successful first test, I decided to jump to six miles and see what would happen. I ran on the dirt trails so it was about 70 minutes. On a side note: I usually split my running fairly evenly between the trails and roads, because both are fun I am not a fanatic about either. I love both and know that the positives outweigh any negative you could come up for either type of running. Back to the cold... keep in mind that when running in the Midwest it can be 30 degrees one day and 60 degrees the next, so it was a couple of days until I had good testing weather again. I never thought I would be looking forward to cold weather in which to run!

It was about 32 degrees with a light wind and very sunny. The sun has played a major mental part of this test (more about that later). I wore shorts, a short-sleeved shirt, a hat and gloves. There was a difference between the shirt and the tank top, but let's get to the run. With not as much mental prep this time, I just changed clothes in the truck and was off. I guess I had mentally adjusted a little because it didn't really seem all that cold this time. I ran a fairly easy pace, enjoying the day and scenery and didn't notice too much discomfort unless a strong wind kicked up. Even then it wasn't bad. About a mile into my run, I came upon a fellow trail runner who was in full cold weather gear (hat, gloves, fleece, and long pants). He looked me up and down, I gave him a hearty, "Good morning!" and he screamed, "ALRIGHT!" It had to be my attire because my speed isn't impressive at all. As I reached my turnaround point, I noticed my shirt was a little damp from sweat, and I could feel a slight chill. That was the difference between the moisture-wicking shirt and a mesh moisture-wicking tank top. The shirt was not that much more material or even warmer; it just adsorbed the sweat and in turn I got colder than when I had on the mesh tank. I was still fairly comfortable and finished the run without any problems. The shirt situation wasn't an issue, just more of an observation to file away. At this point I started to realize what I had been avoiding all this time wasn't an obstacle after all! All in all, this was a successful test.

I still hadn't faced any horrible weather such as wind, rain and or snowstorms. With Global Warming taking over the earth, I wasn't expecting any. A week later snow was predicted. How could this be? I thought it would be a good time to test myself for the next level. It did snow the next day, it was actually

a mild snowstorm with wind around 20 MPH. "GREAT!" I thought, and then I thought, "I have become an idiot!"

My greatest concern in this type of weather was not the cold temperatures but the freezing wind and if it would do damage to the skin with prolonged exposure. I thought I would do a short three-mile run to ease into this more extreme weather.

It was snowing with a 20 MPH wind at 27 degrees. Oddly enough I was hoping for colder! What the hell was happening to my mindset?! I think my brain has gone into hibernation from the exposure to the colder weather. I was at it again, and this time I was more concerned about slipping and falling than being cold. My run was short and sweet, and I enjoyed running in the snow, but the pavement did make for a few more hazards. The wind was hitting me from all directions (I was running in Kansas!), but it was once again not as bad as I had anticipated. This adventure was quite fun and entertaining to see people's reactions. This time I only saw one person, a young girl, probably in her mid 20s. She was riding a bike on the paved trails. I thought, "She is crazy! She is going to crash on this slick path." Then, I started laughing, as I'm sure she thought, "He is he crazy... he is going to freeze to death!" Again, this was a successful run but not the toughest test.

A few days later I went nine miles on the trails and followed with eight miles on the roads two days after that. Temperatures were about 27-33 degrees, and overall it warmed a little as each run progressed. Again, I had no major difficulties; although, I did find myself chasing the sun at times. The sun felt better mentally, and I swear I was warmer. It made sense but I really didn't think it would make that much of a difference. Oh, my run on the road was a little windy and my nipples started to hurt from the cold and wind, but it was funny. Maybe I should try Nip Guards for once.

At this point, I am waiting for colder weather and anticipating putting myself to the test in harsher conditions. So in the meantime, I was running in 30-60 degree weather in just a tank and shorts. Normally when it drops below 60, I start wearing long sleeves. The conditioning to the cold had paid off from that perspective, as I had yet to run in any temperatures below 27.

Then, the forecast called for a cold front coming in the week of December 15, with lows around 12 degrees and highs at 22. I thought, "This is what I have been waiting for--a real challenge!" Although, I am a little confused how we are supposed to have one of the coldest winters in twenty years when Al and his sheep are in a Global Warming panic that suddenly the earth is going to explode into a fireball. It doesn't seem logical but I won't confuse logic with politics, because that just isn't done. Let's move on.

The cold front arrived the night of December 14. It was 60 degrees in the morning, and I think it was 8 degrees that night, so I was anticipating a

challenging run the next morning. After taking our dogs out the morning of the 15th I must admit I was more than a little concerned about running in the single digits without cold weather gear. However, I had to see this through to the end, wherever that might be.

At 10 am the temperature was 7 degrees with the wind chill at -8 degrees, and I was thinking this was a huge difference and was more than a little concerned. As I changed in my truck I kept asking myself what the hell I was doing and then laughing aloud. Once I was changed and ready to go, I did not waste much time, as I was anxious for the outcome. I stepped outside and the cold just took my breath away! I took off running at a quick pace, hoping to warm up. About five minutes into the run I could feel my skin burning slightly, and when I looked at my arms, they were bright red. The redness was expected but the burning I thought would happen after about 20-30 minutes, so that came on much quicker than I had anticipated. As my skin started to burn a little more, I decided to go just two miles and work up from there. At the turnaround point my chest started to burn and the pain was getting a little uncomfortable. You know how it feels when you put antiseptic on a cut? Well that's how my whole body felt. It sounds exhilarating, doesn't it? I think I ran the fastest mile I had run in years! Not only was I trying to get back fast, but I thought the more I worked the more heat I would generate. In reality, it didn't work that way (as far as I could tell). I could have sworn that was what science taught us. Oh, well, what do you expect from a public school education?

I know a lot of you, once you have finished a new challenge, have thought to yourself once it was over you had more in you and didn't give it your best. Well, that's what happened to me. I finished and was grateful to be back, but as I was getting into my truck I thought I should have at least gone three miles, or even four. I do not know about you, but I hate that feeling, as it is a weak, empty feeling. I did feel at the time that I just could not stand the cold any longer and the burning was becoming very uncomfortable. Then, you second guess yourself. You think, "It really did not hurt that much, and I should not have wimped out so quickly."

Fortunately I was able to redeem myself later that day. A couple hours later my friend, Beth, wanted to do a two-mile run. She was in the recovery phase after a half marathon so I thought that would be perfect. Temperatures had warmed to 10 degrees with a wind chill of -4, so this run should be no problem. All of the same things happened to my body as the first time, except I was mentally prepared, and it was not as traumatic. I actually slowed down and walked a little; overall, I was outside about five minutes longer than the first time. The jump in temperature really helped, but most importantly, I had a different mindset. I knew what was coming. Yes, it was cold and my skin was burning, but it really was not as bad as I made it out to be. I knew I could endure more!

Over the next few days the temperature was 18 - 30 degrees. To be honest, after running in the subzero wind chill these temperatures were easy to handle.

One day I was getting ready to run, and it was 25 degrees. I was planning on the usual attire when I thought, "Let's try no shirt!" Yes, I'm a genius, why not run in 25 degrees with no shirt! The funny thing is that it was not brutal. I did have a little burning on my chest when I finished but nothing serious. I have had more pain doing tequila shots after a marathon. Of course, I do not recommend that.

In closing, today I ran for two miles in shorts, hat and gloves. No shirt! It was 3 degrees with a wind chill of 10 below... exhilarating! I ran with a couple of friends, because Paula made herself clear she did not want me to do this kind of stuff alone anymore. I have to listen to her every now and then. Bobbi and Courtney met me at 8 am and off we went. We ran through the Plaza, and it was the first time I had done this in a more public place. People were honking and giving me a thumbs-up, which was great. Again, the burning started about five minutes in to the run. About fifteen minutes later that feeling leveled off and became bearable. When we stopped, I stretched and became a little warm standing outside. Again, I regretted not going farther, but it was then I decided this experiment is over and I found out what I wanted. What was that? I found the human body can adapt to just about anything. You have to have the desire. Most people do not want to run outside in subzero temperatures in just shorts, but you can if you want! Beyond that, this applies to ANY GOAL IN LIFE. Whether it is running in the cold, heat, completing a marathon or ultra... or even 100 miles... if you have the desire and the discipline to train for it, it can happen.

This was not a test conducted by an elite athlete with a bunch of scientific equipment. It was a regular guy testing himself against the elements. I have never won a marathon or ultra. I have finished many at the mid and back of the pack, so if I can do it you can too. You simply need DESIRE. GOD made us to handle the elements, not sit on the couch! Quit whining about the cold and just be happy that you can run.