

A Cyclist

by Marika Azzopardi

Karen Xerri seems a delicate woman at face value. Her slim, svelte and dainty appearance she actually cycled her way through 2,300 km, making headway from Bucharest in did, one of a team of like-minded and determined people wh

She has always liked cycling, doing Sunday rides and perhaps taking the opportunity to hop on a bike every other day or when her busy life of mum and pharmacist leaves her any time to release pent-up energy. But now, she beams as she states, "Now I can really claim that I am a cyclist, and a seasoned one at that too!"

There were two main reasons why she decided to take up the challenge of participating in the Life Cycle marathon. Firstly because she likes cycling, but secondly because her father is also a renal patient and she can well understand the purpose of the fundraising challenge.

"But, there is a huge difference between being a Sunday cyclist and being a marathon cyclist. Training was tough in a big way. We had 17 weeks of training prior to the actual marathon, a gradual build-up to four hours of cycling on a daily basis, six on Saturdays and a total of eight on Sundays."

This meant a wake-up call at four in the morning, when Karen would take the opportunity of riding until eight o'clock. "I chose to ride early in the morning, so as to avoid disrupting family life. By reducing sleeping hours, I could keep abreast with the rest of my responsibilities. Naturally I missed out on sleep!"

Missing out on sleep wasn't the only hardship she faced. Ideally cycling through straight routes meant opting for by-passes, and the longer roads around Malta. It also meant riding 80 km on a daily basis, 120 km on Saturdays and a grand 160 km on Sundays. Cycling through the midday heat was the hardest of all.

"I had all the support in the world from my husband, and all the family and my two kids encouraged me on in their own way, even though they are still six and nine. Nobody really knew what I was in for... admittedly,



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neither did I. We were constantly being told it was no fun trip, but you have to be there to appreciate this."

By the time the marathon loomed, her body had grown used to the training regimen. Just days before leaving Malta however, she suffered a spinal injury when she fell off the bike and fractured her coccyx. "It was a shock. First of all I was terrified I would lose mobility and I was in extreme pain. However my doctor who is an athlete himself, urged me to get moving and that I did. Slowly but surely I made it back on the bike to the incredulity of the doctors. By the time the marathon arrived, I was free from the excruciating pain and didn't suffer any repercussions.

Perhaps it was all in the mind – I was so geared up towards the marathon, that I willed myself to get well."

However, not being an athlete, being a female and being one of the older participants on the challenge meant the experience was tougher on her. En route through eastern Europe, she and her team cycled for 8 hours which could stretch to 10 hours a day. The longest day equaled 12 hours of cycling through 265 km, with the team arriving at destination at 22.00 hours.

The regimen was tough. "We were constantly accompanied by our back-up crew which included the kitchen crew, the medical team made of doctors and physiotherapists and the logistics team. The latter had made a pre-visit to the route in April and would drive ahead of us to sign the planned route up to the destination of the day. Five vans would be spread out to keep an eye on us as we cycled. We would stop every two hours or so at check points to visit the bathroom, eat, get medical assistance, a check-

for Life

earance belies the truth behind the delicate surface. One would never imagine that Romania, through Ukraine and Poland, to finally reach Berlin in 13 days. But she o last August participated in the Life Cycle 2007 marathon.

up and massage. After 20 minutes, we would start off again.”

They were told that it would be no holiday. Riding through Romania and Ukraine was something she wasn't prepared for. With third world conditions in certain parts of the rural areas, coupled by extremely bad roads, cycling was not only difficult but hazardous. “At the end of a long day, we would arrive at destination to find that we had to wash the mud off in a cold shower. The rural areas just don't have the

infrastructure and it was all quite a shock for me. In hindsight I'm amazed at myself. However, coming through the experience was one big adventure and a personal achievement that gave me unequalled satisfaction.”

Being part of team also meant learning about team spirit, making new friends and bonds. Although they were not in a race, they did have to finish within a certain number of hours, meaning they had to try and keep up the pace of cycling at 20km an hour.

Back home, she arrived to the enthusiastic faces of all her family, including her children's, who welcomed her with the declaration that her stay away was way too long. “We had prepared them obviously, but they are too young to realize what it was like not to have mummy there, at all, for two whole weeks, especially since I had never been away. However, I know that in their own way they are proud of me and one day, when they grow older, they will appreciate what it was like to be there. I'm already urging my daughter to do it herself one day!”

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¹ Wiedemann B Poster presented at ECCMID 1999; ² Kreis S R et al. J Clin Outcomes Manag (2000); 7: 33-37;
³ Wilson R et al. Thorax 2006; 61: 337-42; 4 Keating K et al. Curr Med Res and Opin 2006; 22(2): 327-33

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