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Local man to run world's longest race

Trans Europe Footrace is challenging, dangerous

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Jim Swift

ROLLINGWOOD, Texas (KXAN) - The goal is a finish line, a line that marks the border between agony and "the happy place."

That is what Russell Secker calls it, anyway.

"So 45 miles a day is the average," he said. "For 64 days, nine weeks. It's the longest race in the world."

Secker retired two weeks ago, from his job as a vice-president at [Hoovers.com](#), the business information company. His colleagues gave him a going-away gift, a pair of his running shoes, bronzed and mounted on a plaque, with all of their signatures written on it.

Now there is nothing standing between him and the [Trans Europe Footrace](#), the most grueling, dangerous footrace on Earth. It runs 2,800 miles from the south of Italy to the northern tip of Norway, the equivalent of running from Los Angeles to New York, without a single day off. Illness is a constant threat, everything from upper respiratory infections to digestion issues.

"GI problems, you know, vomiting, diarrhea, those kind of things," said Secker. "It's very hard to run when you're losing fluids from both ends."

But if illness is a problem, injury can be a disaster.

"At the end of the French [qualifying] race this year, one of the competitors from Taiwan had bad injury problems with blisters and problems with her toes," said Secker. "She ended up developing this flesh eating-disease called,

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'necrotizing fasciitis' and unfortunately, she had to have one foot and part of her other leg removed. Amputation is the only treatment because it's not treatable by antibiotics. That's how compromised people's systems are in these races."

It gets worse.

"In the German [qualifying] race this year," said Secker, "one of the German competitors, unfortunately, went to sleep after the last day of the race and never woke up. Heart arrhythmia killed him. So this is pretty edgy stuff and this is quite dangerous."

Secker worst injury so far involved his toes.

"[I] don't get infections, don't lose my toenails anymore," said Secker. "I've lost all of them at some point. They kind of [grow back] but, yeah, pedicures are not my thing."

Even without illness and injury, however, 64 days of 45 mile daily runs takes its toll.

"You're tired; you're cranky; you need coffee; you need food, and you know you have the prospect of another nine or 10 hours of running ahead of you that day," said Secker. "When I was having a very bad day in Germany two years ago, most of my colleagues wrote very nice, 'there, there,' kind of e-mails. And one of my friends wrote a three word e-mail back to me, just said, 'Toughen up, Buttercup!' Those three words had a tremendously strong effect, became my mantra for getting through the race."

That race covered only 800 miles over 17 days. Secker's odds of finishing the 2,800 mile long [Trans Europe](#) are only one in three.

"But I have something to say about that outcome," he declared. "It really sits with people for a long time if they fail. I've seen grown men in tears, having to drop out of some of these ultra races because the psychological effect of having to give up your dream, your goal, is very, very hard on people who are already tired and beat up. So I've seen how bad it is when people have to drop out and I know it's a possibility, but I will do everything in my power to make it to the finish. This is the challenge of my life. I think I'll be done; when I get to the North Cape of Norway, I think I'll be done."

Believe it or not, Secker somehow manages to find time to blog during his races. [That blog site](#) is already up and running as he counts down the days to the April 19 kickoff of a race that will continue through June 21. He invites you to follow along on his journey to the "happy place."

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