

PROFILES

# Marathon man

Frank Bartocci of Rochester is on track to run 1,000 long-distance races by 2020

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On an August day this past summer — hot enough for the kids of Hurley, Wisconsin, to wonder if they could fry an egg on the sidewalk — 70-year-old Frank Bartocci was poised at the starting line of the Paavo Nurmi marathon, which winds through the seat of Iron County.

Bartocci was quiet, contemplative and determined as he ran under a merciless sun, putting one mile after another behind him in the thick and heavy heat of the day.

A mile shy of the finish, he lifted his hands to the sky to give spiritual thanks for the gift of being able to run. Expressing gratitude near the finish line is a ritual for him, and he was especially thankful on this sweltering August day because as his feet crossed the finish line, Bartocci had officially completed 900 marathons and ultramarathons.

“Nine hundred was big for me. I didn’t know if I could get here,” Bartocci said. “But in a sense, it’s the uncertainty that gives me the spark I need to do it.”

Surely Bartocci was being modest. Given his track record for running marathons since 1983 — including harrowing mountain trails at high altitudes in brutal conditions such as sleet and snow — Bartocci has proven he’s motivated by physical challenge. And he’s not slowing down until he hits a nice clean number — 1,000.

According to his calculations, and assuming his body doesn’t betray him at some unforeseen point, Bartocci will reach his goal in 2020, running at a rate of 50 to 60 marathons each year.

Fun fact: If you multiply 26.2 times 900, you get 23,580 miles, which is roughly the circumference of Earth (24,901); 1,000 marathons would bring that total to 26,200. And that’s not counting additional miles logged as part of ultramarathons and training runs over the years.

Few have accomplished so much: Bartocci is now recognized as sixth in the nation for total number of marathons completed.

“This whole thing has been a journey to test boundaries,” Bartocci said. “Used to be people would say the human body could only handle one or two marathons a year. But I’ve always tested the limits, my personal limits, since the beginning.”



Frank Bartocci. Photo by Tracy Walsh Photography

## The beginning

Back in 1980, before Bartocci had run a single mile, he lived with his wife and son in Rochester, Minnesota. Bartocci worked as a computer science engineer for IBM, a company that engaged his mathematical mind.

His was a divided mind, however, because at an early age, his son, Matthew, was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, which compromises the efficiency of the lungs and rarely allows those who have it to live past their mid-30s.

Watching his son fighting for air and being powerless to help was an enormous stress for Bartocci. It was the reason that, in 1983 at the age of 35, he took up running and completed his first marathon. It was the Dallas White Rock Marathon in Texas.

The physical challenge left Bartocci dazed. He hadn't trained well enough for it.

But it ignited something else in him: Marathons were tangible challenges that one could control through proper training. Races were obstacles Bartocci could surmount, and victories he could dedicate to his son, allowing him to feel for a short while like he wasn't quite so powerless.

It's possible that Bartocci's and Matthew's lungs burned at the same time — for different reasons — as Bartocci pushed himself to run faster and farther, and Matthew fought an unseen internal battle.

Running is a basic skill, but at long distances it becomes complex, requiring just as much mental as physical strength. Marathons, in particular, have a way of squeezing your body like a wet towel, wringing every ounce of strength out of you, with varying levels of pain in every twist. But the running gave Bartocci something to focus on. He started to run all the marathons he could in the Midwest — the Twin Cities Marathon, the Med City in Rochester, Grandma's in Duluth and more.

But it wasn't enough. Not for Bartocci. And not for his son. Matthew passed away in 2011 at the age of 36 after a lung transplant didn't take. Matthew's wife and two kids survived him.

And Bartocci quietly took his running to the extreme.



Since 1983, Frank Bartocci has run marathons and ultramarathons in all 50 states 13 times, plus more, for a total of 918 marathons and counting. Photo by Tracy Walsh

## 50 states, 13 times

In the years leading up to Matthew's death, Bartocci went through a reckoning. He and his wife divorced; he moved into a small trailer home on the outskirts of Rochester; he quit his job at IBM and became a respiratory therapist instead; and he found purpose through running.

Bartocci started a spreadsheet of all the marathons he'd run and planned to run, recording not only his times but also the state in which he ran. The Midwest gave way to the East Coast, West Coast and everything in between. By July 2009, he'd completed 300 total marathons and had run in each of the 50 states four times. It made him wonder if he had it in him to do another

er set of 100, to run in each of the 50 states once more. (He's now done marathons in all 50 states a whopping 13 times.)

“One of the secrets of living a good life is passion and having a passion for something,” said Bartocci. “I still have that for running. There are times when I’ve beat myself up, but finishing gives me a sense of great personal accomplishment.”

Bartocci still lives in Rochester because it’s centrally located in the U.S. and allows him to travel easily to marathons around the country.

After studying an upcoming year’s marathon offerings, Bartocci sits down at his kitchen table and charts courses for himself. He may drive out West and hit marathons in Utah, Nevada, Oregon and Wyoming, collecting four more feats to add to his list of accomplishments. To make a circuit like this, he would load all his gear into his trusty bumper-sticker-clad Nissan Altima, driving from one marathon to the next. (He now drives a shiny new Toyota Camry, having run the Altima into the ground in 2017.)

“Nowadays, all those hours behind the wheel driving to my marathons are more challenging than running the marathons themselves,” said Bartocci, who just this past fall ran six marathons on six consecutive days in six different states.



Frank Bartocci's medals. Photo by Tracy Walsh

## Favorite races

Of the hundreds of marathons Bartocci has run, a few stand out. [The Savage Seven](#), seven marathons run in seven days, takes place down in Ocala, Florida. It's a set of races that Bartocci cofounded in 2010 with his friend, Chuck Savage, who lives in Florida. Their epic challenge now attracts runners from all over the world.

Bartocci reflects fondly on the most beautiful ultramarathon he's ever run, the Tahoe Rim Trail. Beginning at 7,000 feet beside Spooner Lake, the trail ascends 1,500 feet through alpine evergreens to the undulating ridge dividing Lake Tahoe and the Washoe Valley.

The run is touted by seasoned runners as being “a glimpse of heaven and a taste of hell.”

Bartocci said that up that high, the race is literally a breathtaking endeavor. But there are moments when, looking down at the cerulean blue of the lake and the craggy mountains stacked like dominoes in the distance, you feel invincible.

It's the same feeling Bartocci gets when he runs Pike's Peak Marathon in Manitou Springs, Colorado.

Runners dash straight up a mountain, over dangerous rock-studded trails. Before the gun sounds the start of the race, Bartocci takes a moment to become aware of the energy of the runners around him, breathing in the excitement and anxiety. He knows that over the next several hours, the mountain will humble each of these people around him. (He's run Pike's Peak six times.)

“Running a marathon is an abstraction of a life situation,” he said. “It has nothing and everything to do with putting one foot in front of the other.”

One of the most special marathons for Bartocci is the [Madison Marathon](#) in Montana. The race begins near Black Butte Mountain, a dizzying 10,000-foot summit that lurches out from the earth like a dark anvil. Bartocci ran this marathon in 2014 — it was number 600.

At Mile 2, near the base of the mountain, he took a detour off the marked course. He found a rock, moved it aside and scattered some of his son's ashes there. After a quiet moment of prayer, he returned to the race.

“That was a meaningful moment for me. Matthew's up high, close to God,” Bartocci said.



Bartocci still carries some of Matt’s ashes with him whenever he runs.



Frank Bartocci. Photo by Tracy Walsh

## Running despite aging

How does Bartocci not just run, but also keep running — and so frequently — at age 70?

“You do have physiological changes as you age, of course,” Bartocci said. “But I’ve found that my body has adapted to running in an amazing way.”

He calls it “the extended training effect.”

“My bone density has increased over time, my ligaments and muscles developed to support the strain. My capillary beds expanded because my heart demanded more blood all the time,” he said. “My body has essentially adapted to function more optimally and more efficiently.”

The training effect has ironically resulted in Bartocci *not* training for marathons anymore. He averages one or two marathons each weekend — a huge physical demand — and therefore he requires down time during the week to allow his body to recover.

He jokes that when he goes into the Mayo Clinic for a physical every so often, doctors simply marvel at him. Over the past 35 years, he's transformed his body into a machine that anticipates large bursts of energy every week for 26.2 miles — more, if he's running an ultramarathon.

There's one more thing: Bartocci keeps his attitude sunny.

Savage — who at age 80 has run more than 400 marathons, including about 50 with Bartocci — describes his friend as incredibly smart.

“He's also one of the most upbeat and idealistic people I've ever known,” Savage said. “He likes to push himself. For him, a thousand marathons is a reasonable goal.”



Frank Bartocci. Photo by Tracy Walsh

## A cancer battle

Even so, Bartocci has faced his own health-related stumbling blocks over the years. In 2013, at age 65, he was diagnosed with lymphoma. Bartocci, an eternal optimist, said he had a few more marathons to finish before he could come in for treatment — as if the oncologist arranging procedures was just a buddy trying to schedule a tee time for a round of golf.

At the time, Bartocci was 37 marathons away from hitting his goal of 600 total. He wasn't going to let cancer stop him.

After completing his 600th race, he began treatment — an experimental drug that eradicated the cancer. Relapse-free, Bartocci credits running with optimizing his body, mind and spirit, giving him the strength required to tolerate painful treatments and fight off the disease.

Today, he copes with the occasional Achilles tendon issue and sporadic lower back stress. But he's learned enough tricks of the trails over the years to know how best to handle the setbacks.

Pop open the trunk of his Camry and you'll find four pairs of Altra Olympus 1.5 shoes (designed specifically for running with extra cushioning), which he rotates through for races. You'll see shoe goo (for fixing worn down edges of running shoes), visors and handkerchiefs (for hot weather), extra layers for cold weather and supplements to take during runs to keep his electrolytes and energy up. Before every race, he pops two Advil and hopes for the best — but is ready to accept the worst.



Frank Bartocci's shoes. Photo by Tracy Walsh

# Reaping the rewards

Bartocci, who retired eight years ago, is always dumbfounded when another birthday passes him by.

“I’m getting old out here, but I don’t feel old,” he said with a laugh.

What he does feel is his body persistently and patiently asking him to go slower.

In his most honest moments, he’ll admit he’s getting tired. He baits the carrot on the end of the stick more and more to see himself through the races he’s scheduled.

Some of recent rewards include a new 4K UltraHD TV, a series of Norwegian cruises (lined up for early 2019) and a stack of untouched David Baldacci paperbacks.

The biggest reward of all may one day be a move down to Florida where his four siblings have gone to enjoy their retirement.

“I’m not ready to go there yet,” he said. “I’m not ready to trade in my running shoes for a rocking chair to sit and look at the flowers and watch the grass grow. You get older and you think it’s over? Are you kidding me? You haven’t even started!”

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